

Reading Rhinos through the Lens of Human-Animal Studies

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Given the focus on rhinoceros horn today, it seems odd that Rudyard Kipling chose to write about rhino skin when creating a fable about the species in *Just So Stories* (1902). When his poor-mannered rhino steals a cake, its baker gets revenge by placing crumbs inside the rhino's skin. This makes him so itchy that he rubs vigorously against trees and rocks, seeking relief. As he scratches, his smooth skin folds and sags and wrinkles. The episode establishes in the species a "very bad temper" (Kipling 1902: 41). Kipling's tale is a sort-of colonial origin story that places upon the rhinoceros a peculiar explanation of perceived bully behavior and seemingly unexplainable rage. In many western tales of rhinos, both before and since, their physique is described as odd and ancient and their behavior as unfathomable.

In the Buddhist tradition, the traits of the rhinoceros are not reviled but admired. The *Rhinoceros Sutra*, or *Khaggavisana-sutta*, begins by describing rhinos as innately solitary animals whose isolation enables them to renounce violence and avoid pitfalls of society – both its temptations and its obligations. It lives "[w]ith no greed, no deceit, no thirst, no hypocrisy," according to the sutra, which concludes each verse: "wander alone like a rhinoceros" (Bhikkhu 2013). In this interpretation of rhino intentions, they are not grumpy hermits but tranquil monks. Their predilection to be left alone is not a sign of bad temper but a demonstration of the very temperament that can achieve enlightenment.

These representations illustrate the contrasting cultural constructions humans bring to their ideas about and interactions with non-human animals. Their observations are co-productions of human and non-human animal behaviors, shaped by both real and imagined encounters in specific times and places and passed down, creating traditions and legacies of species representation that have lasting implications for how a species is perceived and treated. Rhinoceros are not animals most humans are likely to encounter daily, making perceptions of them lean more on culture and tradition than on personal observations. Thus, the history of rhinoceros provides a lens into varied cultural imaginaries of a species that, by both of the above accounts, would rather be left alone.

The task of the rhinoceros historian is to find samples of stories, artworks, encounters, and specimens – and to

read them as texts that demonstrate cultural values and perceptions. This investigation offers insight into how human-animal relationships are shaped, often providing context for the decline or abundance of a species, for if an animal is valued, its decline might be stopped. But value does not come in just one shape or size. Rhinoceros have been valued in ways that exterminate them (as trophies and pharmaceuticals) and in ways that save them (as endangered species). Sometimes, their value is confusing and contradictory, as in the practice of removing horns to stop poachers from killing. Is a rhinoceros truly a rhinoceros without this distinguishing feature – a protrusion that the artist Salvador Dali considered one of the most perfectly designed objects in all of nature?

While science defines animals biologically, anatomically, and ethologically, humanities scholarship investigates the role of animals in history and culture. Animal histories unwrap attitudes and conflicts that have led to current crises and reveal contrasting encounters and representations. The rhino portrayed by global conservation rhetoric today seems an altogether different creature than the agricultural pest who grazed indiscriminately for centuries. Unlike both Kipling's and Buddhism's rhinoceros, animals are not static, uniform objects. Essentializing their traits to explain canonized behaviors fails to consider their active agency within their specific environments, histories, and individual circumstances. Human-animal relationships at any moment or place in time are products of decades of negotiating needs and desires, as well as of individual experiences and attitudes.

In the past few decades, Human-Animal Studies has grown as an interdisciplinary field with contributions from history, literature, philosophy, anthropology, psychology, and art on the premise that animals have histories of their own and play a role in creating what we usually consider human history.¹ Such evidence-based scholarship is neither science nor activism but it complements both. The task of many animal scholars is to read into what humans

1 The literature is expansive, but some texts relevant to the ideas presented in this essay include Jørgenson (2019); Heise (2016); Dunlap (1988); Mighetto (1991); Herzog (2010); Fudge (2004); Montgomery (2015). Several books have been published that encompass an overview of the field, including Weil (2012); Taylor (2013); Marvin & McHugh (2014); Kalof (2017), and DeMello (2021).



