

Executive Summary - African Rhino: Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan

The two species of African rhinoceros, the black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) and the white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*) have been driven to near extinction in recent years. Their futures now depend on the development and operation of effective conservation strategies at local, national, and regional levels.

This Plan is aimed at donors, government and non-government organisations, and all those involved in rhino conservation. It outlines the actions and strategies needed to catalyse support for these majestic animals, and help secure their future in sub-Saharan Africa.

The black rhino

The black rhino is classified as Critically Endangered in the IUCN 1996 Red List of Threatened Animals. Yet as recently as the 1960s, it was estimated that over 100,000 black rhino were still roaming Africa. Poaching, combined with inadequate field protection has decimated these populations. Of the four black rhino subspecies, the future of the western black rhino is especially bleak, with about 10 animals scattered across northern Cameroon. The south-central black rhino is the most numerous, yet has an estimated population of only 1,360. Some populations have increased well under protection and others appear to have stabilised during the 1990s. The most recent estimate of 2,600 African black rhinos in 1997 indicates that, for the first time since the compilation of continental statistics began, black rhino numbers in the wild are showing a slight increase. There are 235 black rhino in captivity.

The white rhino

The southern white rhino, rescued from near extinction a century ago, stands as one of the world's greatest conservation success stories. From a single population of barely 20 animals in 1885, there are now more than 8,440 in 247 wild populations, with an additional 704 animals in captive breeding institutions world-wide. Numbers continue to increase in the wild, and the white rhino is now classified as Lower Risk - Conservation Dependent.

By contrast, the situation facing the future of the northern white rhino is critical. In 1960, there were an estimated 2,250 animals; today, only 25 animals are known to exist in the wild in a single population. There are nine ageing and non-breeding animals in two zoos and the subspecies is classified as Critically Endangered.

Continuing threats to rhino survival

The situation facing African rhinoceroses is still critical. The international horn trade ban and the domestic bans imposed in most traditional user states, have driven the trade further 'underground,' in some cases inflating prices and making illegal dealing even more lucrative. The demand for horn from Asia (for traditional medicines) and from the Middle East (for dagger handles) persists and the threat of a return to large-scale poaching is ever present. Wars, civil unrest, poverty, influxes of refugees, and internal corruption within many range states combine so that poachers usually escape arrest and poverty-stricken people become poachers to survive.

Given the political will, stability and adequate field expenditure, rhinos can be conserved in the wild. As conservation budgets continue to decline, the greatest challenge for the future of the rhinos is maintaining sufficient conservation expenditure by range states.

Unless income increases from donors and other sources, or costs are reduced without affecting effectiveness, conservation programmes will be jeopardised.

Goals for rhino conservationists over the next decade:

- Wildlife departments and conservation agencies developing rhino conservation strategies that can lead to self-sufficiency.
- Conservation effort directed towards existing and potential key and important rhino populations, including the most threatened African rhino subspecies.
- Increased regional cooperation in subspecies metapopulation management, conservation and security.
- Active local community and private sector participation, including ecotourism, in all range states as well as maintaining or increasing incentives for these sectors to conserve rhino and biodiversity in general.
- A more culturally-sensitive dialogue between the consumers of rhino horn and the conservation community and an evaluation of the possible dangers and potential benefits of a future opening of a limited legal trade in rhino horn.

Achievement of these goals will lead towards future viable populations of wild African rhinoceroses.