

Exciting new project in Dept Conservation Ecology

“White Rhinos of the Kruger Park” By: Gayle Pedersen and Dr Alison Leslie



The white rhinoceros, *Ceratotherium simum*, had declined in numbers to such an extent that by 1997 they were absent from many of the countries within which they had historically thrived. Successful conservation efforts in South Africa (home to more than 80% of the world's remaining white and black rhinos, *Diceros bicornis*) have seen the numbers rising and in 1961 newly developed translocation techniques led to the establishment of widespread new populations from the source at Hluhluwe-Umfoluzi Game Reserve. One of the areas they were reintroduced to was the Kruger National Park (KNP). The last living white rhino in this area was recorded in 1896 but successful reintroduction programmes saw numbers rise to 1229 individuals by 1988 and numbers currently stand at an estimated 11 330 wild rhinos within Africa.

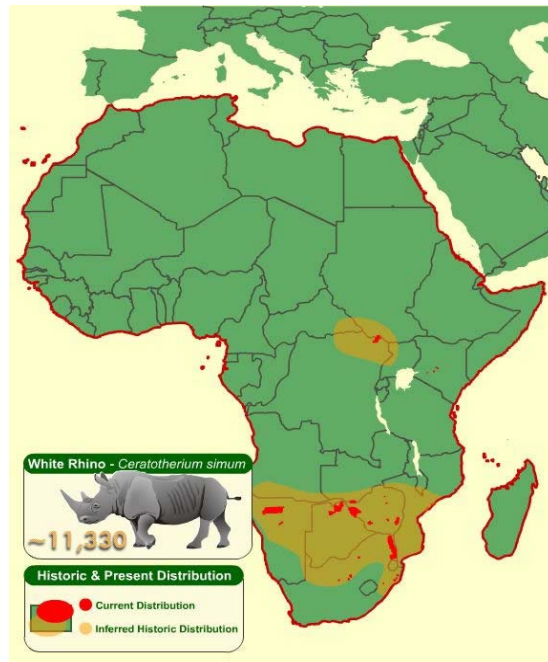


Illustration of the current and historic distribution of the White Rhino (International Rhino Foundation 2002).

In 2005, as part of a Large Mammal Reintroduction Project, a group of white rhinos was translocated to the Makuleke concession (also known as the Pafuri region), in the far north of the KNP between the Limpopo and Luvuvu Rivers, with the intention of establishing a breeding nucleus in an area from which they have been absent for over 100 years.

This year will see the start of an exciting collaboration between the U.S. Department of Conservation Ecology, Wilderness Safaris Wildlife Trust and the University of the Witwatersrand as we commence with Phase Two of this high priority project. Gayle Pedersen, a registered MSc student at Stellenbosch Uni, under the supervision of Dr. Alison Leslie and Co-supervised by the megaherbivore expert Prof. Norman Owen-Smith, will be venturing to the KNP in February for a one year field study on the ecology and feeding behaviour of these newly reintroduced highly vulnerable animals. The primary focus of the study is to ensure the habitat is suitable for the rhinos and record their impact on the new environment, whilst monitoring their general behaviour. This project hopes to see the successful establishment of a breeding population in this area, with the potential to move further a field into neighbouring Mozambique and Zimbabwe. It is also likely to form a preliminary study of the local landscapes and the suitability for reintroductions of further large mammals, including the black rhino.