

SPECIES ON THE BRINK

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The northern white rhino's future hangs in the balance, but the southern white could be the key to saving it

What is the problem?

The northern white rhino is the most critically endangered rhino. It was common at the time of its discovery, in 1903, across five Central African countries: Chad, the Central African Republic, Sudan, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). But numbers plummeted due to staggering rates of illegal hunting for its horn. And living in the heart of war-torn Africa didn't help. By 1984, it had reached a frightening low of just 15 animals, hanging on by a thread in Garamba National Park, in the DRC.

Were they safe there?

Not at all. The park and its surroundings were besieged by everyone from Uganda's Lord's Resistance Army guerrillas and Congolese rebels to the Sudan People's Liberation Army and a motley collection of mercenaries and poachers.

Was there no protection?

I visited Garamba in 1989, by which time, remarkably, the population had increased to 22 (I was lucky enough to see eight of them). The park was better protected than it had been for many years, but it was unimaginably tough. The rangers were frequently risking (and sometimes losing) their lives, and the rhinos were rattling around in an area more than three times the size of Greater London.

How many survive today?

The last confirmed sighting was during an aerial survey of Garamba in March 2006, when two adult males, a single adult female and a young animal were spotted. Another survey, in 2008, failed to find any survivors. There have been sporadic, unconfirmed sightings in war-torn South Sudan, but there is little hope that any survive today.

Are there any in captivity?

A few zoos have held them in captivity. A female called Bebe (born in Uganda in 1950)



A rare historic picture of a northern white rhino in the wild

was held at London Zoo until she died in 1964. But when the last Garamba survey concluded that they were probably extinct in the wild, there were just eight left in captivity: two in San Diego Zoo Safari Park and six in Dvůr Králové Zoo, in the Czech Republic.

So they were the only hope?

Yes. In 2009, four of them – two females (Najin and Fatu) and two males (Sudan and Suni) – were flown in a specially chartered Boeing 747 from Dvůr Králové Zoo to Nairobi, and then continued by road to Ol Pejeta Conservancy, in Kenya. I was among a handful of people travelling with them on their 26-hour journey (the male, Sudan, was so relaxed during the flight that we let him out of his crate and fed him carrots while we ate our sandwiches). Conservationists were hoping that a last chance to stand on African soil might encourage the rhinos to breed. It was a long shot, to say the least, and sadly it didn't work.

How many survivors are there now?

There are none in captivity, and Najin and Fatu are the last survivors in Ol Pejeta, now frail and living under 24-hour armed protection. The last male, Sudan, died in 2018 – effectively rendering the northern white rhino doomed to extinction.

Would it be a disaster if it were to become extinct?

It would be heartbreaking, of course, but the northern white is 'only' a subspecies of the white rhino. The other is the southern white – genetically different but virtually identical – and it is considered a conservation success story, with a population in the wild of around 16,000.

Has everyone given up hope for the northern subspecies?

No. Researchers are using space-age reproductive technology in a last-ditch rescue attempt. They have created 38 northern white rhino embryos in the lab, using semen harvested from the last males and eggs from the surviving females, and the plan is to implant them into surrogate female southern whites. If all goes well, we could see northern white rhino calves in the not-too-distant future.

What are their chances of success?

Slim – but not zero. Even if there are successful births, rebuilding a genetically viable population from a tiny pool of stored material will take decades of careful management. Genetic diversity will be extremely limited, and every step will be fraught with risk. But perhaps the bigger question is what would happen to the rhinos? The forces that wiped them out in the first place – war, poverty and poaching – haven't magically gone away. **w**

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