Chairman's Report

I. Crisis management or prediction and prevention?

Black rhino emerged as the top priority in the Action Plan drawn up at the last meeting of the AERSG held at the Victoria Falls in September 1985 (see below.) It now seems likely that in the last two years the black rhino population of Africa has declined by some 50% from an estimated 8 800 to less than 4 500. Two of the continent's major populations have been hit hard by poaching. Recent reports from the Luangwa valley suggest that less than 200 rhino remain. Reports from the Selous, in addition to that by Borner and Severre (this issue), suggest that few rhino may be left in that Reserve. Once again there will be calls for surveys, a crisis declared, and a flurry of action by Government and NGO's will follow. This has happened in Kenya, in Uganda, in the CAR and, rightly, will happen in Tanzania. These responses have usually been linked to severe elephant poaching and have been too late for rhino.

At the Hwange Meeting in 1981 the key rhino (and elephant) populations of Africa were identified and Governments and conservation organisations were urged to take steps to maintain the status of these populations and the protected areas in which they lived. With the wisdom of hindsight the priorities for species and areas developed at Hwange provided a predictive template of where the greatest threats from poaching were going to develop. I doubt if this was fully appreciated at the time and the following factors were perhaps not realised or sufficiently explicit:

(i) The value of rhino horn would greatly increase and with it the rewards and incentives for poaching;
(ii) The threat to key populations would correspondingly increase;
(iii) The major challenge was not merely to maintain the conservation status of these key populations but to greatly improve the existing capacity to protect and manage them before the poachers struck;
(iv) An early warning system is essential and requires an appropriate, continuous and reliable monitoring system;
(v) A fail safe step against extinction, such as captive breeding, is needed even if the endangered population is as high as 12 000 (as it was considered to be in 1981).

A basis for predicting future threats to susceptible populations exists. It comprises a combination of the scoring and ranking procedures used at Hwange together with a fuller analysis of the resources conservation agencies possess to protect and manage their wildlife. Information on manpower, financial and material resources across Africa provides a comparative basis on which to judge what is required to contain a serious poaching threat. Both Government agencies and NGO's need to be clear about the magnitude of funds and types of resources required to sustain effective protection and management of protected areas. Investment in field protection may, however, be completely undermined if the legal framework or institutions of the country make it easy to dispose of illegal rhino horn or ivory. Similar considerations apply if poaching is part of a high level crime syndicate. The tendency has been to regard monitoring as a high tech affair requiring aircraft and experts and accurate population estimates. While it is necessary to have good population estimates, and it is a great pity the extensive surveys of the seventies were not continued, it is possible to effectively monitor wildlife populations and poaching activities with very simple techniques. The work of Conway (1984) in the Chirisa Safari Area of Zimbabwe and of Bell (1983) in Malawi provide a sound basis for the development of cost-effective and appropriate monitoring systems. Had these been in place in the Luangwa or the Selous, for example, it may have been possible to mobilise support and action against poaching, before drastic declines occurred.

There is a need to move towards predictive and preventative conservation measures. The priorities defined in the AERSG action plan in September take cognisance of this need and it is my hope that we can stimulate the provision of more effective guidelines in this direction.

II. Some gains (and losses) since July

Raoul du Toit was appointed Scientific/Executive Officer for the AERSG in October and has been actively working on our priority to reexamine the subspecies of black rhino. His paper in this issue outlines his approach to this problem. I sincerely hope that all who can help will contribute to this effort so that the first phase of this reexamination of the subspecies of Diceros bicornis can be completed as soon as possible. It would be very useful to have some hard data to discuss at our next meeting in mid July and for the project to be complete by the end of the year. Decisions will have to be made soon and there is no time to lose.

In August last year I was fortunate to be able to attend the meeting of Specialist Group Chairman in Edmonton and to establish contact with the Chairman of the Captive Breeding Specialist Group and Tom Foose, Conservation Coordinator of the American Association of Zoological Parks & Aquaria (AAZPA). This afforded the opportunity to discuss problems of mutual interest on the captive breeding of African rhino and the development of guidelines for the management of small, isolated populations of rhino.

At the end of January I visited Damaraland in Namibia to examine the present conservation status of rhino and elephant living in desert habitats. One of the immediate developments from this visit is that WICI and the Wildlife Society of Namibia are to support an intensive three month survey of the black rhino in Damaraland. Some 50 individual rhino are known in Damaraland but nearly half of these have not been positively identified in the last 18 months. It is important to establish the current status of these rhino and elephant populations and the survey will be carried out by Garth Owen-Smith who developed the initial identification system for these rhino.

News of the northern white rhino population in Garamba indicates that this population has remained stable over the last year. The Chairman of the Captive Breeding Group, Dr. Ulysses Seal, and Director of the London Zoo, Dr. David Jones, were due to meet with officials of the zoo at Dvu r Kralove in Czechoslovakia early in February to discuss captive breeding of northern white rhino.

The southern white rhino remains secure in South Africa and in captive breeding situations elsewhere in the world. The Zimbabwe population remains at about 200 and steps to increase its range and population size depend largely on making use of the Parks & Wildlife land in the Zambezi valley. A report by Russell Taylor details a first and unsuccessful attempt in this direction.

The Government of CAR held a conference at the end of October in which they formulated policy for the protection of elephant and rhino and also stopped the system of collectors' permits in the country. Trade in ivory, other than by the Government, was banned and a batch of confiscated ivory was sold to provide funds for elephant conservation in the CAR.

