

AERSG West and Central African region holds inaugural meeting in Gabon

The inaugural meeting of this regional group took place in November last year and was attended by government delegates from Gabon, Congo, Central African Republic, Zaire, Cameroon, Ghana, Liberia, Guinea and Mali.

Top of the agenda was the AERSG Action Plan on rhino and elephant. The Action Plan was rather unpopular with a majority of delegates because most of those who represented governments felt that they had not been adequately consulted when the document was prepared. Concern was also expressed that the Central and West African region was neglected and not adequately catered for in the document.

Despite this, the meeting's discussions were frank. The major areas in the document and in the region which need urgent attention were identified for further action. Among other recommendations, the meeting agreed on the need for a regional database, and outlined holding action projects within country studies on the ivory trade. It was also reported that there are possibly 100 rhinos in Cameroon. This new information calls for a re-evaluation of this country's rating in identifying and funding future rhino projects.

C.G. Gakahu

Sanctuaries offer a future for black rhinos in Kenya

The opening of land for human settlement at the start of this century, together with the current levels of poaching - which were triggered by a high demand for rhino horn - have reduced black rhino numbers in Kenya today to about 500—600. The situation calls for urgent measures to conserve and actively manage these few remaining rhinos, which are faced with extinction. It is no wonder, then, that conserving the black rhino, a species with a 40 million year lineage, remains a critical problem facing wildlife conservationists in Africa. No wonder, too, that the black rhino has become a symbol of the world conservation movement. When a species like the rhino is faced with extinction, there is normally an outcry that everything possible must be done to save it. In an atmosphere of panic and uncertainty, many strategies and techniques are proposed. The main issues centre around the extent to which man can manipulate the few remaining animals in the hope of saving the species. This is because conservationists are caught unawares by the threat of extinction and the options have to be selected on the basis of theory rather than practical experience. Consequently, in most cases, there is an element of risk.

The conservation and management options which have been put forward for the black rhino include: enhancing the effectiveness of anti-poaching forces, de-horning, controlling and ending the trade in rhino horn, captive propagation and the establishment of small sanctuaries. The few remaining rhino herds and individuals are fragmented over their range, which has reduced their opportunities for breeding. In such a situation, the animals are faced with potential problems which can accelerate their extinction. These include environmental changes, disease, demographic fluctuations, such as biased sex ratios, and genetic problems, such as inbreeding depression. The principal aim of

sanctuaries is to control these potential problems by translocating and consolidating the fragmented rhinos into confined areas. Sanctuaries also enhance opportunities for breeding and ensure adequate security.

Translocation, which involves capturing the rhinos either by immobilization or trapping, is not only expensive but also requires personnel with the correct technical skills to ensure that the rhinos do not die. These problems, together with ecological the suitability of the proposed sanctuary, are among the challenges that must be faced before translocation.

In the early 1960s, the Kenya Game Capture Unit translocated some black rhinos from places where poaching was prevalent to safer areas. While some of these rhinos died due to inadequate preparation before capture and the poor technical skills of those doing the capturing, others survived and their populations have continued to increase. Seventeen rhinos were translocated to Nairobi National Park. Today the population stands at 51 having increased at 5.6 per cent per annum. Another 20 were translocated to Solio Ranch, which now has over 80 rhinos, an increase of 9.3 per cent per annum.

Today rhinos in sanctuaries account for about 50% of Kenya's population. These results are an encouraging sign that sanctuaries hold a future for rhinos. The rapid rates of increase show that sanctuaries can provide a source of rhinos for restocking the species in its former range. In the light of this, the Kenya Rhino Rescue Project has officially adopted sanctuaries as the central pillar of a special programme to conserve and manage rhinos. Sanctuaries, some entirely or partially fenced, have been established in private ranches and in government wildlife protection areas. The sanctuaries include:

Private ranches: Solio - 81 rhinos
Lewa Downs -12 rhinos
Ol Jogi - 9 rhinos
Laikipia - 45 rhinos

Government protected areas:

Nairobi National Park – 51 rhinos
Nakuru National Park – 20 rhinos
Ngulia in Tsavo West National Park – 8 rhinos
Aberdare National Park – 39 rhinos

Improved technical capabilities together with intensive management and surveillance in these sanctuaries, promise better results than those witnessed in the past in the unplanned and unmanaged translocations to Nairobi National Park, Solio and other areas.

Prior surveys to establish the habitat condition and carrying capacity of potential sanctuaries, optimal choice of pioneer animals to avoid inbreeding and loss of adaptive traits, together with management monitoring and surveillance are, however, basic requirements which must be fulfilled to enhance the performance of sanctuaries.

C.G. Gakahu

Diplomat found with ivory

A container was intercepted between the house of the Indonesian Ambassador and the port of Dares Salaam following surveillance by the Tanzania Wildlife Conservation Society.

The container, which was opened on 1 January despite the protestations of the ambassador, contained (among other items): 184 raw tusks, weighing approximately three tons; 24 whole, partly-worked tusks; 82 carved ivory figures; 13 unopened packages of ivory necklaces; 16 ostrich eggs; two gazelle shoulder mounts; various pieces of old ivory; and five zebra skin handbags.

All these items were confiscated. On Friday 13 January, the same ambassador tried to fly out of Dar es Salaam. The police inspected his luggage at the airport and found more ivory.