



Going, going – gone?

Fossil records indicate that the *Perissodactyla*, or odd-toed ungulates order of animals that include tapirs, horses and rhinoceroses, originated in the northern continents in the Palaeocene era some 66-56 million years ago.⁵ The rhinos spread south and up until recent times roamed across vast areas of Asia and Africa in their millions.³ It is estimated that there once existed some 50 genera the family *Rhinocerotidae*.⁵ Today only five remain – and their continued existence hangs by a thread. In 2015 it was estimated that there were only some 30,000 rhinos now surviving on the Earth.³

In Indonesia populations of the Sumatran and Javan rhino are extremely low and both species are listed as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List.³ There are now less than 80 Sumatran Rhino in the wild. Their populations were decimated by poaching and habitat loss due to forests being destroyed for palm oil and paper pulp.³ The Javan Rhino has an estimated population of just 67 living in the Ujung Kulon National Park³ making it “now among the rarest animals on earth.”¹⁹



By 1900 due to wholesale colonial hunting the Greater One Horned rhino of India had been reduced to fewer than 300 animals and it was on the brink of extinction. Happily, today due to conservation efforts there are some 3550 individuals in India and Nepal.³

In Africa a hundred years ago the population of Black Rhino was estimated to be one million.¹⁹ Today due to large scale poaching the populations have been reduced to under 5500 individuals.³ The Southern White Rhino is estimated to now number just over 20,000 individuals² while the Northern White Rhino has been tragically reduced to just two.

Humanity needs to work on a combination of initiatives to save the rhino - this should include reducing the demand in rhino horn to prevent poaching, and to protect habitat - before this charismatic mammal is lost forever.⁴

Poaching remains the major threat to the continued survival of the white rhino.⁶ Effective field protection of rhino populations has been critical. Many remaining rhino are now concentrated in fenced sanctuaries, rhino conservation areas and protective zones where law enforcement efforts can be concentrated at effective levels.¹³

International legal measures and enforcement action can play a key role in saving the rhino.² The trade in rhino horn is completely illegal¹¹ as the African Rhino are listed on CITES Appendix 1 and commercial trade in rhinos and their products is prohibited.² To save the rhino the whole world needs to work together to enforce the ban on the trade in rhino horn.

Sudan - “the last known male northern white rhino” - died on 19th March 2018.¹² Sadly it may be too late to save the northern white rhino but his death should inspire us to keep up the fight to retain the few remaining rhinos that do still survive.¹²

“It’s very sad to lose Sudan, because it clearly shows the extent of human greed and what sort of impact human beings can have on nature... if we don’t take care of what we have, we will definitely continue to...lose other species that are currently endangered.”¹⁶

Around the world many iconic mammals are facing the real threat of extinction. Most large cats, such as lions and cheetahs, are in decline and African elephants are also increasingly threatened by poaching.¹⁹ In the not too distant future charismatic animals like pandas, tigers and rhino’s may well only exist in zoos or protected wildlife areas.¹⁹ Many of the forces of the current extinction event are of our making - humanity is altering the atmosphere, cutting down tropical rainforests, and poaching for ivory and horn. We stand at a critical point in time - it will be the decisions we take now that will determine if these important mammals survive or not. Our action - or inaction - will determine their fate and decide “which evolutionary pathways will remain open and which will forever be closed.”¹⁹



This then will be humanities enduring legacy - whether or not elephants, tigers, polar bears and rhinos continue to walk the Earth.

“In an age where billions of dollars are poured into saving companies going bankrupt, and trillions into wars of arguable provenance, can we not spare a fraction of that to save a unique and charismatic mega-vertebrate – and begin to address our disastrous impact on planet earth?”¹⁴

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