
Acting Chairman's Report

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Members of the African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group (AERSG) are people selected for their knowledge and technical capabilities, not for their opinions on wildlife philosophy or policy. Their responsibility is to identify the problems, needs, and priorities of securing the welfare of pachyderms. To achieve this goal there must be general agreement on activities and methods: members of AERSG must be headed in the same direction for the group to remain coherent.

The highly contested ban on ivory trading hurt AERSG to some extent. This might partly explain why few members seem prepared to answer quantitative questions on the populations' status, poaching, and ivory movement and trade within Africa. Of course, there are other issues of elephant conservation but none as basic and important as these. During the next CITES meeting in Japan, AERSG will be expected to be a major source of advice on such matters.

If some members feel aggrieved it will be difficult, if not impossible, to reach consensus on a united strategy for the conservation of elephants and rhinos. One may ask whether consensus is necessary. I believe it is, in order to cater as far as possible for the different opinions and diversity of wildlife philosophies and management practices in Africa. Most AERSG members operate under conservation authorities with defined policies. Some formulated the policy themselves. However, they should remember that the role of AERSG is continental and the conservation of elephants and rhinos demands more than the capabilities of one individual or single management authority. Personal convictions coupled with an unbending stand will make our task even more taxing.

Despite the above observations AERSG has remained one of the most active groups of the Species Survival Commission (SSC). Members who were attending the IUCN General Assembly held in Perth in December, 1990, held an informal meeting to discuss future goals and missions.

A continental survey of black and white rhinos has just been completed and is reported in this issue of *Pachyderm*. A questionnaire prepared under the auspices of AERSG in collaboration with UNEP, the Elsa Wild Animal Appeal (EWAA) and Wildlife Conservation International (WCI) was sent out in January, 1991, to gather data and information for the African Elephant Data Base at UNEP. Data will be analysed to give new estimates of country and continental African populations.

AERSG is also playing a leading role in two proposed major studies. One will review the status of and trends in elephant populations, estimate current levels of poaching and assess African ivory markets. The other study will be of the possible effects on rhino conservation of resuming trade in white rhino horns.

Since the ban on trading, Asian ivory business has fallen by 80%. The reduction in demand should cause a price drop such that killing elephants becomes uneconomic for the poacher. But periodically we get press reports on poaching. For example, in December 1990 ten elephants were poached in Kenya bringing the year's kill to 50; in the same month 24 raw tusks were impounded in Namibia, 387 in Tanzania and a consignment of illegal ivory worth Rand 500,000 was impounded in Swaziland. There were almost certainly many more unknown or unreported ivory poaching incidents. If poaching is continuing, where is the ivory? Are traders in Africa stock-piling it for speculative purposes?

Civil and liberation wars have greatly contributed to the decline of elephants and rhinos in Uganda, Sudan, Mozambique, Somalia and elsewhere. The wars often arise from demands for political change. While commending Southern Africa's elephant populations, healthy enough to have a surplus for harvesting, and risking being called a pessimist, I would caution that the same region is undergoing drastic political change. The current satisfactory status can only be guaranteed as long as the current regime together with its management policy persists. We should be prepared for the possibility of a citizenry that will feel deprived and try every means to use resources they fought for.

Most range states are under considerable economic, social and political pressure, and nearly all available resources have to be directed to the improvement of human welfare. While donations for the conservation of pachyderms are always welcome, often the donor has designated the use of the money with little or no input from the recipient country or management authority. As a result many NGOs in the range states have busied themselves with projects which, at best, are peripheral to the mainstream conservation effort and, at worst, run counter to it. It was in recognition of this inefficiency, among other issues, that the African Elephant Conservation Co-ordinating Group (AECCG) was formed to co-ordinate the securing of funds and technical assistance for elephant conservation in Africa. Under the auspices of AECCG donor countries have declared their collective commitment to elephant conservation, and it now remains for the oft rescheduled meeting of range states to actually take place for donor funds to be pledged.

A full AERSG meeting will be held in April of this year. The status of populations of elephants and rhinos; poaching; the intra-African ivory and rhino horn trade; local, national and international education and awareness campaigns; incentives to local communities to increase their participation in wildlife conservation; which conservation policy worked and which failed and, more importantly, why; all these will be topics for discussion and exchange of views. I have no doubt that the common concern of members for the welfare of pachyderms will ensure the meeting's successful outcome.
