Letters

Some progress, but concern remains about Namibia's desert rhinos and elephants

In November 1985 I had the opportunity to return to Namibia, which I had last visited three years previously, and spent three days travelling in Damaraland and the southern part of the Skeleton Coast National Park. This area is part of the driest desert in the world and, as the article in *Oryx*, October 1984 reported, with Kaokoland to the north, provides a unique habitat for subspecies of elephant and black rhino as well as other species normally associated with the African bush and savannah.

The elephant and the rhino are particularly vulnerable there for a variety of reasons, including the harsh habitat and the scattered nature of their tiny populations in a vast area. The latest news on the rhinos of Damaraland, however, is good. The rains of 1984 were plentiful and the water table in the valleys is high. I saw three rhino, all in prime condition. Rhino numbers have risen since 1982 from 35 to a present 52. They are constantly monitored by Blythe Loutit working for The Wildlife Society of Namibia and by arrangement by the Directorate of Nature Conservation.

The main stronghold of the desert elephant is 200 miles further north in north-western Damaraland and the lower Hoanib and Hoaruseb area. Here the picture is not such a happy one, and elephant numbers at around 80 are, at best, static. In the far north of Kaokoland a mere six animals still survive in the area of the lower Kunene.

Overall, poaching of elephant and rhino is being contained through increased patrolling by Department of Nature Conservation staff, whose numbers have recently been increased slightly, and by those such as Blythe Loutit, who are entirely dependent on voluntary contributions and their own fund raising efforts. Regular and prolonged visits to particular areas by working conservationists, together with local media publicity and the full help and co-operation of the Council of the local Damara people, have all helped, and there have been no cases recently involving the military, who with helicopters and modern weaponry are in a position to do irreparable damage. The expeditions into the area run by local tour operators in Windhoek and Swakopmund, in full collaboration with the Directorate of Nature Conservation and voluntary bodies concerned, are also beneficial.

However, worries remain. The rhino population would be particularly vulnerable to any resurgence of poaching as animals regularly use the same route, travelling 40 miles or more every four days to particular watering holes. It is also rumoured that military bases may be built in the north. Not long ago there was a serious well-publicized proposal from a local politician, fortunately rejected, that facilities should be sold to West Germany and the US for the dumping of nuclear waste in Kaokoland.

Perhaps the greatest danger arises from the continuing uncertainty over Namibia's political future, which seems to have paralysed future planning. If the situation deteriorates, it is particularly important that conservationists worldwide should be fully aware of what is at stake, and be in a position to give all possible help and encouragement to those on the spot.

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The problem of bore-holes

I was very interested in the piece 'Towards understanding the causes of famine' on page 2 of the January *Oryx*, for it highlights a fact that most authorities are very slow and even more reluctant to admit. My training was basically as an ecologist—for forestry is largely applied ecology—and, since serving in Ghana for 14 years in the 1930s and 1940s, I have been back 14 times to East, South and West Africa. Even when I started work, it was already clear that the arid land such as the Sahel could not be safely occupied other than by nomads, who with their flocks and herds of grazers and browsers can use small patches of mixed vegetation scattered over a wide area, seldom causing anything more than limited short-term degradation, for the nomads had worked out a *modus vivendi*.

The introduction of deep bore-holes has begun a process that must lead to disaster, for the resultant changes are irreversible, certainly in terms of human generations. Two points must be made