



FACT SHEET

Rhinoceroses

Factsheet No.46

The five rhinoceros species existing today are descendants of the more than 30 rhino species that lived on earth over 60 million years ago. The rhino is found only in Africa and Asia and all five species are now threatened with extinction. Man's demand for rhino horn as a traditional Oriental medicine and for use as intricately carved dagger handles in North Yemen has fuelled poaching in Africa and Asia. There are now fewer than 11,000 wild rhinos left in the world (while during the late 1960s an estimate of 70,000 black rhinos alone existed in Africa).

Asian Rhinos

All three Asian rhino species are on the brink of extinction: the one-horned **Indian rhino** (*Rhinoceros unicornis*); the one horned **Javan rhino** (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*); and the two horned **Sumatran rhino** (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*). The Indian and Javan rhino are closely related to each other but the Sumatran rhino is a distinct species. The Asian rhinos are listed as "Endangered" by IUCN-The World Conservation Union's classification of degrees of threat.

Asian rhinos once ranged widely across southern and Southeastern Asia, but are now found only in small, isolated areas. The remaining 1,900 Indian rhinos are found in the protected open marshy reserves in northeastern India, Bhutan and Nepal. Of the three species of Asian rhino, the Indian rhino is the least threatened.

The Javan and Sumatran rhinos prefer thick rainforests. The Javan rhino still exists in Vietnam with a population of about 15-20 animals while 45-50 remain in Java's Ujung Kulon National Park. The Javan rhino has the distinction of being the rarest large mammal in the world. The remaining 400-500 Sumatran rhinos, the smallest of the five species of rhino, are thinly scattered throughout Sumatra, Borneo, the Malay Peninsula, Burma and perhaps in some very remote areas of Thailand.

The decline of the Asian rhino is due mainly to excessive demand of rhino horn. Reduced and fragmented populations are especially vulnerable to extinction because of the small number of breeding adults. Habitat destruction by humans is another threat.

African rhinos

Two rhino species are found in Africa: the **black rhino** (*Deceros bicornis*) and the **white rhino** (*Ceratotherium simum*). The black rhino is found in southwestern, south-central and eastern Africa and a few remain north of the



rainforest belt in Cameroon. The black rhino is listed as Endangered by the IUCN.

The white or square-lipped rhino is the largest surviving rhino (weighing up to 2,500 kilos) and is actually gray, not white. The name probably derives from a mistranslation of the Boer word *wijde*, meaning wide, which refers to the animal's broad, squareish lips. At the end of the last century the southern white rhino was already believed extinct. A few were discovered in Natal, South Africa, and as a result of careful protection there are now about 5,800; these southern white rhinos are listed as Vulnerable. The position of the northern subspecies, however, is far more precarious: only 31 rhinos remain, all found in Zaire's Garamba National Park and are listed as Endangered. Ten years ago, there were even less: between 12-15 were estimated to remain.

Also gray in colour, the black rhino is considerably smaller than the white rhino, weighing about 1,400 kilos. There are less than 2,500 black rhinos left in Africa - mainly in Namibia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Kenya and Tanzania.

Both African rhino species prefer the open savannahs and are generally not found in forest zones. The black rhino is generally solitary and hostile when disturbed while the white rhino is more social and rather placid. Poaching continues to push this species towards extinction.

Rhino Horn Use

The demand for rhino horn as a medicinal ingredient in Asia is the root cause of the three Asian rhinos' near extinction - China's last rhino was killed more than 1,000 years ago. Traditional Chinese medicine uses rhino horn to treat fevers and other ailments such as epilepsy, malaria, poisoning and abscesses. Until recently the Westerners had been skeptical about its healing capacities, but the studies done in Hong Kong proved that rhino horn can reduce fever, but not at the dosage rates prescribed.

However, demand for medicine has not been the only factor in the destruction of Africa's rhino populations. In Yemen, a carved rhino horn handle on a *jambiyya*, the traditional dagger worn by men, is a status symbol. In the 1970s, as oil revenue poured in, Yemeni buying power increased - many people could afford rhino horn this led to an unprecedented wave of poaching: around 90% of the black rhinos of Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia were killed and the species has become extinct in up to seven countries.

Although Yemen's rhino horn imports are believed to have tapered off in the late 1980s, it appears that they may be increasing once again. Yemeni officials are being urged to adopt legislation that would ban internal sale of rhino horn, and to join the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). In addition, Yemen's religious leader, the Grand Mufti, has issued an edict stating that it is against the will of God to kill rhinos for their horns.



TRAFFIC (Trade Records Analysis of Flora and Fauna in Commerce), WWF's wildlife trade monitoring arm, is working to reduce the threats to rhinos posed by the illegal trade in rhino horn in Yemen and in countries where rhino horn is used in the preparation of traditional Asian medicines. Emphasis is being placed on stopping the illegal trade in China, South Korea and Taiwan, three of the largest remaining markets for rhino horn.

Under CITES, all five rhino species are listed in Appendix I, which prohibits commercial trade in rhino horn and its by-products. The rhino has been listed in Appendix I since 1977. All African and Asian countries with wild rhino populations have banned hunting for the rhino horn trade.

However, since rhino poaching has continued regardless of the CITES listing and numbers have now dropped to critical levels, an effort to dehorn as many wild rhinos as possible has been undertaken in several southern African countries. Namibia was the first to undertake dehorning in the late 1980s when the black rhino population in Damaraland was dehorned. Swaziland has also started a dehorning programme of white rhinos and in Zimbabwe, approximately 150 white and 150 black rhinos were dehorned in 1992.

There is sufficient proof to indicate that dehorning is a significant deterrent to poaching and is a viable management option in many situations. But as rhino horn is made of keratin, which is also found in human fingernails and hair, it grows back when cut. Hence, dehorning operations need to be repeated every two to three years and costs are high - about US\$1,000 per animal.

IUCN and WWF are actively involved in conservation efforts to save the dwindling numbers of rhinos. These include assisting governments in their efforts to protect the species against poaching, protecting the rhino's remaining habitats, captive breeding, and pressuring countries to ban all trade in rhino horn.

Further reading:

1. Cumming, D.H.M., R.F. du Toit and S.N. Stuart, IUCN/SSC African Elephant and Rhino Specialist group, *African Elephants and Rhinos: Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan*, 1990.
2. Mohd. Khan bin Momin Khan, IUCN/SSC Asian Rhino Specialist Group, *Asian Rhinos: An Action Plan for their Conservation*, 1989.
3. Lesa Griffith, Editor, WWF International Campaign Reports *Help WWF Stop the Rhino Horn Trade*, N01 and 2

* **IUCN Categories of Threat**

Degrees of Threat are as follows:

Extinct: Species has not been located in the wild during the past 50 years.



Endangered: Species in danger of Extinction. Survival is unlikely if the cause of its decline continues.

Vulnerable: Species believed likely to become endangered in the near future if the cause of its decline continues.

Rare: Species with small world populations that are not at present Endangered or Vulnerable.

Threatened: A general term used to describe a species in one of the above categories.