



# SAVING THE AFRICAN RHINO

by Frants Hartmann

*Vulnerable to poaching and much sought for its horn, the survival of the African rhino is in the hands of conservationists.*

**T**he rhino is a most impressive beast — its massive body, thick hide, and sharp horns allow it to join the elephant and lion as the invulnerable royalty of the wild. Nevertheless, the five living species (two in Africa, three in Asia) have been seriously reduced in number, and the survival of the Asiatic rhinos is now at a critical stage.

The population of both African species is on the rise today, thanks to strenuous conservation efforts. But the fall and rise of the African rhinos is a study that well illustrates the impact, both good and bad, of man's activities on wild animals.

The two species of rhino in Africa, the black rhino and the white rhino, are divided into two subspecies, one southern and the other northern. The black rhino and the white rhino are distinct in many ways — almost as different as black and white, although their color names are misleading descriptions of both species. As seen in the wild, their color depends on the particular soil of the region, as they are usually coated with a light film of dust. However, there is a basic color difference; the white rhinos tend to be light gray, the black rhinos tend to be dark gray.

The black rhino and white rhino belong to a group of animals classified as "odd-toed ungulates" (Perissodactyla) which includes zebra and all horse-kind, as well as the tapir. The rhino's spoor (track) is distinct; it perhaps can be confused only

with that of the hippo, which has four toes, while the rhino has three.

Just 50 to 75 years ago, the black rhino was plentiful throughout most of South and Central Africa. However, at the turn of the century, it was shot by the thousands and was quickly brought to near-extinction in South Africa, while at the same time, it persisted in East Africa.

The black rhino has always been characterized as being aggressive, truculent, and unpredictable. The white rhino is docile and mild-tempered, which makes it very vulnerable to poaching. (Both species are vulnerable to hunting with high-powered rifles.) In 1890 the white rhino was declared extinct in southern Africa, but later a small number was found to survive in Zululand, and from these descended the present population of the southern race of white rhino.

With agricultural development and new settlements, the black rhino's distribution has been drastically reduced, and now it is only found in a very few areas outside national parks. In the past, control of population was based on extermination. Now, with the introduction of immobilizing drugs and modern translocation techniques, there are

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Of the five living species of rhinos, two are found in Africa. The white, or square-lipped, rhino (above) is the largest land mammal after the elephant, but the black rhino (shown on page 24) is considered more aggressive.

new possibilities for the survival of both species of rhino. Both species (but especially the white) are being reestablished in other areas where they had become extinct. With the aid of immobilization techniques, they have been moved from areas allocated for settlement, or from places where poaching spelled the ultimate end. Both species have also been reintroduced into areas where they once were exterminated, and they have been moved to new habitats within national parks and preserves.

### Slaughtered for its horn

The black rhino is about five-and-a-half feet high at the shoulder, and it weighs about one-and-a-half tons. Both sexes have horns, growing from the skin, made up of compacted fibers that are derivative of hair. Both the black and white rhinos have been, and are still being, slaughtered by poachers for the sake of their horn, which is smuggled to the Far East, where it is believed to have aphrodisiac properties. Belief in these unproven properties of the rhino horn have generated slaughter of rhinos that has depopulated all species. The

price of a rhino horn may represent several years' income for a native farmer.

The black rhino has a prehensile (grasping) upper lip which facilitates its browsing. Its habitat ranges from mountain forests to semi-desert bush country. Although the black rhino is also found in West Africa, it appears to be more numerous in East Africa. The survival of the animals is critically dependent upon the availability of water. In Tsavo Park, the 1961 drought, combined with habitat destruction by elephants, took a heavy toll of the black rhino population. Rhinos, however, are quite capable of digging when no surface water is available; I have often seen holes dug by rhinos in dry riverbeds. In areas inhabited by the black rhino, two features cannot escape the observer: the dungheaps, which the black rhino always deposits in certain places, and the well-worn tracks or paths through dense bush. Rhinos have a low reproductive rate, which also accounts for their dwindling numbers; there is an interval of about three years between each calf. The gestation period of the black rhino is about 18 months. The calf of the black rhino usually follows close at the heel of its mother, while in the case of the white rhino, it is the other way around — the mother keeps the calf in front of her.

The black and white rhinos are often seen in close proximity with other herbivores. Adult rhinos have no significant predator other than man: they are largely invulnerable and can even run a pride of lions from their territory. Rhino calves, however, are occasionally preyed upon by lions, and more rarely, by hyenas. Recently, I read an interesting account of a black rhino being killed by a large crocodile in the Tana River in 1907, but this is exceptional. Man still remains the rhino's greatest predator.

In most areas rhinos are seen in association with cattle egrets and oxpeckers. The activities of the oxpecker are of mutual benefit. The rhino is always infested with ticks, which are embedded on the softer parts of the skin. The oxpeckers climb about on the gray bulks, getting a free meal. Although the rhino has good hearing and a good sense of smell, its eyesight is very poor; the oxpecker therefore performs another very important function in alerting the rhino, with its hissing call, in case of any approaching danger.

The temperament of the black rhino varies from area to area and from individual to individual. I have always found the black rhino in the Tsavo Park area to be ill-tempered, compared with

the same species in the Ngorongoro Crater. Rhinos must always be treated with caution. The national park ranger will usually know the individual animals in his area and whether an approach at close quarters can be made. It is always good practice to approach a rhino slowly, moving closer in stages. When a rhino becomes aware that a car is in the vicinity, it will usually either make off, or accept the car's presence at a reasonable distance.

### Square-lipped grazer

The white rhino also was once widely distributed in southern Africa, as well as in southern Sudan, Uganda, and adjacent parts of Zaire (formerly the Republic of the Congo). The isolation of these two white rhino populations at two points, several thousand miles apart, is due to past environmental changes, as these two segments of population must have been a single group at one time.

In East Africa the white rhino has been introduced into the Murchison Falls National Park and Meru National Park, where it has not existed in known history, but conditions there match its natural habitat in other parts of Africa. The white rhino is much bigger than the black — about six-and-a-half feet at the shoulder, and weighing up to

three-and-a-half tons, the biggest land animal after the elephant. The white rhino is a grazer and is square lipped, which in early Afrikaans was called 'wiet' (wide) and through an inadequate translation has been given the name white rhino.

Both species of rhino do not seem to be as adaptable to environmental change as other species. Removal of a part of its habitat is tantamount to removing a part of its population. In fact, the rhino serves as a good example of an animal whose survival is completely dependent on the will of man. It can be easily exterminated (by contrast, the coyote has resisted extermination despite intense efforts towards its control). In Africa, both species were first subjected to ruthless slaughter, followed by intensive protection and conservation. The white rhino was on the verge of extinction, but through protection in the wild the animals have begun to overpopulate the limited area available to them. But even in protected areas, they are still subject to poaching and encroachment by human settlement and activity.

Conservationists have successfully protected both species of rhino beyond what was first thought possible, but the rhino still provides a big challenge to scientists and conservationists to ensure its survival in the future.

**Both species of rhinos are dependent on water for survival, and they are quite capable of digging when no surface water is available.**

