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**Editors' note:** This Chairman's report is reprinted in its entirety with permission, from the African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group Newsletter Number 1, April 1983, pages 3-4. Other articles published in the Newsletters have been referenced in our Elephant Bibliography in the section "Newsletters, House Organs, and other Reports on elephants and related subjects" in this issue. We, at the Elephant Interest Group wish the African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group (AERSG) success in their endeavors and look forward to helping the AERSG however we can in their conservation efforts.

**AFRICAN ELEPHANT AND RHINO SPECIALIST GROUP:  
REORGANIZATION AND GOALS**

by **David Western, Chairman \***

**Chairman's Report**

Elephants and rhinos share a great deal more in common than their large size. Both occur widely throughout Africa from coastal flats to alpine meadows, and from parched deserts to wet equatorial forests. Both are hunted for trophies and their products are traded throughout the world; both are threatened over much of their range by over-utilization and by agricultural expansion. Both too are widely viewed as a monitor of how well our conservation efforts are succeeding - the logic being that if we cannot save the biggest and most dramatic of Africa's animals, what hope is there for the rest? Whether this is a valid assumption or not is immaterial; indisputably the fate of elephants and rhinos has helped alert our conservation consciousness and redouble our efforts to preserve natural areas vast enough to contain them.

The similarities between elephants and rhinos inevitably led to parallel efforts to conserve them and to a considerable redundancy of effort and competition for funds, with the more beleaguered rhino losing out to the more glamorous elephant. This at least seems to have been the thinking of the African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Groups of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) at a joint meeting held in Wankie during 1981. The result of the week-long gathering was an impressive document spelling out the conservation priorities. By using a variety of biological, economic, and political criteria, the Wankie meeting established the areas and populations which should be given most attention. In essence the outcome was a synthesis of the Pan African surveys conducted by the elephant and rhino specialist groups over the previous few years, and a formula for defining a continental conservation strategy. The results have since been published in an IUCN/World Wildlife Fund (WWF) summary document, entitled "Elephants and Rhinos in Africa - a Time for Decision." The detailed technical proceedings have still not been published.

\* The current Chairman is David H. M. Cumming.

The success at Wankie led IUCN to combine the elephant and rhino specialist groups. By August, 1982 I had been appointed Chairman and in September the first meeting of the African Elephant and Rhino Specialist Group (AERSG) was held in Nairobi. I will try to convey the gist of what has happened since AERSG was formed, and what plans we have for the next couple of years.

Although there were many good reasons for combining the elephant and rhino specialist groups, it is worth considering the rather daunting problems it created. Ordinarily IUCN's specialist groups are made up of individuals who volunteer their time in order to assess the status of species, and to define plans to conserve them. In the case of elephants and rhinos, things were a little different. International concern over their imperilment added a sense of urgency that could not await the sedate pace set by voluntary efforts. To speed the process New York Zoological Society (NYZS) and WWF provided funds for a secretariat for both the African Elephant Specialist Group, headed by Iain Douglas-Hamilton, and the African Rhino Specialist Group headed by Kes Hillman. Both Chairmen devoted their entire time, and that of a small staff, to the task. Largely because of their efforts the Wankie meeting was able to synthesize the results of their surveys and produce a conservation plan for Africa.

However, the newly appointed group was faced with twice the work of either previous group, but without the benefit of a full-time executive. Furthermore, the urgency is even greater for rhinos and certain elephant populations than it ever was, and the impetus established by the former elephant and rhino groups and by Wankie, has slipped considerably in the meantime. In an effort to streamline our activities and regain the lost momentum we have reorganized AERSG.

The first meeting of the group was held in Nairobi between 27th to 29th September, 1982 to decide how AERSG would function and what its priorities would be for the ensuing year. I will briefly review the outcome of both topics.

