

# THE WHITE RHINO

By Robert Reece

Perhaps one of the most well known of the conservation mandates during the last decade involves the demise of rhinos throughout the world. A large and formidable megavertebrate, the rhino conjures up an image of a seemingly indestructible creature – and yet all over the world its numbers are plummeting. Prized for their horns, rhinos have been slaughtered by thousands to provide folk remedies and dagger handles. The story has been told many times in countless languages, but the battle to save these magnificent animals continues.

In the midst of all the efforts by governments and conservation organizations to save the various forms of the rhinoceros, a success story emerges—one that begins in the latter part of the 19th century. The white rhinoceros was once very abundant in Africa, its numbers stretching from the northern coast to Natal and Zululand in the south. Unlike today, the rhino was hunted not only for its horn but also for its hide and meat. Since its mild personality made it easy prey, the number of white rhinos began to diminish rapidly until shortly before the end of the 19th century when the government of South Africa took action. They declared the Umfuluzi and other areas to be game reserves. By most accounts there were probably fewer than thirty animals left when finally they were accorded protection.

In the early 1950s, there



An encouraging conservation story of this century involves the white rhino. The numbers of both subspecies have increased, thanks to cooperative efforts.

were over 400 white rhinos in the Umfuluzi reserve. Outside of these relatively small parks in Natal, the southern subspecies of white rhino ceased to exist. The ensuing years saw the development of a management plan for the Natal parks under the extraordinary leadership of Dr. Ian Player. The parks expanded as did the populations of southern white rhino, and today there are approximately 4,800 animals in South Africa and in other former range countries. The northern subspecies of white rhino experienced a similar decline: Not long ago there were only about 13 individuals left in the wild – and those had to be guarded closely within the confines of Garamba National Park in Zaire. Led by a dedicated researcher, Dr. Kes Hillman-Smith, the Zairis have steadfastly protected this remnant population, allowing it to expand to about 30 animals in just a few years.

While it would appear that the battle to save the white

rhino has been won in the south and that the trend has begun to reverse in the north, history has shown that relatively small populations of animals, even growing populations, can experience severe setbacks. In order to afford the white rhino the protection of a self-sustaining captive population, the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums (AAZPA) established the White Rhino Species Survival Plan (SSP) in 1982 which continues to be active today.

This captive breeding effort owes its beginnings to the Natal Parks Board which agreed, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, to place a large number of animals in zoos. These white rhinos were the potential founders of North America's self-sustaining captive population. Today, 46 zoological parks in the United States and Canada cooperate in the management of a population of 126 white rhinos.

Throughout the ten-year history of the White Rhino

SSP, a great deal has been learned about the mammal's social behavior, nutritional requirements and reproductive capabilities. For example, when many of these animals were imported from the Natal parks, they were placed in institutions as juvenile pairs. Unfortunately, nearly all of the animals that grew to adulthood in these "paired" situations failed to reproduce. The only institutions breeding white rhinos were those that had acquired large groups. As a result, many zoos have been exchanging animals with the parks, which have been able to accommodate larger numbers, in an effort to insure that as many of these original potential founders as possible are afforded the opportunity to breed and contribute to the next generation of rhinos. These transfers are important because a large founder base helps to insure the genetic integrity of the species.

The white rhino appears to be much less threatened today in the wild than it ever has been during this century. Nevertheless, it's comforting to know that, in this ever-changing world, the species is "insured" because of the cooperation of zoological parks in North America and throughout the world. □

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