

Disappearing Silhouettes in the Savanna Sun:
The Deathly Impact of Poaching and Hunting on Black Rhinos

by Christine Shieh

On November 7, 2007, men dressed in Zimbabwean army fatigues approached the Imire Game Farm to commit murders of absolute atrocity. Entering the property by force, they tied up the maid, assaulted guards of their victims, and used AK-47s to slaughter Amber, DJ, and Sprinter – three black rhinoceroses straddling the edge of extinction. Amber’s fetus, slated to be delivered that week, died with her mother (“Another Devastating Loss”). Upon hearing the tragic news, conservationist Dr. Ian Player remarked that “the whole of the African continent will now suffer the consequences of this unforgivable act” (“Another Devastating Loss”).

Standing six feet tall and weighing over a ton, the black rhinoceros once roamed African savannas with a population of a hundred thousand in the 1960s (“West African Rhino”). Forty years have passed and their number has now fallen to a meager thirty-seven hundred (“Rhino Conservation”). The threat directly responsible for depletion of this species is none other than the human race. Since the emergence of black rhinos, poachers have relentlessly pursued these mammals not for their meat, but for their horns which are valued for misled purposes. As evidence continues to warn of extinction, the importance of recognizing the black rhino as a “flagship” species and a symbol of wildlife magnificence is more crucial than ever.

Black rhinos are poached excessively for their horns, which are believed to have mystical healing properties (Collins). As early as 5th century B.C., the rhino was mistakenly associated with mystical animals and its horn was envisioned as a “panacea”

for all illnesses (Kasnoff). Venetian explorer Marco Polo described seeing black rhinos as “numerous unicorns...with hair like that of a buffalo, feet like those of an elephant, and a horn in the middle of the forehead, which is black and very thick” (Kasnoff). Such entrancing descriptions of rhinos as magical creatures have led cultures to pursue the horns for medicinal purposes. In China, the horn is believed to reduce fevers and once was also used as cups to detect poison (Blouin). Yemen uses the horn to manufacture handles for “ceremonial” knives which young men wear proudly (Blouin). Others believe that the powder from the horn can cure “diphtheria, nose bleeds, measles, and chest pains” (Kasnoff). Yet the spiritual fascination surrounding these horns is entirely misled. Scientists have performed multiple “chemical tests” that show the horn has “no medicinal effect” whatsoever (Collins). Regardless, the value of the black rhino horn remains high in the world market and not only encourages more poaching, but also promotes cases of illegal trade.

Besides poaching for their horns, hunters also slaughter black rhinos in a senseless manner as in the case of Amber, DJ, and Sprinter; all three had already been dehorned before their murders. This senselessness has become prevalent as eighty dehorned rhinos were killed in Zimbabwe in 1993 (“Another Devastating Loss”). Efforts to save the black rhino by dehorning have evidently failed, as “mortality” risks involved in the process have been coupled with such brutality of humans (Ong). Manager Datuk Lingham from Borneo called the beheading of a dehorned rhino at his wildlife reserve a “senseless act due to human greed” for trophies (Ong). This greed has permitted poaching to reach a grotesque level, as 96% of Africa’s black rhinos were killed between 1970 and

1992 (“Black Rhinoceros”). Still, the numbers continue declining as people have not come to appreciate the vital roles that black rhinos play in our lives.

After the murders at Imire, Dr. Player tragically remarked that collectively, the “human race” has “let down these black rhinos” and his warning that a “whole” continent will “suffer the consequences” do not stray far from the truth (“Another Devastating Loss”). Black rhinos are the key to stimulating conservation policies for entire ecosystems through their title as a “flagship” species (Collins). This title is given to a vulnerable, distinctively endangered species selected to be an “ambassador or icon for a defined habitat, issue, campaign or environmental cause” (“Global Species”). “Flagship” animals engender support from the public, so that conservation policies directed towards their species will also benefit smaller organisms in whole ecosystems. With their pre-historic countenance and imposing size, black rhinos have come to symbolize the struggle for conservation of African savannas. Efforts to save the black rhino hence contribute to bettering the ecosystem in general. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) was the first to recognize black rhinos as a “flagship” species and since then, has emphasized the need to conserve the habitats they live in (“Global Species”). As a result, WWF has “strengthened protected areas in Africa, lobbied to halt the illegal timber trade,” and has outlawed “illegal horn trade” (“Black Rhinoceros”). Many do not realize it yet, but recognizing the black rhino as a “flagship” species is a crucial step towards maintaining biodiversity in ecosystems which we, too, are ultimately a part of.

The second importance of black rhinos lies in their contribution to the magnificence of wildlife which future generations have a right to see. Due to their rarity, black rhinos have become tourist attractions at conservatories in South Africa. As these

rhinos disappear from the face of the earth, future generations are robbed of witnessing these grandiose relics of the past. Accordingly, with every murder, the chances of our children ever seeing a black rhino decreases drastically. Action should be taken to save the black rhino, if not for the sake of our ecosystems, but for the sake of our future generations.

Though Africa is a considerable distance away, individuals are still empowered in many ways to save the black rhino. The first step that must be taken is to spread the word that rhino horns do not truly hold magical healing powers. Nearly all black rhinos are killed for their horns, thus dispelling this belief is imperative to diminishing the value of the horn on the market and cases of poaching as well. Methods to spread the word involve simple acts of civic participation. Whether it includes publishing a webpage about this issue, writing an essay to present in front of a class, or entering an article into science magazine contests, every effort will make a difference. Yemen once imported “three tons” of rhino horns annually in the 1970s, but after becoming convinced that usage of these horns was harming the rhino population more than it was helping humans, Yemen ministers imposed a ban on horn imports in 1982 which has been strengthened over the years (“Eastern Black Rhinoceros”). The fact that Yemen, once the leader in rhino horn trade, has reverted its course and taken action to prevent misled usages of rhino horns reveals that if people spread the word enough to promote facts, then nations around the world will begin to see the truth.

Another approach that must be taken to save the black rhino is to forbid poaching and hunting of these beasts by bringing attention to the unethical nature and harmful effects of such actions. This approach can first and foremost be accomplished by

education in schools. Children today need to recognize the importance of ecosystems as a cohesive environment that encompasses humans and organisms alike; disruption of any part of the ecosystem, such as endangerment of one species by poaching or hunting, will jostle the lives of humans as well. Actions taken by schools to help recognize the precariousness of ecosystems include participating in the Adopt-a-Rhino project, where commitment to adopt a rhino results in fundraising to support the nurturing of rhino calves in order to increase their numbers. Personally for me, simply buying and wearing a shirt from the Saving Rhinos organization is an effective form of spreading the word that black rhinos need our help; funds generated from buying shirts serve as donations to various foundation causes. Several foundations have made efforts to relocate rhinos where they will be out of harm's way. Areas within rhino range are also now patrolled for illegal poachers while punishments for poaching have also been heightened. Though individually, one might not be able to institute a new law or dispatch patrollers over a range of public property, merely donating to support a good cause can collectively turn out to make a difference.

When it comes to the black rhino, there is still one more method that people can take to save this species from disappearing off the face of the earth: tourism. Wildlife safari projects in Namibia have encouraged small expeditions across savannas for tourists to gaze at remaining black rhinos (Maruping). In past years, tourism in countries where few black rhinos reside has brought attention to these endangered species and stimulated efforts to save them. Only through proximity can we humans feel the aura of the black rhino's prehistoric presence and recognize the urgency to save this species before their roaming silhouettes in the savanna sun disappear forever.

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