FIGURE 2.1 The only living, Rhinoceros, or “Unicorn,” in America. Now attracting such crowds of wonder loving people. At Barnum’s Museum. Broadsheet issued as part of Barnum’s Gallery of Wonders No. 9 by Nathaniel Currier (1813–1888) of 158 Nassau Street, New York. Probably issued in 1849, for one of the ventures of Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810–1891). Note the oversized horn
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have said about animals and their actions to fill the silence in the archive. The voices of animals are not written, but if human intentions, activities, and expressions are examined critically, a more nuanced understanding of these shared experiences is possible (DeMello 2021: 27; Kalof & Montgomery 2011).

For example, writing the history of European colonization of North America cannot exclude the animals and plants they brought with them – their portmanteau biota, as historian Alfred Crosby called it in *Ecological Imperialism* (1986). Animals, plants, and diseases played an active role in reshaping landscapes, populations, and ecosystems in ways that contributed directly to the outcomes of human conflicts. Human intentions can be helped or hurt by animal bodies. In the region that is now Nepal’s Chitwan National Park, the diminutive mosquito enacted its agency by preventing outsider intrusion through the spread of infectious diseases, keeping non-locals on the outskirts of the region for far longer

than they might have desired. As a consequence, rhino populations did not decline as rapidly here as elsewhere (Dinerstein 2016; Mishra 2009). Without this historical understanding, scholars might fail to understand that it is not human legislation, park creation, and conservation biology alone that preserves species. None of this happens in isolation of natural forces and ecological contributions. Rhino roam Chitwan, in part, because mosquitoes played defense.

Encroachments into rhinoceros territory in Africa and Asia happened both before and alongside colonialism, but the latter was a driving force in their extermination. Not only did outsiders introduce new agricultural methods that exploited more land that suppressed local and indigenous practices, they brought with them a culture that valued the heads and horns of rhinos as symbols of both individual and national pride. They killed, captured, and collected rhinos for monarchs, popular exhibits, and scientific inquiry. The field of natural history required

physical evidence for investigation, seeking to catalog and categorize all life on earth. To both the Linnean project of classifying the world into nameable entities and natural theologians who investigated Biblical animal references, the rhinoceros' horn aligned with myths of the unicorn, or re'em, that sparked imaginations and interest. The Indian and Javan rhinoceros' single horn, in particular, made the animal seem to fit such descriptions. Its utter difference from the heraldic white horse with its long, slender horn made it a thing of curiosity, something to be considered and contemplated, not direct proof. Captive rhinos traveled Europe as audiences thirsted to see the real thing with their own eyes – both to witness the exotic and to decide for themselves what they thought of the creature. Unicorn associations continued even as citizens of empire became more familiar with rhinos. When the American showman P.T. Barnum exhibited one rhino in the mid-nineteenth century, he billed it as the “unicorn from scripture” (fig. 2.1). He beckoned crowds to witness the conflation of myth and reality embedded in the rhino's body (Enright 2008; Ridley 2004).

The rhetoric with which rhinoceros are most enmeshed is that of wilderness and wildness, created through human interpretation of rhinos' predilection for living apart from humans and their reputation for attacking without provocation. “Although not possessed of the ferocity of carnivorous animals, the rhinoceros is completely wild and untamable,” wrote Georg Hartwig in a guide to “man and nature in the polar and equatorial regions of the globe” in 1875. Hartwig essentialized all rhinos, ignoring centuries-old Asian practices of training them to hunt and keeping them as amusements. In the eighteenth century, the Indian rhinoceros Clara toured Europe and was known to be so gentle and affectionate that she often licked her handler's face. A comic strip for Barnum's traveling menagerie just fifteen years before Hartwig's publication portrayed it as still, inactive, and lazily greeting visitors. While there are also reports of captive rhinos attacking their keepers, the practice of keeping and exhibiting rhinos continued to bring relatively calm creatures to public audiences without changing the type of essentializing rhetoric used by people like Hartwig. The wild and the tame rhino lived side by side in the western imagination and persist into the present day.

By the early twentieth century, the rhino's lousy temper had become rote in everything from scientific to children's literature and even shaped how scientists wrote about them. The legacy of Andrew Smith's declaration that rhinoceros “disposition is extremely *fierce*, and it universally *attacks* man if it sees him” (Smith 1838) was apparent nearly a century later, when Theodore Roosevelt

theorized such attacks were contributing to their demise. “I do not see how the rhinoceros can be permanently preserved save in very out-of-the-way places,” wrote Roosevelt, “the beast's stupidity, curiosity, and truculence make up a combination of qualities which inevitably tend to ensure its destruction” (Roosevelt 1910). Hollywood has cast rhinoceroses as raging and ravaging without explanation, threatening even the most resilient heroes. In *Hatari* (1962), rhinos face off with two icons of rugged masculinity – John Wayne and a Jeep. As he runs atop a train in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), adventure-icon “Indie” is nearly emasculated by a circus rhino who pokes its horn through the roof right between his legs.

