
THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE NORTHERN WHITE RHINO IN GARAMBA

Despite the upheaval Garamba National Park in the newly formed Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) has recently been through, the northern white rhino populations are doing well, although most other large mammal species have suffered from poaching.

Between October 1996 and April 1997, what was previously Zaire was overtaken by civil war, which created the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Garamba National Park, in the north-east of the country, was on the route for fleeing Force Arm Zairoise, and by January 1997 was being used as a base by mercenaries fighting for ex-President Mobutu. The Liberation forces arrived at Garamba in mid-February 1997 and initially disarmed the park guards. During these upheavals, 90% of the park's equipment for the law enforcement activities was lost or destroyed. Although joint anti-poaching and monitoring efforts gradually resumed from March 1997 onwards, the anti-poaching effort between March and June was a fraction of what it was for the same period in 1996.

The war of liberation followed several years of heavy meat poaching, which law enforcement monitoring efforts showed was largely perpetrated by Sudanese with some Zairois/Congolese, and was associated with the military and arms presence across the border in Sudan, which was (and still is) experiencing civil war. Due to financial restrictions resulting from the socio-economic crisis in the country under Mobutu and limited donor funds, the joint efforts of park officials and the WWF Garamba project personnel were insufficient to adequately combat the poaching. By 1995, buffalo numbers had been halved from 53,312±16,960 in 1983 to 25,242±16,920 although elephant and rhino numbers had increased, with elephants increasing to 11,117 ±3,660. However, the annual poaching distribution maps demonstrated that poaching was moving south through the park towards the rhino sector. The breakdown of law and order in the country, and the resultant reduction in anti-poaching effort gave the poachers an advantage.

By June 1997 it was possible to carry out an intensive aerial survey of the southern sector of the park, which is the main rhino and elephant area. Eighteen different individual rhinos were found, while the estimated maximum number of rhinos which could be counted, based on the proportional returns from previous surveys of this type, was estimated at 24. Additionally, poaching

activities were quite evident, with 49 new/recent poaching camps seen, mostly on the edge of the rhino sector, and ten groups of poachers were seen. All carcasses counted (29 elephant, 24 buffalo, 16 hippo, one giraffe, and one waterbuck) were fresh (Smith and Smith, 1997; Evaluation of the status of Garamba National Park in June 1997 following events associated with the Liberation War, Paper presented at Ministry of Environment Conservation Round Table meeting, Kinshasa July 1997).

Combating the poaching problem with extra support, and being able to obtain and safely bring in required equipment, involved working closely with the new government. An excellent working relationship was developed with the newly restructured Ministry of Environment and the Institute Congolese pour le Conservation de la Nature (ICCN), which led to a direct audience with the President.

On going ground and occasional aerial monitoring activities confirmed that two rhinos, a young adult male (Channel 2) and an adult female (F4) were poached in March and November 1997 respectively, and that three rhino calves were born between August 1997 and February 1998. The first of these was named *Congo* and was broadcast on national television.

In March and April 1998 it was possible to bring in the first shipment of equipment and fuel, and to carry out an intensive survey of the southern sector of the Park (Hillman Smith *et al.*, 1998 - Evaluation of the status of Garamba NP in April 1998, following the civil war and associated events). Twenty-four different individual rhinos were found, including another calf which was born in March, bringing the total births to four since the end of the civil war. Rhino distribution was closely associated with long grass mosaic patches that had been maintained during the burning regime as a protective management tool during the war. There was widespread evidence of old poaching, but no new signs, which correlates with information gained through law enforcement monitoring, which shows that there poaching levels reduced during the latter part of 1997. This may be partly due to the efforts of the park guards, partly to the support of the President's forces deployed in the hunting areas around the Park, and partly due to the re-distribution of Sudanese military in Sudan, where the current focus of combat has moved to the eastern Sudan.

A Comparison of poaching indicators June 1997 and April 1998.

Date	Elephant carcass, fresh	Elephant carcass, old	Buffalo carcass, fresh	Buffalo carcass, old	Hippo carcass, fresh	Hippo carcass, old	Poaching Camp, occasional	Poaching Camp, fresh	Poaching Camp, old
June97	29	1	24	0	16	0	10	49	3
April98	2	101	0	102	0	19	0	0	15

In May 1998 an independent rhino survey was carried out using a WWF consultant, independent observers, ICCN staff in addition to the Garamba project personnel. Twenty-two individuals were seen, including one new individual not seen in the April survey. In addition, a known group of three rhinos not seen in the May survey were observed in June.

These results are far better than had been hoped, and the lull in poaching gives time for a build-up of support for Garamba. However, as a word of caution, the results of the all species systematic aerial survey shows a massive reduction in elephants, buffaloes and hippos (see the table below) though no significant reduction in other species is seen, and distribution is limited almost entirely to the southern sector.

Survey numbers of elephant, hippo and buffalo.

Species	1995 Pop est.	SE	1998 Pop est.	SE
Elephant	11,175	3,679	5,487	1,339
Buffalo	25,242	8,299	7,901	2,062
Hippo	3,601	1,294	786	

There is much to do to counteract the crisis and rehabilitate the park. The lessons of the last few years indicate that a greater level of support, more people and a collaborative effort with more partners and innovative, sustainable funding mechanisms are necessary for the long-term

future of Garamba and the rhinos. A strategic planning workshop is to be held in August 1998 to address some of these issues for the way forward. In the context of new opportunities in a new nation, the substantial population of rhinos remaining gives cause for optimism.

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