The newly constituted group has a Chairman who initiates and coordinates activities; a Deputy Chairman, Robert Malpas, who coordinates all activities in our Nairobi Office; two Vice Chairmen, Esmond Bradley Martin and Richard Bell, who provide technical and scientific guidelines; and regional representatives, Anthony Hall-Martin (Southern Africa), J. Ngog-Nje (Central West Africa) and David Cumming (South Central Africa), who coordinate localized activities and provide a regional perspective. Two other regional representatives will be added shortly to cover West and Central Africa. AERSG also has more than 30 members and a number of other consultants who contribute with information and to our decisions. We have, initially at least, kept the membership deliberately small. We will add new members as the pace quickens and our responsibilities widen. With its Chairmen and regional representatives the group should be able to meet more regularly than in the past and reassess the priorities more frequently. A second meeting is

already scheduled for 17th April in Harare, Zimbabwe, with the intention of reviewing the trade in rhino and elephant products prior to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora (CITES) meeting in Botswana immediately afterwards.

New York Zoological Society is helping by supporting the Chairman and Deputy Chairman, the salary of a full-time researcher, secretarial and computer services and administrative costs. Office space has been kindly provided in the African Wildlife Foundation's field headquarters in Nairobi.

The first task of AERSG was to review the conservation priorities established at Wankie and consider whether they were still valid. The general consensus was that little had happened to change the Wankie priorities, and that most of our efforts in the first year should be devoted to implementing them. Although most emphasis was placed on implementing conservation programs there was a clear recognition that we must also continually revise data on the status of species, and monitor the trade in their products, if we are to understand more about how ecology, politics and commerce will affect elephants and rhinos in Africa in the coming years. Without such continuing reviews, conservation action will always lag behind the circumstances it is trying to anticipate and circumvent. In the same vein the meeting also stressed the need to study the biology of species and subspecies, and to ensure that captive breeding programs provide a failsafe for biologically important races, such as the forest elephant, and the northern white rhino.

How have those initial discussions and intentions translated into practical action? I can only briefly summarise what has happened since our Nairobi meeting and how we intend to expand our efforts. The purpose of our Newsletter is to regularly circulate information about projects that are underway, issues that must be addressed and improvements that can be made in our abilities to conserve elephants and rhinos. We hope to produce the Newsletter twice a year.

In 1981 the Wankie meeting recognized that the northern white rhino (Ceratotherium simum cottoni) presented the most urgent conservation challenge, yet, in spite of funds already allocated by WWF, no action had been taken. The Nairobi meeting of AERSG set as its first priority the task of initiating a conservation programme. Pat Rogers of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Zaire had already been in contact with IUCN over the plight of white rhinos in Garamba National Park, and Ian Hughes and Kes Hillman were sent on an emergency mission in November 1982 to report on what could be done. As a result of their visit, and urgent pleas from the Zaire government, anti-poaching equipment is on its way to Garamba to help protect the rhino population, now reckoned to number in the low tens, down from over 400 in the early 1970s. Kes Hillman is also engaged on a much larger survey, recommended by AERSG, that will assess the status of northern white rhinos and recommend what action can be taken to conserve them in Zaire and Sudan, the two countries where they still occur. Kes Hillman reports more about the project in this Newsletter.

An equally vital project is Esmond Bradley Martin's recent survey of the trade in rhino horn in the Far East. The results of his findings are summarized in his report and will form the basis of decisions made at the Harare meeting to close the remaining avenues of trade. There is good reason to think that concerted action now could soon eradicate most of the remaining trade. The African Wildlife Foundation recently spear-headed a publicity campaign that caused North Yemen to ban the import of rhino horns. If successful, the ban could lead to a significant improvement for the black rhino since over 40% of all horns traded found their way into North Yemen during the late 1970s. Bradley Martin advocates that similar diplomatic and press campaigns could work in Far Eastern countries.