The juxtaposition of Jeeps and trains with rhinoceros is another trope seen often in popular culture's assessment of the species. Advertisements use rhinoceros as synonyms for toughness, as in a 1951 Armstrong Tires ad announcing the “Rhino-Flex” construction of their product has “None Tougher!” (Enright 2008: 115; 2012). A 2009 advert for Mitsubishi posed a rhinoceros over its tires while the body of a SUV was lowered onto its back. “It's more than technology. It's instinct,” touted the ad (Mitsubishi 2009). A quick Google search reveals combinations of the words “rhino” and “tough” used to describe fishing rods, tools, knives, steel, water tanks, boots, glue, shelters, cell phone cases, and propane cylinders.

The rhino's image is wrapped up in the legacy of a specific type of ruggedness of character that is unafraid to confront even the largest and most formidable of beasts. In non-western cultures, the confrontation between rhino and human, and how the human fares in the interaction, has held associations with status and masculinity. In Redmond O'Hanlon's search for the Sumatran rhinoceros in Borneo, he finds the animal impossible to track. When he interviews an indigenous Ukit elder, he shares images of rhinos, and the man joyfully recounts hunting tales of his youth. O'Hanlon (1984) oddly ceases his search after talking to this man, saying he has found what he was looking for. This troubling ending implies that human knowledge is the endpoint of animal existence, that indigenous lives are as reflective of wildness as the lives of animals themselves, and that human connections to rhinoceros necessarily take the form of a hunt – whether with a gun, camera, or pen.

While scientific studies of rhinoceros bring excellent understandings of the species, historic ranges are still explained with phrases like “it may have also existed in” and “unconfirmed reports” (Khan 1989). Outside of representations and cultural capital, animal historians, contribute to the record of rhinoceros sightings. Such

scientific uncertainty can benefit from historical investigation. While it may not all be recoverable, what is excavated can reconstruct historical habitats and lifeways that have impacted species for centuries, helping to explain species' vulnerability or resilience to specific impacts over time. Anthropology, too, has much to offer, as O'Hanlon's tale suggests. Taking indigenous stories, beliefs, and practices into account and weighing that knowledge equally with traditional science and scholarship provides a complete picture of global human-animal relations.²

Intensive examination of the cultural life of a species breaks apart the confluences of myth and science that have long associated rhinoceros with the idea of wildness. In rhino history, old ideas remain firmly planted even as attitudes about them shift. The homepage of the International Rhino Foundation (2022a) greets visitors with a photograph of a mother and baby rhinoceros with a headline stating their vision: "A World Where Rhinos Thrive in The Wild." The organization's mission and values reveal a closer connection to "science [and] political realities," but to grab attention and support, they choose to invoke "the wild" (International Rhino Foundation 2022b). Just as it was for Kipling and Roosevelt, the wild is a romantic place far from what they called civilization, by which they meant western culture. The problematic nature of wilderness is suggested further down IRF's homepage, where they state they are a U.S.-based organization with "on-the-ground programs in Africa and Asia where rhinos live in the wild." Conflating ideas of where wilderness exists with non-western nations is a legacy of colonialism and globalism that romanticizes landscapes, animals, and people.³ This critique is not of IRF's exceptional work but of the language they, like many other conservation groups, feel they must use to generate empathy and support for endangered species. Rhinos are constantly placed in the wild, a place of the past and the imaginary, which does not offer the true vision of what it means to save a species in decline. It is ultimately a human-animal partnership. IRF states this more accurately when they share details of their work "supporting viable populations of the five remaining rhino species and the communities that coexist with them" (International Rhino Foundation 2022a).

