

RHINOCEROS IN THE NAMIB AND NAUKLUFT AREAS

(Joachim Lenssen, Swakopmund 2008)

The central Namib plains, inclusive of the Swakop and Kuiseb rivers, once abounded in game and several species not found here now are mentioned in the reports of the early explorers and hunters. One of these species is the black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*) or hook-lipped rhinoceros. They were abundant in the western parts of Namibia before firearms were introduced by European travelers and traders. Being aggressive by nature and very fleet-footed, it was largely avoided as a prey species by indigenous people armed only with primitive weapons. However, it is recorded that they fell into game pits at times.

Sir James E. Alexander has recorded in his "Expedition of Discovery into the Interior of Africa" that in 1837 he encountered black rhino in the present day Maltahoehe area while on his way north from the Orange River to Walvis Bay. When he approached the Naukluft Mountains he had already been informed about the rhino bull which was resident in the Tsondab River (called Chontob then). The cutting that the Tsondab makes through the Naukluft Mountains was already known as the Bull's Mouth Pass way back then. The present day name Bullspoor is clearly related. But even on the southern slopes of the Naukluft Mountains two rhino were flushed from cover when zebra, kudu and springbok were hunted on the plains below. Shots were fired at these from a distance. Another two were encountered at the entrance of the poort and shot at as usual. The following day, 30th March, was a day of rest and reconnaissance of the poort. There they encountered another rhino cow which was too far to shoot at. While Sir Alexander was in the poort the rest of his party went hunting, which was the main sport, and amongst others killed another two rhino. The rhinoceros was indeed plentiful before the advent of the gun. During the passage through the poort they killed another large rhino cow and were charged during the night by another rhino. They did not encounter the legendary rhino bull, which surely would have been killed in a hunting frenzy.

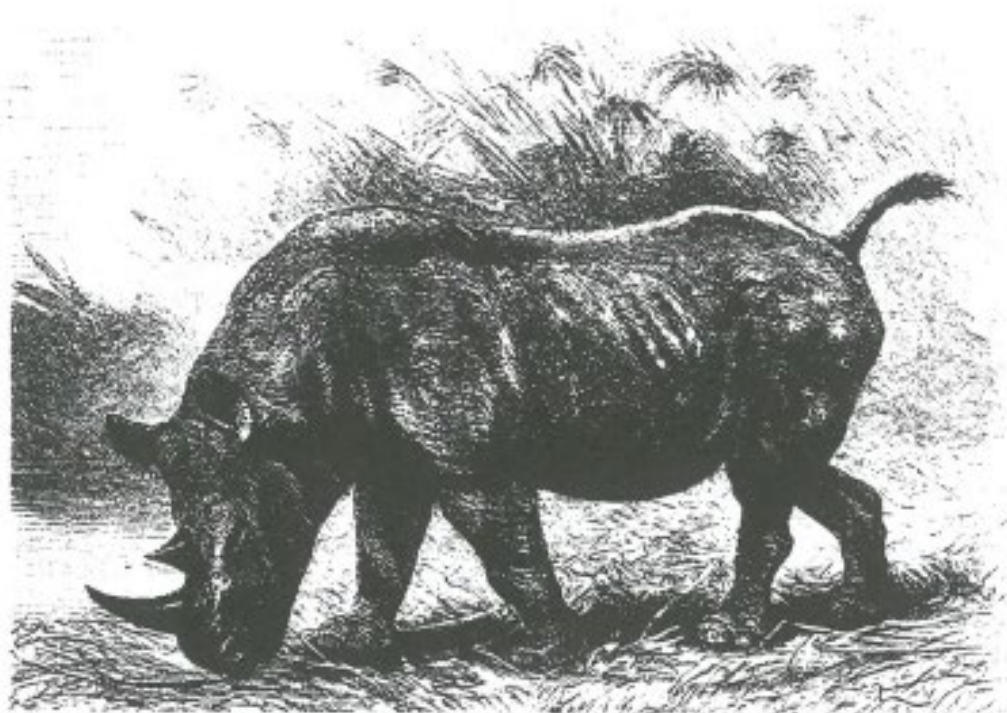
A week later they descended into the Kuiseb ravine near Barrowberg, which is quite a distance upstream from Homeb. The party had left the wagon behind and proceeded downstream on foot with some 14 oxen and a few sheep and goats. Although no mention is made of further rhino hunting in the Kuiseb, the party did come past a skeleton of a rhino which had drowned in the previous flood. The presence of rhinoceros in the lower Kuiseb is confirmed by imprints left behind in moist clay not too distant from Rooibank, where there are also some tracks of elephant.

Like the Kuiseb, the Swakop River also had rhinoceros and elephant populations. Charles J. Andersson, the well-travelled explorer, trader and hunter, travelled from Walvis Bay to Otjimbingwe several times. He documented the fresh tracks of rhinoceros in the Swakop River at the Husab tributary on 20th September 1850. A few days later, tracks of several rhino were discovered at the Annis fountain in the Swakop River. They hunted for these animals for three hours but did not encounter them. On the return journey however they did shoot one specimen at this fountain. On the second inland journey, 13th November 1850 he came across a rhino calf and cow in the Tinkas River which he shot at but did not kill. They tracked these animals onto the large Tinkas plains and shot at them again without delivering a mortal shot before they lost sight of the animals. He writes:

“ I felt disappointed at our failure and the chance of a feast; and was, moreover, sorry for the poor rhinoceros; for though she was lost to us, I felt certain it was only to die a lingering death at a distance.” Wounded animals normally return to their water source before they die.

