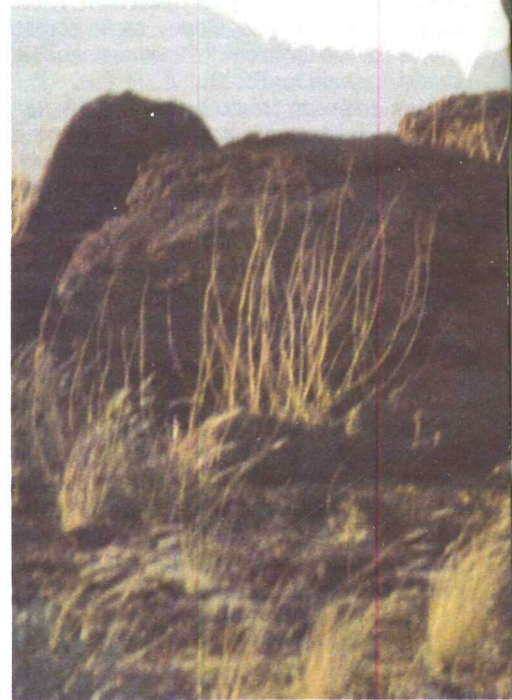




photo: Anthony Hall-Martin

# THE DAMARALAND RHINO



by Blythe Loutit

**T**he north-western region of South West Africa/Namibia is extremely arid country and forms part of the Namib Desert. A narrow strip of coastline has been proclaimed a national park and is known as the Skeleton Coast Park but is not more than 40 kilometres wide at any point. The southern boundary of the park is the Ugab River and the northern boundary the Kunene River. Damaraland to the south and Kaokoland to the north form the eastern boundaries and these areas combined form the Kaokoveld, a locally derived botanical term which describes the vegetation type.

There is no fence dividing the Skeleton Coast Park from Damaraland and Kaokoland which allows the free ranging of all wildlife in and out of the proclaimed area. Although the desert regions of Damaraland and Kaokoland remain unproclaimed due to political difficulties, conservation management of wildlife, wildlife safari tours and wildlife research programmes are successfully implemented with the full support of the local authorities and the government's Directorate of Nature Conservation and Recreation Resorts.

The terrain is vast and rugged with mountain ranges intercepted by wide gravel plains running into sandy, vegetated riverbeds and hot, dry valleys. Although harsh in



Rhino and calf gallop across the desert at Wêrelds End.

photo: Eugene Moll

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Young black rhinoceros feeding during the early evening while temperatures are low. The temperature may reach 42°C in the valleys during most of the year.

photo: B. Loutit



Damaraland: black rhinoceros in arid habitat at Doros Crater, showing surrounding habitat of granite boulders and the darkened basalt walls of the ancient crater.

photo: B. Loutit

appearance, these rivers are in fact the arteries of life for most of the desert-dwelling animals. When the annual rains fall, these rivers flow in a flood across the sandy surface of the riverbeds, the waters then sink below to filter silently through the sand to the Atlantic Ocean. It is in this extremely arid habitat that a number of black rhinoceros survive. "Nowhere else in the world does the rhinoceros live under such stressfully arid conditions, nor in such ruggedly hostile terrain", said Professor Gideon Louw, Head of the Zoology Department at the University of Cape Town, when he visited the area.

Between 1970 and 1977, a number of black rhinoceros (approximately 43) were captured and removed from the upper Ugab and central Damaraland and transported to the Etosha National Park by the Directorate of Nature Conservation and Recreational Resorts in an effort to give better protection to the population. This left a relic population behind which numbered more than 100 in Damaraland and approximately 150 in Kaokoland.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s the numbers were drastically reduced by poaching. Carcasses riddled with automatic bullets were found at waterholes and the local population joined the massacre with their own .303 rifles. Horns were hacked off with pangas and, in the case of elephants, chain saws were used to remove

the ivory.

By 1982 less than ten rhinoceros survived in Kaokoland and an estimated 30 to 40 survived in Damaraland. The illegal trade in rhinoceros horn escalated throughout Africa, and to date more than 80 per cent of Africa's rhinoceros population has disappeared.

