

BACK FROM THE BRINK : THE WHITE RHINO STORY

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The southern race of the white or square-lipped rhinoceros Ceratotherium s. simum was at one time very common over large parts of southern Africa. Its range originally extended from present-day Zimbabwe in the north to at least the Orange river in the south, including Mozambique south of the Zambezi, Botswana, South West Africa, Transvaal, Swaziland, northern Natal and northern Cape. It may have extended south of the Orange river, but records are not clear enough. There are no definite records for Orange Free State, although it may well have occurred there. Between 1840 and 1880 vast numbers were shot throughout the species' range, and when ivory became scarce in about 1880, the white rhino became the favourite target of many hunters where it still occurred, because of the supposed medicinal qualities of the horn.

EARLY CONSERVATION IN ZULULAND

The Zulus are not known to eat rhino meat, and it is unlikely that the two species of rhinoceros were hunted by the early inhabitants of Zululand. Indeed, other game was abundant in the region (by all accounts available to us from early hunters), and that meat would have been preferred. It must therefore be assumed that, prior to 1850 at the earliest, there was no significant hunting pressure on the Zululand population of white rhino.

By 1890, the plight of the species was recognised in Zululand when the colony's first game law was proclaimed, on 31 March 1890. By this time the white rhino was practically confined to this region, with odd pockets surviving in eastern Transvaal (where it became extinct in 1896); in Mozambique (ca. 1940); Rhodesia (ca. 1932); South West Africa (ca. 1890). The Zululand law of 1890 put the white rhino in Schedule D, for which permission to shoot came from the Governor only, and followed recommendations by Melmoth Osborn, the Resident Commissioner of Zululand.

In 1893, because of pressure from owners of cattle, who were suffering from an epidemic of nagana at the time, several big game species, including both species of rhinos, were moved from Schedule D (royal game) to Schedule C, thus permitting hunting between 1 March and 31 August. On 19 February 1895 a local hunter, Mr C.D. Guise, wrote to the Secretary for Zululand suggesting that the white rhino be reinstated as royal game and that "a reserve be created to protect their habitat." The result was the proclamation of

rhino (both species) as royal game on 16 March 1895.

Mounting public pressure at about the same time resulted in the Governor of Zululand, Sir Walter Hely-Hutchinson, establishing "Reserved Areas for Game, within the boundaries of which the killing of game will be altogether prohibited." This proclamation appeared in the Natal Government Gazette of 30 April 1895, as Government Notice (Zululand) No. 12 of 1895, having been signed by the Governor on 26 April. There were five of these Reserved Areas, the boundaries of which were defined in the proclamation. Two of these Reserved Areas were the Hluhluwe Valley and Umfolozi Junction reserves, which formed the cores of the present-day Hluhluwe and Umfolozi Game Reserves.

By June of the same year two conservators, Messrs Tweedie and Sivertsen, were appointed by the Resident Commissioner "for the purpose of supervising the Game Reserves which have recently been defined in Zululand, and generally to ensure a strict observance of the game law." On 30 April 1897 four "Game Reserves" were proclaimed, in terms of Government Notice (Zululand) No. 16 of 1897, and the boundaries were the same as those set out in 1895. One of the earlier reserves was omitted from this proclamation. Within two of them, known as Umdletshe and Hluhluwe, hunting permits would be granted.

In that same year, all the earlier game laws were repealed and the schedules amended, so that white rhino, along with elephant, became "Especially Protected Game" for which no permission would be granted to shoot at all. Black rhino were placed on Schedule E, along with hippo, which only the Governor could give permission to shoot, and that for a licence fee of ten pounds.

It was also at about this time that the epizootic disease of rinderpest swept the country, killing large numbers of game. Simultaneously, the incidence of nagana decreased and people again started settling in areas hitherto unoccupied because of the danger to their cattle. Shortly after the end of the rinderpest epidemic, the numbers of game started picking up again. The magistrate at Mahlabatini, in whose area the "Umfolozi Junction Reserve" fell, reported in 1903 that "The White Rhinoceros there are about the only specimens now to be found anywhere in Africa, and have only been spared by timely preservation. There are about fifteen head of this kind in the reserve."

Between 1900 and 1912, little of consequence to the white rhino story took place. A few minor amendments to game schedules, the incorporation of Zululand in Natal, the appointment of a game conservator for Zululand (F. Vaughan Kirby), and the Act of Union were some of the notable events. Some land south of the White Umfolozi was added to the reserve in 1907.

In 1912 there was consolidation of game conservation measures into a single Ordinance, No. 2, for Natal including Zululand. There were three schedules of game, of which Schedule C was Royal Game and included white rhino. Royal Game could only be captured or killed under permit from the Administrator, who could theoretically issue one only for breeding, scientific experiments, or museum specimens. From then until 1920 there was again an increase in the incidence of nagana, which was highlighted when the Ntambanana Settlement was opened to ex-servicemen in 1919. These farmers lost large numbers of cattle in their first winter, resulting in a public outcry. This in turn led to the deproclamation, in May 1920, of the land added to Umfolozi Reserve in 1907, and to the abolition of the reserve in August of the same year. This did not, of course, affect the status of the white rhino, which remained Royal Game. The reserve was re-established in 1930 to facilitate research on the tsetse fly.

