

## January 2012 Update: Elegy and Celebration

A few months ago, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) -- the official international body that tracks the status of the earth's plants and animals -- declared that the Western Black Rhinoceros, *Diceros bicornis longipes*, is extinct. The Western Black Rhino, a giant browser that



**Sopen**

once ranged widely across central and western Africa using its exquisitely dextrous upper lip to pluck twigs and leaves from shrubs, had the ill-luck not only to live in places where more and more humans have commandeered the land for their own uses, but also to be endowed with two spectacular horns. These horns, considered an aphrodisiac in traditional Oriental medicine, have in turn been in greater and greater demand as the numbers and buying power of their human consumers have grown. The Western Black, like all rhinos, has been squeezed on all sides. The last known individual, a female named Sopen, was found dead at the hands of poachers in 2006, and subsequent surveys have failed to locate any new animals. So, in November 2011, the IUCN came to the tragic but inescapable conclusion that these rhinos are gone. Forever.

The Western Black Rhino joins the Yangtze River Dolphin, the Black-faced Honeycreeper, the Golden Toad, and the Atitlan Grebe -- just a few of the animals that have become extinct within the last few years. It's all part of our earth's sixth mass extinction, which is now underway -- the only mass extinction in our 4.5 billion-year-old planet's history to be caused by one species -- that is, us.

And these are the ones we know about. All over the earth, and especially in little-studied places like Tompotika, natural habitat is disappearing so fast that we know many species of plants and animals are becoming extinct before we have even had the chance to identify and name them. In Tompotika, cursory surveys have yielded at least 9 new animal species just in the last few years; possibly even here, and certainly in other areas lacking conservation efforts, unknown species are already being lost. Poet C.J. Graham of Vashon Island, Washington, writes:

### **Elegy for an Unknown Species**

How shall we mark with silence,  
That place in nature's web  
We never knew,  
Now frayed for loss of you?

Is there a need?  
Your silence is its own memorial --  
No buzz, nor chirp, nor bleat sounds there.

We did not care.

We never saw  
Your exquisite bejeweled form,  
Itself a living place  
For many a smaller race.

We project our inner emptiness  
Onto nature's screen,  
And so your vanished company grows each day  
As fewer of you living with us stay.

But rest ye not in discontent  
Thinking we build for you no monument  
Because we make this paradise infernal  
Our silence too will be eternal. \*

The loss of the Western Black Rhino and all its extinct sibling species, named and unnamed, is irrevocable, and unspeakably sad. There is no way to alter the fact that these are events of darkest grief and regret.

But do consider this: there is one marvelous animal -- the maleo bird -- which is no longer on its way to joining the ranks of the departed -- at least not anytime soon -- and that is thanks, in part, to you, dear AITo supporter. A few people got together, and helped things go a different way. Though still far from secure, whereas in 2006 the endangered maleo seemed to be following the inexorable path of the Western Black Rhino and the Yangtze River Dolphin, now the maleo is actually recovering in Tompotika. In this world, that is cause for celebration.



**Maleo. Photo: Kevin Schafer**

And it is a reminder: what we do matters, for the Western Black Rhino, for the maleo, for us all. Thanks for making a difference.

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