In Kenya numbers have dropped drastically from an estimated 18 000 to about 450 animals, many of which are protected on private property. In the Central African Republic it would appear that from a healthy population of some 3 000 rhinoceros in 1980, they may become extinct there this year! In Zimbabwe conservationists are fighting a conventional war against heavily armed poachers and the rhinoceros numbers are dropping daily. Zambian rhinoceros face extinction unless steps are taken to control the situation from the highest government levels.

#### WHAT HOPE FOR THE RHINOCEROS?

There is a ray of hope for the future of the rhinoceros in Africa. In Kenya the last remaining rhinoceros are being captured and translocated to heavily guarded stockades to safeguard these populations and to set up a secure breeding stock. In Zimbabwe the anti-poaching teams are intensifying their methods of protection and are translocating vulnerable populations to guarded

stockades in better protected areas.

But the most encouraging news comes from Dr. Esmond Bradley Martin who has been investigating the illegal trade in rhinoceros horn in the eastern and northern African countries where the horn is used for dagger handles and medicinal uses. Dr. Martin has been persuading the medicine makers and dagger-handle carvers to use alternatives, such as water buffalo horn for dagger handles and Siaga deer horn (which contains similar medicinal properties) for their medicines. Dr. Martin has managed to persuade the North Yemen Government to draw up a strategy which would greatly curtail the use of rhinoceros horn in their country. Part of the strategy was to be a request to the Grand Mufti to issue a religious decree stating that it was against the will of God to eliminate an animal species, which is what would eventually happen if the illegal trade in rhinoceros horn continues as it has been.

#### RESEARCH AND FIELDWORK

Monitoring of Kaokoveld rhinoceros and their movements began in 1982 but has recently, in the past three years, become more intensive. All nature conservation staff and non-government fieldworkers have contributed towards the formation of identikit files on each individual rhinoceros. Day-to-day records of rhinoceros sightings

are kept in a comprehensive set of files. These files consist of front- and side-view photographs, ear notches, tail deformities, spoor measurements, localities, calf ages and sex ratios. Movements and home ranges are logged on a map. The feeding ecology and general behaviour of the "desert" rhinoceros are also recorded. Garth Owen-Smith has recently completed a year-long census of the rhinoceros, funded by the New York Zoological Society. It was found that five or six rhinoceros still inhabit some of the Damara farms to the extreme east. However, these farmers have little or no problem with the rhinoceros which tend to remain in the more inaccessible areas. The Damara people have, in fact, shown a great enthusiasm for the recent projects aimed at the protection of the rhinoceros and other wildlife in Damaraland.

An intensive investigation into the feeding habits of the most southerly population of black rhinoceros has recently been completed and has proved extremely valuable to the conservation and management of the species in this arid habitat. All previous studies on rhinoceros have been done in high rainfall areas and this was the first opportunity to investigate their means of survival under such stressful conditions. Most of their habitat in Damaraland is extremely arid with an annual rainfall of less than 150 millimetres, which is unsuitable for conventional farming. The human population is therefore minimal and there is no direct pressure on the habitat for human development.

The monitoring project and the feeding investigation will contribute valuable information on which to base future priorities for the conservation of the rhinoceros and for the future planning of Damaraland's natural resources. It is of prime importance for the *in situ* conservation of the black rhinoceros in this part of Africa.

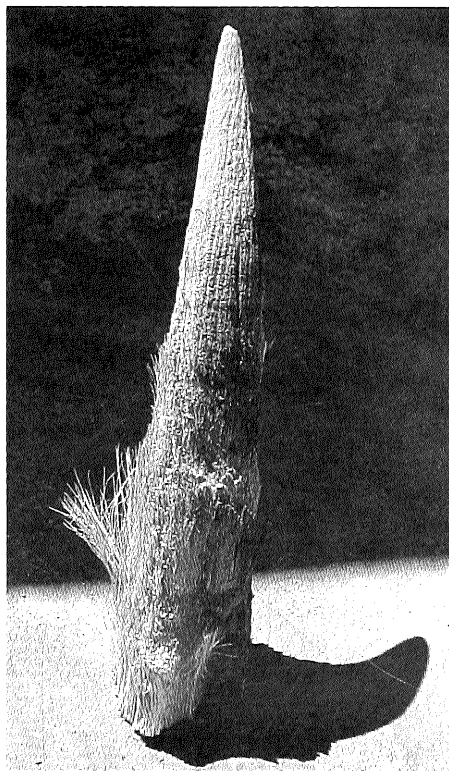
### POACHING AND PREVENTING IT

The survival of the black rhinoceros in Africa is a crisis which involves all the countries which still hold viable breeding populations. S.W.A./Namibia is now one of the two leaders in the successful protection of their stock of rhinoceros. The success has largely been due to the involvement of the local people in the protection and conservation of their wildlife.

