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Many endangered species face fate of black rhino



In 1970, more than 65,000 black rhinos roamed Africa. They now number less than 2,000 and might be extinct in some countries by the end of 1994. The black rhino is headed for total extinction in the wild by the end of the decade.

The story of the black rhino's decline is neither one of a species unable to adapt to a changing environment nor of an animal running out of habitat. Rather, it is a story of human greed.

Africa's rhino populations have been decimated by poachers who kill rhinos for their horns, which are used in traditional Asian medicines and for ornamental daggers; each animal has two horns on the bridge of its nose. The incentive for poachers to illegally harvest rhino horns is high — the horns bring \$1,500 per pound on the black market.

Most black rhinos live in Zimbabwe; in 1992, 1,500 remained there. Now, only 296 are left. Most experts believe poachers will kill every rhino in Zimbabwe by the end of the year.

In an attempt to prevent poaching, Zimbabwe began dehorning rhinos several years ago. Conservation agents tranquilized rhinos, cut off their horns with a chain saw and treated the animal with antibiotics. After an hour or so, the rhinos would wake and go about their business, unharmed by the procedure. The horns, made of a hairlike substance, gradually grow back.

The dehorning program worked well when coupled with tough anti-poaching measures. Poachers knew that the chance of finding a valuable

horn was low and that the chance of being caught by game scouts — and jailed or killed — was high. However, when Zimbabwe ran out of money for its anti-poaching efforts, the program fell apart and more than 1,200 black rhinos were killed by poachers.

Without the chance of arrest, poachers could profit by killing dehorned rhinos whose horns had only begun to grow back. In a grotesque example of human greed, black-market dealers who have stockpiled rhino horns are paying poachers to kill dehorned rhinos in order to drive up the price of horns. Extinction of the black rhino would generate a fortune for those who have amassed a large number of their horns.

Shortsightedness has prevented the sustained utilization of the black rhino horn. Rhino horns could easily be harvested as a renewable resource using tranquilizers. Horns would grow back in about two years, and the process could be repeated. The population would survive, and the demand for rhino horn could be met.

The black rhino was one of the first animals protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species treaty 20 years ago. The plight of the rhino is an ill omen for other species in decline. Twenty years of protection under the CITES treaty, millions of dollars for conservation programs and intensive efforts by conservation professionals

have failed to reverse the decline of the black rhino.

Is the black rhino a harbinger of things to come? Will it set a pattern of shortsightedness overcoming wisdom? Earth Journal editor Joseph Daniel posed the question: "If we are to lose such a magnificent wild animal as the rhino, then what hope have we of saving the less-spectacular species of endangered plants and animals?"

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.