If rhinos were to live in the wild, they would have to be time travelers. The rhetoric around species conservation looks backward and forward with its twinned goals of saving a species for future generations (ours and theirs) and

restoring ecosystems to a previous balance. In shorthand histories of endangered species, many assume the past was better, the present not good enough, and the future reason to hope. What is really meant by the vision that rhinos will once again live "in the wild" is that they will have lives independent of human protection. Saving a species involves scientific methods, social changes, shifts in cultural attitudes, political legislation, and in the case of rhinos, armed militia. Many a hunter from centuries past would be confused by the gun barrel facing away, not towards, the animal. Likewise, those who admired rhinos without needing a trophy would wonder where the wildness remains in a species that requires such diligent human protection.

Rhinos need bodyguards because humans place enormous value upon their horns. Looking at officially-established protections or conservation efforts is misleading in the case of rhinos. While habitat loss is also a danger that must be managed, poachers operate outside laws, national borders, and international trade systems. Thus, as protections for rhinos rose in the twentieth century, the value of its horn also increased to make them even more vulnerable in the twenty-first century. Nepal's rhino population dropped from 800 in the 1950s to less than 80 in the 1970s. They established Chitwan National Park to draw protective boundaries around the species and its habitat, but poaching continued. The region had seen declines before as horns, hooves, and hides were often used locally. This led to the designation of rhinos as a Royal Animal in 1846, protecting them from hunting by any other than the royal family of the Rana dynasty. This measure is credited with preserving a larger population than in other rhino habitats. How people have valued rhinos are directly tied to both their conservation and their decline (Tanghe 2017: 125–126; Martin 1985).

In 1976, World Wildlife Fund and the Nepalese government worked together to increase projects to protect rhinos near Chitwan and deployed guards from the forestry department before stationing the Royal Nepal Army members at the park. In 1982, the government worked with Smithsonian's National Zoological Park to establish the NGO now known as National Trust for Nature Conservation, but poaching still rose. As Nepal became a democracy in the 1990s, the community became more involved in conservation, creating buffer zones, but civil war would decrease these gains in the early 2000s in part because the military was unavailable to protect rhinos. Only when the community began to publicly pressure the government to enforce anti-poaching measures did the number of rhino deaths again decline. This timeline of conservation efforts reveals a few things essential to

2 West 2016; Ogden 2011; Govindrajana 2018; Sodikoff 2012; Rose et al. 2017.

3 Cronon 1995: 69–90; Nash 1967; Nelson & Calicott 1998, 2008; Oelschlaeger 1991.

interpreting environmental and animal histories. First, the establishment of boundaries, protections, and organizations are not the end of species preservation. Forces from outside written law who ignore borders still operate independently, wreaking havoc on even the best protective efforts. Second, conservation can be a top-down and a bottom-up process. Just as animals represent silences in the archive, so too are the voices of locals sometimes excluded. Not so in this case, as scholar Paul F. Tanghe points out. “Public authorities responded to social pressure, not vice-versa,” he concluded, showing how the community began to value the presence and preservation of rhinoceros as part of their local identity. External tourism or market hunting were not instituted as regional economic drivers or incentives to preserve which, according to Tanghe, is a good thing. Tourism, he argues, “legitimiz[es] the economic exploitation and commodification of wildlife like rhino, and socailiz[es] community members and public authorities alike to see such wildlife through Market Pricing relational schemata, thereby suppressing moral mechanisms that could contribute to endangered species protection.” In other words, how people think about rhinos is more important than their market value (Tanghe 2017: 165–170).

Such “moral mechanisms” and cultural incentives create strong bonds between communities and wildlife. When Tanghe asked locals why they wanted to protect rhinos, they replied: “I am Nepali!” Tanghe connects this to a sense of responsibility and belonging to a place, but it also belongs to heritage. Seeing rhinos as part of a local, long-standing identity creates a shared preservation of the environment and history. The stories people tell about their present are always informed by their past. Rhinos are a relic of a former way of being and worthy of preservation for this connection to cultural heritage. A cynic might say this is too anthropocentric a motive for conservation. Still, the idea that humans should preserve rhinos for their own sake is ethically inspirational but practically too ambitious. Culture will always make meaning of non-human others in ways that make sense to those inside the culture. Pretending that relationship does not exist is inaccurate and unproductive. Even the definition of wildness, wilderness, and who gets to be wild is a cultural construct. On a more direct note, the image of rhinos guarded by armed rangers plays directly into their status as culturally-important relics, as museum or palace guards stationed around important artworks or royal lineages.

