

A TRIBUTE TO THE RHINOCEROS

by John Aspinall



The name of Francesco Nardelli must be familiar to all readers of this newsletter. In 1985 he gave up his post as Curator of Howletts and Port Lympne to oversee the now well-known Sumatran rhino project. From his involvement in this programme, Francesco Nardelli conceived the idea of a major book on the five species: *The Rhinoceros: a Monograph* is produced in collaboration with Basilisk Press in a fine limited edition with twenty full-page, full-colour paintings of the Sumatran, Javan, Indian, Black and White rhinos. The paintings were commissioned specifically for the work from Matthew Hillier, whose natural history paintings are often seen in general books and magazines and who has produced something quite exceptional for this

edition. He works in water colour and gouache on paper, painting on location in Africa and Asia and from living animals in captivity.

The text draws on extensive historic and current sources, bringing together previously unpublished field reports, academic and government papers, published sources, and first hand accounts by those involved in setting up field captures, handling the animals in zoos, or trying to stop the illegal trade in rhino products. It has been contributed to and assembled by Francesco Nardelli for compilation and editing by Sandra Raphael. Below is the text of the foreword I contributed to introduce the book.



Foreword

'I began collecting fine illustrated books on mammals over thirty years ago, and soon noticed how few there were compared with the number of similar books on birds and flowers. Francesco Nardelli's *The Rhinoceros: a Monograph* will help to fill the gap.'

'The production of this book is a bold venture

inspired by love and admiration rather than commercial logic or academic zeal. A magnificent illustrated tome of the multi-coloured guenons might have been a safer bet, but Nardelli looks here not for safety but for personal satisfaction. This noble work on the rhinoceros has been conceived out of his fear for their imminent extermination. The quality of Matthew Hillier's paintings faithfully portrays the separate physical

characteristics and peculiarities of the five surviving types, all of which can still be found in the wild state — but only just. They are literally being eliminated across the board 'before our eyes' and as we read these words. The northern race of the white rhinoceros (*cottoni*) is at its last gasp, reduced to a mere seventeen and less than a dozen in captivity. The southern white and the black have been cut down to a few thousand over what little remains of their erstwhile vast range in Africa. The great Indian one-horned rhino is still hovering over four figures, but his last strongholds in Assam and Nepal are shrinking from the pressures of human intrusion. The Sumatran two-horned hairy rhinoceros is confined to isolated pockets of flatland and montane forests in Sumatra, Borneo and mainland Malaysia. His numbers have been whittled down to less than a thousand, while the Javan rhino, a close cousin of the great Indian, is constricted to the peninsula of Ujung Kulon on the westernmost tip of the island of Java, a habitat that can sustain a population of not more than sixty animals.

'Whether we like it or not, we are living through the epoch of *Homo Vastans*. We watch with horror the last fading efforts of our close relatives, the high mammals, to avoid the doom that we have set in store for them. The massive bulk of the great white rhinoceros; the brave spirit of his smaller cousin, the black; the 'armour plating' and forward thrusting tusks of the giant Indian race; the secretive and nocturnal habits of the Javan and Sumatran have not been enough to more than postpone the day of reckoning. Some of these qualities, along with many others painstakingly described in this book, have enabled these mammals to outlast the millenia and to endure the recent centuries of persecution at our hands. Any concept that the great rhino family was already failing before the cancerous advance of civilisation can be confidently discarded. The works of Harris, Lydekker, Sclater and many others bear witness to the astounding number of black and white rhinos in the early part of the last century. Winston Churchill, who shot three black rhino 'monsters' near Makindo in Kenya one morning, described these beautifully adapted browsers as 'odd grim stragglers from the stone age'. He believed them to be 'ponderous brutes, invulnerable to pain and fear'. One bull that he shot reminded him of an 'engine or some great steam barge impervious to bullets'; I wish that Churchill's colourful language conveyed any truth . . .

Richard Meinertzhagen 'bagged' three black rhinos before breakfast on a trip to Lake Rudolf, and he was a naturalist and the author of 'The Birds of Arabia' a classic of its kind. Neither man, however great and admirable they were in other ways, had the slightest compunction in the perpetration of these gruesome crimes. They represented, I regret to say, the norm in this respect, not the exception of their class and race.

'On the whole the rhinoceros has suffered from a catalogue of misinformation throughout the ages based on ignorance and superstition. It is hard to know whether Western or Eastern civilization has erred most. Generally considered cumbersome, he is in fact agile, being able to halt instantly at full gallop and turn on his own shadow. When a rhino trots he appears to prance on air-compressed springs. His neck muscle and the famous weapon it motors is a wonder of nature and makes an adult rhino immune to the attacks of predators other than man. Before the advent of firearms a veritable war party of braves was required to bring down a rhino, and few succumbed to the spears and arrows without exacting a toll Those who think him stupid expose their own folly, as the ethologists who have studied him carefully in the wild state, without exception, consider the rhino to be the most intelligent of all the Perissodactyla. Goddard, Schenkel, Van Strien and Laurie have spent an aggregate of over twenty years studying black, Indian and Sumatran rhinos. They believe these creatures to be extraordinarily well adapted and responsive to their environment. It is only man's numbers explosion from one to 5,000 million in less than a million years, accompanied by the recent excesses of his technosphere, that has all but sealed their fate. Those who love and admire rhinos must still fight for them and protect them, if possible, in their dwindling wild redoubts and breed them in captivity if they can. Each task about as difficult as the other, but both vital if the rhino is to be ushered into the next century.

'If this wonderful but sad book helps save a few rhino from extinction or at least delay the date of their execution, then I know that the author will have been repaid in some measure for the risks that he has taken in producing a book of such unusual quality for a market so small, for an animal so little appreciated and so savagely abused.'