Although four black rhinoceros have recently been poached in the Etosha National Park, those suspected were tracked from the site of the slaughter to a local kraal not



Welwitschia mirabilis seeds, a favoured food of the desert-dwelling rhinoceros. photo: B. Loutit



The fibrous composition of rhinoceros horn can be seen in this photograph of a horn collected on the beach in the Skeleton Coast Park.

photo: B. Loutit

far from the Etosha border. The white traders involved were also apprehended within a few days and were charged for the illegal possession of rhinoceros horn. It is not often that the middlemen in the trading racket are caught, so one hopes that the eventual fines imposed on the guilty parties will be heavy enough to act as a deterrent to any would-be poacher. But what about the trader who is responsible for the illegal export from the country?

In the Kaokoveld, an auxiliary game scout system (privately funded by the Endangered Wildlife Trust) was introduced by Garth Owen-Smith, the scouts being supervised by nature conservation officials. These game scouts are appointed by the headman of an area and their duties include reporting on game movements and numbers, reporting vehicles passing through the area and any suspicious happenings. The Damara Representative Council has recognised the international importance of protecting the black rhinoceros. They also support and encourage the view that conservation of the indigenous and consequently well-adapted wildlife in this arid habitat has a great potential for tourism, research and long-term utilisation.

Involvement of the local people in the conservation management programme has proved most beneficial to the elephant and rhinoceros protection programme in this situation where a combination of land uses exists outside proclaimed game reserves.

### EDUCATION AND SURVEILLANCE

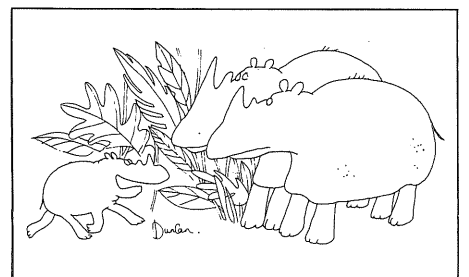
Poachers are always poised and ready to begin another slaughter campaign. It is therefore imperative that we continue monitoring the status of the black rhinoceros and keep up a strict surveillance of the area. We

must maintain contact with the people who live in close proximity to the home ranges of the rhinoceros. Much of the habitat of the rhinoceros borders on farms which are inhabited by subsistence farmers and semi-nomadic family groups who move from waterhole to waterhole during the rainy season. The monitoring of rhinoceros movements requires surveillance and fieldwork covering an area of some 40 000 square kilometres of ruggedly arid terrain. Aerial surveillance is an important part of the monitoring programme. Although rhinoceros are notoriously difficult to spot from the air, we have experienced a certain amount of success due to the open terrain. Aerial coverage also acts as a deterrent to any would-be poachers and allows us to keep track of the movements of elephant and other game species. The main costs of the monitoring programme are locally funded by the "Save the Rhino Fund" in Swakopmund which gains support from The Wildlife Society of Southern Africa, the Southern African Nature Foundation and the Endangered Wildlife Trust. The Save the Rhino Fund works in co-operation with the Directorate of Nature Conservation and Recreation Resorts.

The black rhinoceros in Africa has become an international celebrity; it has featured on the front cover of one of the world's most widely read political magazines (*Newsweek*, 11 August 1986), a space usually reserved for the politicians and *Homo sapiens* news makers. Has this fame and attention come in time to save this mammal of prehistoric countenance which has roved the earth for longer than 70 million years?

The future existence of the *Diceros bicornis* species in Africa will depend largely on continued and intensified extension work, education and liaison with the local inhabitants. A more determined effort will have to be made to include the local people in the conservation of their wildlife resources and make it beneficial to them to protect their own heritage. But most important of all is the effort to gain the sympathy and co-operation that is so desperately needed from the very top circles of government in all the countries involved in the saga of the rhinoceros and its much sought after horn. ■

B. Loutit,  
Save the Rhino Fund,  
P.O. Box 83,  
9000 Khorixas.



"We made it! We made it! We're on the Endangered Species list!"

with acknowledgements to *Punch* Cartoon Diary 1983