We have been actively concerned with other aspects of rhino conservation, including rhinos on private ranches in Africa and the United States. In Kenya many of the remaining 1000 or so rhinos are found on private ranches where land owners protect them. Since it costs a rancher considerable money, it is not unreasonable that he should expect support from public conservation bodies. However, there are many issues that concern us about how this is done, and we have been helping to formulate ideas for a policy that would enable Kenya to promote rhino conservation on private lands, yet still guarantee that the State, which legally owns all wildlife, could ultimately benefit in the process and safeguard rhinos should a rancher no longer want to preserve them. Incentives for private conservation efforts must be recognized, but so too must the rights of conservation organizations who help with funds. No less than any government agency, conservation bodies are accountable for the projects they support. How this might be accomplished to the general satisfaction of ranchers, government, and conservation bodies, is now being discussed.

A similar situation applies in the United States where a number of Texas ranchers are trying to obtain and breed black rhinos from Africa. Under what conditions should private efforts be encouraged? What responsibility does the rancher have to ensure that rhinos obtained under the guise of conservation are appropriately managed? That is an issue we are much concerned about. In principle we approve of the idea if it helps reduce the public burden of conserving species, but we are unwilling to do so in practice unless the rancher is prepared to accept certain responsibilities. The American Association for Zoological Parks and Aquaria is presently preparing certain guidelines that should, we consider, be the prerequisites of breeding rhinos on private land in the U.S.

Turning next to elephants, our first priority has been to help direct conservation efforts to designated priority areas, such as Selous Game Reserve in southern Tanzania and Garamba National Park in Zaire. New studies are also underway to update information on the volume, source and destination of ivory coming out of Africa. The Wildlife Trade Monitoring Unit in Cambridge together with Esmond Bradley Martin and Ian Parker are presently analysing the trade statistics and will present their findings in time for the Harare meeting where the information will be reviewed and decisions made on any conservation action thought necessary. Early indications are that

extremely large consignments have been leaving Sudan in the last two to three years and that mean tusk weights have fallen substantially signalling an over-utilization of elephants. Informants in South Sudan report that large poaching gangs are decimating elephants and rhinos in a manner reminiscent of Kenya in the mid-1970s. Aerial counts of Western Equatoria suggest that the elephant population has dropped by a half between 1976 and 1980. Since Sudan is a member of CITES and actively seeking outside support for its conservation efforts, our next task is to consider what emergency measures can be used to curb illegal hunting.

As Ian Parker showed in his ivory report to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, we can glean a great deal about the status of elephants in Africa by monitoring the trade in ivory. However, we still do not know what ivory parameters are most reliable, or how sensitive they are to changes in elephant populations. To explore the potential of trade statistics more thoroughly, Tom Pilgram of the University of California, Berkeley, has embarked on a statistical analysis of what a piece of ivory can tell us about the elephant from which it was extracted, and thus what trade statistics ultimately tell us about the status of the population from which a given consignment was drawn. He elaborates upon this theme later in this Newsletter. We hope eventually to formulate guidelines for how the ivory trade can be better regulated in those countries which intend to manage their herds on a sustainable basis. The meeting in Harare will address the topic in some detail.

We also hope to initiate a study of the forest elephant (Loxodonta africana cyclotis), a sub-species of the African elephant which is still somewhat of an enigma. We do know from the substantial volume of ivory assigned to cyclotis that it must be numerous. But how numerous and how widely it is distributed is uncertain. We know even less about its basic biology, ecology and social organization, yet it could play a key role in maintaining the patchwork of equatorial forests and the high faunal diversity associated with it. It is exciting to think that such a large and important animal is still virtually unknown biologically.

Finally, we are also in the process of launching a new Pan African survey of elephants and rhinos, a process we hope to complete later this year, and one that should enable us to review the trends of the last three years and help us to define a new conservation strategy sometime in 1984.

Future issues of the Newsletter will elaborate on the projects we have begun and offer a variety of news and viewpoints on elephant and rhino conservation in Africa.

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