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## Press Release

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# Northern White Rhino Facing Extinction in the Wild

Despite the efforts of national and international conservation agencies in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) the last remaining northern white rhinos in Garamba National Park are now on the brink of extinction in the wild due to a deadly 'cocktail' of poaching and politics.

Listed as 'Critically Endangered', the northern white rhino is probably the most threatened rhino subspecies in the world. Occurring only in Garamba National Park – a World Heritage Site (currently listed as *In Danger*) located in the northeast of DRC on the border with Sudan, the northern white rhino managed to survive, due to the valiant conservation efforts of ICCN (Institut Congolais pour la Conservation de la Nature) and its NGO partners, despite decades of conflict and instability that has plagued this part of the continent. However, a rapid escalation of commercial poaching from mid-2003 onwards reduced the rhino population to an estimated 10 individuals by the end of 2004.

In response to this crisis, an emergency strategy, incorporating both increased protection in the wild and a rescue operation to move five rhinos to a safe sanctuary in Kenya, was developed by ICCN and an impressive coalition of international organizations including: UNESCO, United Nations Foundation, Frankfurt Zoological Society, Zoological Society of London, People and Parks Support Foundation, Fauna & Flora International (FFI) and the International Rhino Foundation (IRF), the lead NGO in Garamba since 1998; and with support from such agencies and donors as US Fish & Wildlife Service, Save the Rhino International, International Elephant Foundation, Wildlife Conservation Society, World Wildlife Fund, WildAid and the European Commission. The current partners committed to an emergency budget of US\$1 million for protection of the rhino in Garamba. As part of this expanded partnership, IRF and FFI entered into a formal coalition, the Garamba Conservation Programme, to coordinate the NGO efforts.

Today's bleak outlook for the northern white rhino is in sharp contrast to the mood of optimism in January this year. During a visit to Kinshasa, under the auspices of ICCN, of an NGO delegation led by the IUCN/SCC African Rhino Specialist Group, the President and Vice-Presidents of DRC approved in principle a rescue package for Garamba's rhinos. This translocation would have preserved a nucleus of the subspecies, which could have been used in the future to revitalise or re-establish the northern white rhino population in Garamba once the park was stabilised and secured. The evacuation of the rhino was from its inception intended as a temporary measure.

Unfortunately before a protocol could be formalised and signed by the DRC Government, the issue of the rhino translocation became ensnared by politics and by the local and national divisions that are sadly so characteristic of this troubled country. Despite the best efforts of the ICCN Directorate to counter the rampant misinformation and rumour seemingly generated for political gain, by late February the proposed translocation had become such an explosive issue that local opposition around Garamba had been incited to a fever pitch. The result: conservation activities in the park itself were obstructed; ICCN and expatriate staff were threatened; and seizures of equipment attempted.

These events have not only prevented the rhino rescue operation from occurring, but compelled NGO partners, including FFI and IRF, to suspend conservation support to Garamba. Meanwhile whatever rhinos remain are defenceless at the hands of the poachers. Under these circumstances FFI and IRF appeal to President Kabila and his Government to urgently resolve this current conservation crisis, as with each passing day the chances of this subspecies surviving in the wild diminishes.

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## **For further information**

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## **Notes to Editors**

The Northern White Rhino *Ceratotherium simum cottoni*

The northern white rhino is Critically Endangered in ironic contrast to the status of its relative the southern white rhino, which is the most abundant of all rhino taxa known today. Once ranging in large numbers throughout north-central Africa south of the Sahara, wild northern white rhino populations have been again reduced to 10 or fewer individuals located in Garamba National Park, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). There has been much concern about the status of this last surviving population because of the recent civil wars and attendant disruptions.

In the 1970s and 80s, poachers reduced the number of northern white rhinos from 500 to 15, however by the early 1990s through mid-2003 the rhino population had recovered to double their low point to more than 32 rhinos. Since mid-2003 the poaching has intensified reducing the northern white rhino population to 10 or fewer. Only the most intensive protection, possible only if adequate resources are available, will enable this population to continue to survive.

A small number of northern white rhino are maintained in two zoological institutions: six at the Dvur Kralove in the Czech Republic and the remaining three located at the San Diego Wild Animal Park in the United States.

The northern white rhino in captivity have not been reproducing well. However, a female calf was born at Dvur Kralove in 2000, the first captive born of this subspecies in a decade. Considering the numbers (about 25), distribution (all the wild northern white rhino in a single site), and circumstances (captive rhinos not breeding well; wild under severe poacher threat), the northern white rhino is one of the three most endangered rhino taxa on the planet (along with the Vietnamese Javan and the Cameroon black rhino).

**The International Rhino Foundation** supports and operates rhino conservation and research programs both in nature and in captivity. IRF programs in nature (in situ) concentrate on the species and subspecies most in need of and most appropriate for intensive protection and management. IRF programs in captivity (ex situ) facilitate management and sponsor research with the ultimate objective of helping captive populations become truly viable and hence an integral part of conservation strategies for rhinos.

**Fauna & Flora International (FFI)** acts to conserve threatened species and ecosystems worldwide, choosing solutions that are sustainable, based on sound science, and take account of human needs. Founded

in 1903, FFI is the longest established international conservation organization, and is currently supporting conservation through partners in more than 40 countries world-wide.

**IUCN** is a unique Union. Its members from some 140 countries include 77 States, 114 government agencies, and 800-plus NGOs. More than 10,000 internationally-recognised scientists and experts from more than 180 countries volunteer their services to its six global commissions. Its 1000 staff members in offices around the world are working on some 500 projects.

**The IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group (AfRSG)**, like its counterpart in the Asian Rhino Specialist Group (AsRSG) is among the 100+ Specialist Groups in the Species Survival Commission (SSC) of IUCN - The World Conservation Union. Both the AfRSG and AsRSG have developed Action Plans for conservation of their respective rhino species. These action plans provide very specific recommendations and propose detailed projects with the goal of ensuring survival and recovery of all rhino species and subspecies. The AfRSG is based at the KwaZulu-Natal Nature Conservation Service in South Africa where Chairman Dr. Martin Brooks and Scientific Officer Dr. Richard Emslie are located.

**UNESCO - the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization** (UNESCO) was founded on 16 November 1945. For this specialized United Nations agency, it is not enough to build classrooms in devastated countries or to publish scientific breakthroughs. Education, Social and Natural Science, Culture and Communication are the means to a far more ambitious goal : to build peace in the minds of men.

**The World Bank Group's** mission is to fight poverty and improve the living standards of people in the developing world. It is a development Bank which provides loans, policy advice, technical assistance and knowledge sharing services to low and middle income countries to reduce poverty.