

## Man's activities driving last northern white rhinos to extinction

BY PETER MUIRURI

On Saturday last week, I made a brief visit to Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Laikipia. It is a haven of sorts for endangered species such as the rhino besides offering refuge to 37 chimpanzees.

However, one of the saddest ecological disasters in the world is taking place here. In a 700-acre enclosure are three massive rhinos – Sudan, Najin and Fatu. A casual look shows contented animals steadily browsing in the company of other herbivores.

The three are the last northern white rhinos remaining in the world. In the 1960s, there were more than 2,000 northern white rhinos in Uganda, South Sudan, the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

By 2010, there was no known northern white rhino remaining in the wild.

In 2015, only four remained – the three currently in Kenya and Nola, who lived in a San Diego zoo. She died last November. What went wrong?

Each of the countries where this rhino called home has been embroiled in some form of armed conflict, destroying its natural habitat. "To get enough food, a rhino needs a home range of about 140 acres. During conflict, humans encroach their habitat, killing many and settling in these areas. In any case, armed soldiers are not trained in conservation," said Joshua Wambugu, tourism education officer at Ol Pejeta.

I listened as Wambugu narrated to me the saddest ecological tale I have heard in ages. He says the three north-

ern white rhinos at Ol Pejeta cannot breed on their own. Forty-two-year-old Sudan, the planet's last male, is too old and has low sperm count. The two females have health issues besides their advancing age.

"The only hope is to create embryos using stored sperm from their species. These will be implanted in surrogate white rhinos. We hope science will come to the rescue. If this fails, then that is the end of the northern white rhino," said Wambugu.

I spent several minutes watching the big male munch grass by the mouthful. I shuddered at the thought that this may be the last time I was watching the northern white rhino, driven to extinction by our own actions.