Let us look at what Thomas Baines, the explorer, tells us about rhino. He travelled from Walvis Bay via Otjimbingwe to the interior and also passed between Langer Heinrich mountain and Bloedkopje on 7th June 1861. He writes: “At Tinkas Drift I saw, for the first time, the bleached skull of a rhinoceros.” Coincidence? Why were the rhino decimated to near extinction so quickly? Andersson tells us why: “The horns of the rhinoceros, which are capable of a high polish, are a valuable article of commerce. At the Cape, this commodity fetches half as much as ordinary elephant ivory.” Added to this fact was that hunting was (and still is) considered a sport and many animals

were shot dead merely for the sake of shooting and not because of a need. Andersson writes that he shot, "single handed" close to 60 rhino during his expedition.



The central Namib plains including the Swakop and Kuiseb rivers were proclaimed a game reserve in 1907 because wildlife was being exterminated so quickly. Although most of the attention on centenary celebrations has focused on Etosha, the Namib-Naukluft Park did get a gift of nine black rhino which were re-located from the Maltahoehe area to the western Naukluft slopes. The re-introduction of rhino to the Namib has been a priority for the last 40 years. In 1972 the rhino in Kaokoveld, west of Etosha, were in danger of being exterminated and the Department of Nature Conservation took the decision to catch as many as possible and to re-locate them to conservation areas around the country. The Namib Park was one such area, the Namib-Naukluft Park was only created and proclaimed in 1979, and the choice of sites was indeed limited. The Swakop River was inhabited by subsistence farmers and at Langer Heinrich there was a prospecting plant for uranium. The central plains had insufficient vegetation to sustain a rhino population on a permanent basis and the lower Kuiseb River was also inhabited by subsistence farmers. The only viable area was the upper Kuiseb, upstream from Homeb. The author, who had been transferred from Gobabeb to the game capture unit in

1972, was sent down to the Kuiseb, because of his detailed knowledge of the area, to erect holding pens for three rhino. The Namib had exceptional rains in that year and the following year and nature could not have been more favourable for a translocation. However, up north it was not much different and in September 1973 it was extremely difficult to find three suitable specimens for translocation. Most cows had calves which made them unsuited for a long journey and captivity period. Single animals were very scattered due to optimal nature conditions. The late Dr. Ian Hofmeyr had determined that all three animals were to be caught and transported the same day. This proved impossible and by late afternoon only a grown bull and a young female had been captured and loaded. Transport took place during the night and the two rhino were transferred to their pens with first light. They stayed in captivity for two months to settle down and get used to the natural fodder which was collected on the canyon embankment every day. They were released early in December and the bull had a fatal fall from a cliff soon afterwards.

The Topnaar people of Homeb and Oswater were most helpful during the entire operation and lived in unity with the rhino as they have done for centuries. The rhino cow was last seen at Zebra Pan in December 1974 and in March 1975 the author was dispatched to search for this animal. No trace could be found and it was presumed that the rhino had also died somewhere in the Kuiseb canyon. Then more than a year later, October 1976, a rhino was reported to be wandering on farms in the Khomas Hochland. The tracks were located but the rhino remained elusive and could not be found. Only then was the translocation failure acknowledged and the holding pens in the Kuiseb demolished. Fresh tracks were again reported in January 1977 but once again the rhino was not found. In August 1977 the assistance of Chris Eyre with his horses was called in to search for the rhino. After several days they were successful and the helicopter was called in with the veterinarian, the late Dr. Theuns van Wyk (Dr Hofmeyr had been appointed as vet in Etosha). After darting the rhino the helicopter touched down to allow the drugs to take effect and the hot exhaust set the long grass on fire that instant. There was no staff or equipment to fight the fire then and saving the rhino and all the vehicles was top priority right then. The rhino was taken back to Etosha and the capture team was summoned to fight the fire which had spread over two farms.

After the proclamation of the Namib-Naukluft Park in 1979 all the farm fences of the farms purchased for the new park had to be removed first. It was then decided to try a second time to re-introduce rhino to the enlarged park and a site west of the Naukluft massif was chosen. Holding pens were constructed after a thorough survey. Unfortunately the long and cruel drought of the mid 1980's set in and it was not advisable to take rhino to the edge of the Namib under such adverse conditions. Many years have passed since and the vegetation on the overutilised farming land had ample time to rehabilitate and improve. Secondly, the rhino released recently are semi-tame and used to the area and climate. If they learn mountain climbing they have very good prospects for the future.

Signs of previous rhino habitation in the present Namib-Naukluft Park are still being found to this day. Only a few years ago a rhino horn was found on the plains near Kriess-Rus by a traveller whose car had broken down and was thus killing time by exploring his immediate surroundings.

References:

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