Estimates of the number of white rhino in Umfolozi Reserve up to 1936 were firstly provided by Vaughan Kirby in 1922, who gave a figure of 20 (an obvious underestimate, probably to draw attention to the plight of these animals); by Lang in 1929 - 120 inside and 30 outside; by the veterinary authorities in 1932 and 1936 - 220 and 226 respectively; and by the game conservator in 1934, Capt. H.B. Potter, who reported seeing 134 animals in the reserve and 72 outside. In 1938, Capt. Potter estimated the population to be 300. From these figures, it can be assumed that the number in 1920 was between 150 and 200, thus also placing doubt on the figure of 15 given in 1903. It was probably more like 50, if an annual rate of increase of 10% is accepted.

In 1936, a white ranger was appointed to Umfolozi Game Reserve, when the Natal Provincial Administration "..... decided to take over control of all the animals in the Umfolozi reserve so that a stop could be put to indiscriminate shooting and poaching within the sanctuary." Then, with a serious outbreak of nagana in 1939, an intensive shooting campaign was launched with the object of eliminating all game in Umfolozi. This followed similar campaigns in 1919 and 1929 respectively, which proved to be resounding failures because all they achieved was dispersion of the game animals. However, the 1939 campaign differed from the others in that professional hunters were employed, who had strict instructions not to destroy any rhino. Although throughout this time the Provincial Administration retained control over the protection of game, the South African Government, through the Division of Veterinary Services, had the final say in the fate of wildlife in Umfolozi Game Reserve. It was only through appeals by individuals, private organisations, and the provincial authorities that the white rhino was spared from final destruction, while all other species were being

eliminated in the reserve. The results of two separate counts carried out by the veterinary authorities in 1948 were 487 and 554 respectively. It was only in 1952 that the reserve was finally handed back for complete control to the Provincial Administration, now acting through the Natal Parks, Game and Fish Preservation Board. At that time the estimate of white rhino numbers was 500.

Subsequent counts conducted initially from a fixed wing aircraft and, since 1969, from a helicopter have shown a steady population, indicating that the rate of removal has been consistent with the annual rate of increase, which is estimated at 10%. The results of these counts for the Hluhluwe-Umfolozzi Complex are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. THE WHITE RHINOCEROS POPULATION OF UMFOLOZI GAME RESERVE BETWEEN 1967 AND THE PRESENT.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number</u>
1967	577
68	680
69	929
1970	1361
71	1529
72	1211
73	1114
74	836
75	1022
76	1079
77	No census
78	1122
79	1319
1980	No census
81	1199
82	No census

It must be accepted that the earlier figures were probably inaccurate and that there is an error of unknown magnitude in all of the later figures.

OPERATION RHINO

In 1960, the Natal Parks Board decided that it was essential for the long-term survival of the species not to have "all its eggs in one basket", and to capture and translocate some of the rhinos to zoos all over the world. This was a momentous decision which was to have far-reaching consequences in conservation circles, and to capture the attention of concerned and interested people all over the world. Since that time and up to the end of 1982, no fewer than 2766 square-lipped rhinoceroses have been moved from

Zululand, mainly from Umfolozi Game Reserve, the corridor and surrounding areas, to various parts of the world. Details of the destinations of these animals are shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2. SUMMARISED DETAILS OF THE DESTINATIONS OF WHITE RHINOS TRANSLOCATED FROM NATAL PARKS BOARD AREAS BETWEEN 1 JANUARY 1961 AND 31 DECEMBER 1982.

<u>Destination</u>	<u>Number</u>
Natal	470
Other RSA	1267
Other Africa	429
Europe	291
Americas	257
Asia	52
	2766

In the Table "Other RSA" includes the independent states, but excludes South West Africa and Swaziland, which, with Zimbabwe, Botswana and countries farther north, are included in "Other Africa".

The current population in Hluhluwe and Umfolozi stands at an estimated 900 animals. The Natal Parks Board has a policy of removing the annual increment to maintain a population which is stable with the environment. In 1979 it was realised that the population of grazing animals was in fact too high for the habitat to withstand, and a programme aimed at reducing the biomass to below the estimated carrying capacity was started. This was perhaps fortuitous in the light of the drought we are now experiencing, but the fact remains that the need to reduce numbers was recognised long before this. It will be a continuing programme in the years to come.

The "market" for surplus animals continues to be an active one, although there has, in the past few years, been a decline in demand from abroad.

One of the problems that was recognised in the early 1970s was the fact that there had been a distinct bias in favour of removal of young animals suitable for export, and a slight bias in favour of removal of females. In order to counteract this and obtain a more balanced removal ratio, the decision was taken in 1973 to permit the removal of surplus males for trophy hunting purposes.

Initially, this programme was restricted to local game ranchers, with the males being caught and transported direct from the field to the ranches. It was later expanded so that game ranchers in Transvaal also received these surplus males,

while normal translocations continued to take place to stock ranches with breeding animals and to provide breeding stock to conservation areas in southern Africa. To date, some 250 surplus males have been transferred to game ranches for trophy hunting - an average of 25 per year.

The question of providing animals for trophy shooting has at times been controversial, first from the point of view of the emotional aspect, and secondly because of problems associated with the CITES agreement. Fortunately, both these viewpoints now accept our action as part of the valid use of a resource which would otherwise have to be culled by the Natal Parks Board. The international community appreciates that bona fide hunters export the trophies for their own purposes and not for trade.

If it is accepted that the average cost to a hunter for shooting a rhino is R 4 000 (it is probably more), then ranchers in Natal and Transvaal have already received a million rand from this source. This is a figure that puts the cherry on the top as far as this success story is concerned.

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