Reports of very high levels of ivory poaching from the Selous and the Luangwa Valley continue. The numbers of elephant in the Luangwa are now considered to be in the region of 25 000 while the Selous population is not known and a survey is urgently needed to establish the present size of the population and the severity of poaching. The Tanzanian Government has invited Dr. Douglas-Hamilton to carry out such a survey, Dr. Borner's and Mr. Severre's

paper includes data on trends in elephant poaching up to the end of 1984. I have received first hand reports of very much higher levels of elephant poaching in the 1985 season with one observer encountering an average of 10 elephant carcasses per day.

The Norwegian Aid Agency, NORAD, will be funding the Luangwa Integrated Rural Development Project in Zambia and Dr. Richard Bell has been appointed co-Director. This project will probably incorporate many of the activities and responsibilities of the Save the Rhino Trust (SRT) Unit which has been conducting anti-poaching operations in the Luangwa over the past five years.

The ivory quota system adopted at the last meeting of CITES came into effect at the beginning of this year and we carry a note on the quotas submitted thus far. Moves to establish an Ivory and Elephant Management Council for Africa have progressed and draft terms of reference have been circulated to member Governments. Proposals for such a Council were formally discussed at a meeting of Government representatives in Dakar in April last year.

Vice-Chairman David Western has been visiting the tropical forests of Africa, while Esmond Martin is in the Far East engaged on a project aimed at reducing the demand for rhino horn.

The annual AERSG meeting was held in September at the Victoria Falls. It was an intensive two day meeting which covered a lot of ground and provided a valuable forum for the debate of a number of thorny issues. The major output from this meeting is the revised Action Plan and this is given in full below.

III. Current Action Plan.

(As defined at the Victoria Falls Meeting in September, 1985)

FIELD PRIORITIES

1. Develop a Conservation Strategy for the Black Rhino.

The continuing rapid decline of black rhino populations in most parts of its range coupled with the fact that many viable populations do still exist in the wild merits the placing of black rhino, in contrast to white rhino, as the top priority for conservation action. The development of a continental conservation strategy for the species involves three major, and preferably concurrent, actions:

1.1 Examine the taxonomic status of presently described subspecies of black rhino so as to provide a sound basis for ordering priorities for action amongst the now geographically separated populations in Africa.

1.2 Develop National Conservation Plans for those countries with more than 100 black rhinos. Priorities for action would need to be examined once the results of the taxonomic studies were available and the national plans had been drafted.

1.3 Promote the dissemination of information and expertise necessary to implement and support the international and national rhino conservation plans.

2. Northern White Rhino.

2.1 Encourage efforts to co-ordinate the breeding of existing captive northern white rhino.

2.2 Examine the taxonomic status of the northern white rhino. A key issue in deciding on the resources to be invested in the conservation of northern white rhino is the extent to which they have diverged from the southern white rhino populations.

2.3 Support the rehabilitation of Garamba National Park with northern white rhino as a component of the ecosystem.

3. Desert Elephant.

Continue to monitor the status of elephant populations in Mali, Mauritania and Namibia and to urge appropriate conservation action.

4. Forest Elephant.

The second phase of the study of forest elephant numbers and distribution (i.e. the classification and delineation of elephant habitats and land use strata) should be initiated as soon as possible. A sound knowledge of the size of the forest elephant population is crucial to decisions about the management of African elephant and the regulation of the ivory trade.

5. West African Elephant.

Convene a regional arm of the AERSG in West Africa and encourage a re-assessment of the status and distribution of elephant within West Africa.

6. Selous Game Reserve.

A full census of the rhino and elephant populations of the Selous is needed urgently. Existing and planned surveys of the Garamba National Park and the Luangwa Valley should proceed.

7. Central African Republic.

Continue to support rhino and elephant conservation initiatives in the CAR despite recent major reductions in the populations of these species.

TRADE PRIORITIES

1. Rhino Horn.

1.1 North Yemen. Take action to reduce demand for rhino horn and, if possible, close down the trade.

1.2 East Asia. Take action to reduce the demand for rhino horn and, if possible, stop the trade in horn.

1.3 Investigate the movement of rhino horn within Africa.

1.4 Investigate the discrepancies between reported declines in rhino populations and the amount of horn appearing in the trade.

1.5 Inform Governments of the value, and potential value, of their rhino populations and so encourage the allocation of more resources to their conservation.

2. Ivory.

2.1 Encourage the formation of a wildlife division within Interpol or if this is not feasible the formation of an equivalent organisation linking wildlife law enforcements agencies.

2.2 Investigate the internal trade in ivory and ivory products in central Africa (i.e. Zaire, Cameroun, CAR and Congo).

2.3 Investigate the internal trade in ivory and ivory products in West Africa (i.e. from Senegal to Niger and Nigeria).

2.4 Continue the development of ivory and elephant population models as an aid to the interpretation of ivory trade statistics.

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Promote the conservation and management of elephant populations in Africa by providing information and advice on:

1. Monitoring elephant populations
2. Management and harvesting
3. Legal and administrative frameworks
4. Law enforcement
5. Ivory trade

The main focus of conservation action for elephants in Africa has been on anti-poaching and on attempts to halt the ivory trade. While these may be the most appropriate actions in some cases there are many circumstances where positive management of elephant, as a valuable aesthetic and economic resource, may be more successful. African Governments and wildlife agencies need to be made more aware of the options available to them.

David Cumming

References are listed on page 4.