

# Portraits of Zimbabwe



## Black Rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*)

A species of considerable concern in Zimbabwe today owing to poaching problems, the black rhino was widely distributed prior to the colonial era. The big-game hunter F.C. Selous noted that while hunting in western Mashonaland and northern Matabeleland in the 1870's, he encountered black rhinos frequently (e.g. "five to eight in a day"). Although black rhinos were particularly abundant in the low-altitude areas (the Zambezi Valley and Sebungwe region, and the south-eastern Lowveld), they were also recorded along the central watershed; until the 1940's, they were seen regularly in the Kwekwe and Gweru areas. Reduction in rhino range due to rapid agricultural development was exacerbated by rhino hunting as part of tsetse control operations, commencing in 1924. A series of capture exercises, starting with Operation Noah (the rescue of animals from the area flooded by Lake Kariba in the early 1960's), has enabled the re-introduction of black rhinos to the Hwange and Gona-re-Zhou National Parks, where the species had been virtually eliminated.

The species is also known as the hook-lipped rhino, since it has a prehensile upper lip which has evolved in accordance with its browsing behaviour. In contrast, the white (or square-lipped) rhino is predominantly a grazer and has wide lips for cropping grass. Black rhinos prefer a habitat of savanna woodland and scrub, and feed on shrubs and young trees up to 4 metres in height, pushing them over if necessary to reach edible parts. In Zimbabwe, black rhinos are rarely found more than 15 km from water sources, since they drink regularly. The animals tend to be solitary, with the only stable bond being between a female and her calf, which persists until the female has another calf (the gestation period is 15 months and the interbirth interval is about 3 years).

Black rhinos have a well-deserved reputation for aggressiveness towards humans, towards other animals and also towards members of their own

species. When living at natural population densities in suitable habitat (about 1 rhino per 5 sq km), they occupy overlapping home ranges of 20-50 sq km and communicate their reproductive status and dominance mainly by means of olfactory signals (i.e. urine squirts, dung middens and scent trails created when the rhinos kick up their dung and then deposit residues as they walk). In keeping with this communications system, black rhinos have a very well-developed sense of smell; their hearing is also acute, but their eyesight is poor. In zoos, black rhinos have reached over 40 years of age. Large bulls may weigh about 1000 kg. Rhinos enjoy wallowing in mud or shallow water, but do not venture into deep water.

The population of black rhinos on the continent has been devastated by poaching over the past 30 years, following a brief respite from the pressure of colonial sport hunting. In 1970 there were about 65 000 black rhinos in Africa; the total is now about 3 500, of which half is made up by the Zimbabwean population. The poaching has been fuelled by the demand for the rhinos' horn as a component of traditional medicines in the Far East (the horn is not used much as an aphrodisiac, contrary to popular Western belief) and for the manufacture of traditional dagger handles in North Yemen. The rhino population in the lower Zambezi Valley of Zimbabwe was first afflicted by serious commercial poaching in 1983, and the recent virtual eradication of the species in Gona-re-Zhou National Park (for the second time) is a clear indication of what will happen in the other wildlife reserves unless a carefully-planned and adequately-funded rhino conservation strategy is implemented. The current gloomy situation is enlightened by the successful establishment of 160 rhinos on ranchland in the interior of the country, through translocation operations carried out since 1986, although much still has to be done to ensure a viable breeding programme.