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The white rhinoceros in captivity

By Dr Kees Rookmaaker

On 29 July 1946, a six day old baby female white rhinoceros, deserted by her mother, was found near the Sangoyana Hills in the southern buffer zone of the Umfolozi Game Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal. It was immediately taken to the National Zoological Gardens in Pretoria, where "Zuluana" (as she was named) lived for forty years and eight months until she died on 21 March 1987 (being the record longevity). "Zuluana" was the first white rhinoceros to arrive in a zoological garden anywhere in the world.

During the following twenty years or so the white rhinoceros remained a very rare exhibit in any kind of captive situation. Only in the early 1960's did the Natal Parks Board decide to sell off pairs or groups of white rhinos from their reserves to selected zoos around the world. Then followed a daring experiment. In August 1970 a group of twenty white rhinos was taken to Whipsnade Park near London, and in February 1971 a similar group was taken to San Diego Wild Animal Park in California, USA. Because the white rhino in the wild is usually found in larger groups, zoo authorities imagined that they would have a better chance of success to breed this rare animal when they were kept in conditions resembling those in nature. After nearly thirty years it is clear that this gamble by the Zoological Societies of London and San Diego has paid off remarkably well, as these groups have bred consistently well, with 40 youngsters having been born in Whipsnade until the end of 1994 and no less than 81 in San Diego Wild Animal Park.

Since "Zuluana" arrived in the Pretoria Zoo in 1946 until the end of 1994, 626 white rhinos have been imported from the wild and 479 young were born, exhibited in a total of 314 collections spread over 60 countries. The first birth in captivity occurred at Pretoria Zoo on 8 June 1967, but the mother was pregnant when she arrived at the zoo. The first zoo-bred animal was born, again in Pretoria, on 23 October 1967. The gestation period is about 480 to 485 days, or about 16 months, just like in the other species of rhinoceros. Only "Zuluana" in Pretoria reached an age in captivity of over 40 years, but this

may be due to the fact that most animals now shown in zoos were only imported during the 1970's and several are still alive, and will maybe eventually challenge the existing record of longevity.

Most of the white rhinos included in the above figures belonged to the southern subspecies of the white rhinoceros from southern Africa. Only 25 examples of the northern white rhino, which once roamed Uganda, Sudan and the Congo, have ever been shown in captivity and this animal is now easily the most threatened variety of rhinoceros in the world. 21 were imported from the wild and 4 births were recorded. It is not clear why this subspecies has not matched the success shown for the southern animals, although they have been kept in reasonably large groups in the zoos of Dvur Kralove and San Diego. This population is now rapidly ageing, while there is very little hope of replenishment from the wild.

In South Africa, many white rhinos are now kept on private game ranches. A survey of 1997 by the Rhino and Elephant Foundation established the presence of 1494 animals in

162 different locations. This figure is more than double the number of white rhinos in zoos and safari parks around the world at the end of 1994. It will be a very important contribution to nature conservation if these animals could be managed carefully to allow maximum breeding. Provision for adequate protection, an understanding of rhinoceros management and breeding biology will be necessary, as well as cooperation between owners to exchange animals when needed.

Management also means a detailed administration of all rhinos on each ranch and monitoring of any changes in the groups by death or birth. It would be advisable to maintain a central record of all rhinos on private land, as it is done for the population in zoological gardens (in the form of a studbook kept by the Berlin Zoo). Even if the data would be kept confidential, these records would be important for nature conservation in this country.

Sources L.C. Rookmaaker, 1998. *The Rhinoceros in Captivity*. Rotterdam, SPB Academic Publishing.

Rhinoceros illustrations 4: The *asinus cornutus*

by Dr Kees Rookmaaker

In the sixteenth century, several large size illustrated books were published, trying to give an encyclopaedic overview of the animal kingdom. They were written by the German Konrad Gessner, the Italian Ulysse Aldrovandi and the Dutchman Johannes Jonston. These books contain lengthy descriptions of the appearance, habits of and fables about a large variety of animals. The illustration on the right is a page from the *Historia Naturalis de Quadrupedibus* by Johannes Jonston, which first appeared in 1653. It shows two species of unicorn, with different types of manes, and at the top an animal called "Asinus cornutus" or "forest ass". A study of this last animal leads to the conclusion that it looks far more like a rhinoceros with two horns on the nose, than an ass, despite the shape of the head and the feet. This is probably one of the very first European illustrations of an African rhinoceros. The collar around the neck points at a captive existence. It has been suggested that this represents the rhinoceros seen in a garden in Constantinople in 1588 by the German traveller Samuel Kiechel. While this has not been substantiated, it is an interesting, very early example of how the rhinoceros became known in the Western world.