Nepali attitudes shift the image of rhinos from heavily-guarded relics to members of living communities, from icons on the brink to animals with agency and allure. The commodification of wildlife is integral to

considerations of conservation and wildlife management. Understanding animals is not a one-way street; many roads are good, and examining historical examples, and cross-cultural comparisons in the work of humanities scholars can be instructive tools in making plans for the present and the future.

Rhinos have a long heritage of being exoticized. They have been symbols of empire, icons of the wild, and fulfillments of myths. They have traveled the globe and their form has contributed to dialogues greater than themselves. In Zocchi’s painting *Allegory of the Continent of America* of 1760 (figure 10.12), a rhinoceros stands alongside American Indians and a Roman chariot in an amalgam of wild, ancient, and exotic elements, all out of place and time, the “others” of western culture. Like many animals, humans have found rhinos a resource for their own needs and desires. Throughout the centuries, their hide has been used as shield and armor; their hooves and horns intricately carved into chalices, knife handles, and sculptures; their heads displayed as trophies; their powdered horn ingested. Rhino parts remain in private collections and the storage rooms of museums, and though the trade is banned, it has not ended. Rhino horns now circulate in a global black market where poachers kill African rhinos to bring to Asia as pharmaceuticals and trophies.

Restricting hunting to an elite few is still a method used to help support rhinoceros conservation. In 2018, one hunter paid \$400,000 for the opportunity to kill a black rhinoceros in Namibia’s Mangetti National Park. One South African hunting lodge promotes hunts for white rhinoceros ranging from \$55,000 to \$129,000 depending on the size of the horn. They also offer a Green Hunt for \$10,500, where the hunter only tranquilizes the animal for a photo shoot. In both cases, those providing hunts make sure to say the money is going toward the conservation of the species and that the rhinos killed are males who do not have breeding potential (Padilla 2019; Africa Hunt Lodge 2022). This method seems to devalue the wildness of the rhino, making sacrificial trophies of a few for the good of the many. Various other protection methods sacrifice wildness on behalf of conservation, such as poisoning or removing rhino horns to make them less appealing to poachers. Rigorous debate surrounded the practice of farming rhinos for their horn, as was allowed in South Africa, with some arguing it is a viable way to save the species. Each of these methods monetize rhino and shift their status from wild to domesticated. They remove something of what it means to be wild, belaying the idea that wildness is a past to which rhinos may return.

Through the lens of the rhino, complex human desires to protect a population reveal themselves. Both IRF and

the owners of the Africa Hunt lodge value rhinoceros. Both wish to promote experiences with a wild animal and keep the species alive. Both might have some success in achieving this goal despite their differing ideas of what makes a rhinoceros valuable. They also both play upon the heritage of rhinos as legendarily wild. IRF wishes to separate the rhino from culture to appreciate a distant type of non-human nature that values the animal for its independent life, implying that the rhino is meant to live apart from human intervention. The hunting lodge, on the other hand, values the wildness of the rhino, informed by centuries of hunting tales as the most formidable of beasts. Both the park and the lodge have boundaries and breeding assistance, making these spaces elements of the human world. However, the idea that wildness still exists remains a profitable and psychologically desirable element of promoting interactions with rhinoceros.

The importance of conversing across cultures is vital for rhino conservation. Conservationists have pursued information campaigns, offering western scientific beliefs to those who believe in the healing ability of the horn, but the desire for it has not waned. The global market for rhino horns is banned, yet their numbers continue to

decline. A 2015 publication, *The Costs of Illegal Wildlife Trade: Elephant and Rhino*, estimated that 29,000 rhinoceros survived worldwide, representing a 94% decline in the last century and a 60% decline in the previous 45 years (Tanghe 2017: 14; Smith & Porsch 2015: 16). That means that since the trade was banned in the 1970s, things have only gotten worse for rhinos and their horns. Conversely, IRF's "2021 State of the Rhino Report" stated that Nepal's greater one-horned rhino population had reached 752 – up from 107 in 2015. The report credits the success to the collaborative work of governments and non-profits and "the local communities that value their rhinos and other wildlife as national treasures" (International Rhino Foundation 2021). This cultural significance has developed a deep and abiding conservation ethic. There have been very few poachings in Chitwan in recent years. One that occurred in 2017 was followed by a "mourning rally" to protest, raise awareness, and demand action to find the criminals (Dudley 2017). This event reveals the importance of each and every rhino to the community and amplifies the importance of understanding animal representation and the role it plays in the lives of human and non-human animals alike.