

PREPOSTEROUS

4316
What has happened to the rhinoceros is as hard to fathom as the beast itself

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROSAMOND PURCELL
 TEXT BY STEPHEN JAY GOULD

FROM NUMEROUS VERSIFICATIONS IN BOOKS FOR CHILDREN, RHINOCEROSES HAVE ACQUIRED a one-word definition in a near rhyme: preposterous. The five living species of rhinoceroses, viewed as tanklike vestiges of a prehistoric past, and barely hanging on as threatened populations in their African and Asian homes, do convey an image of superannuated heavyweights from a lost world where brawn could overcome stupidity and ensure survival.

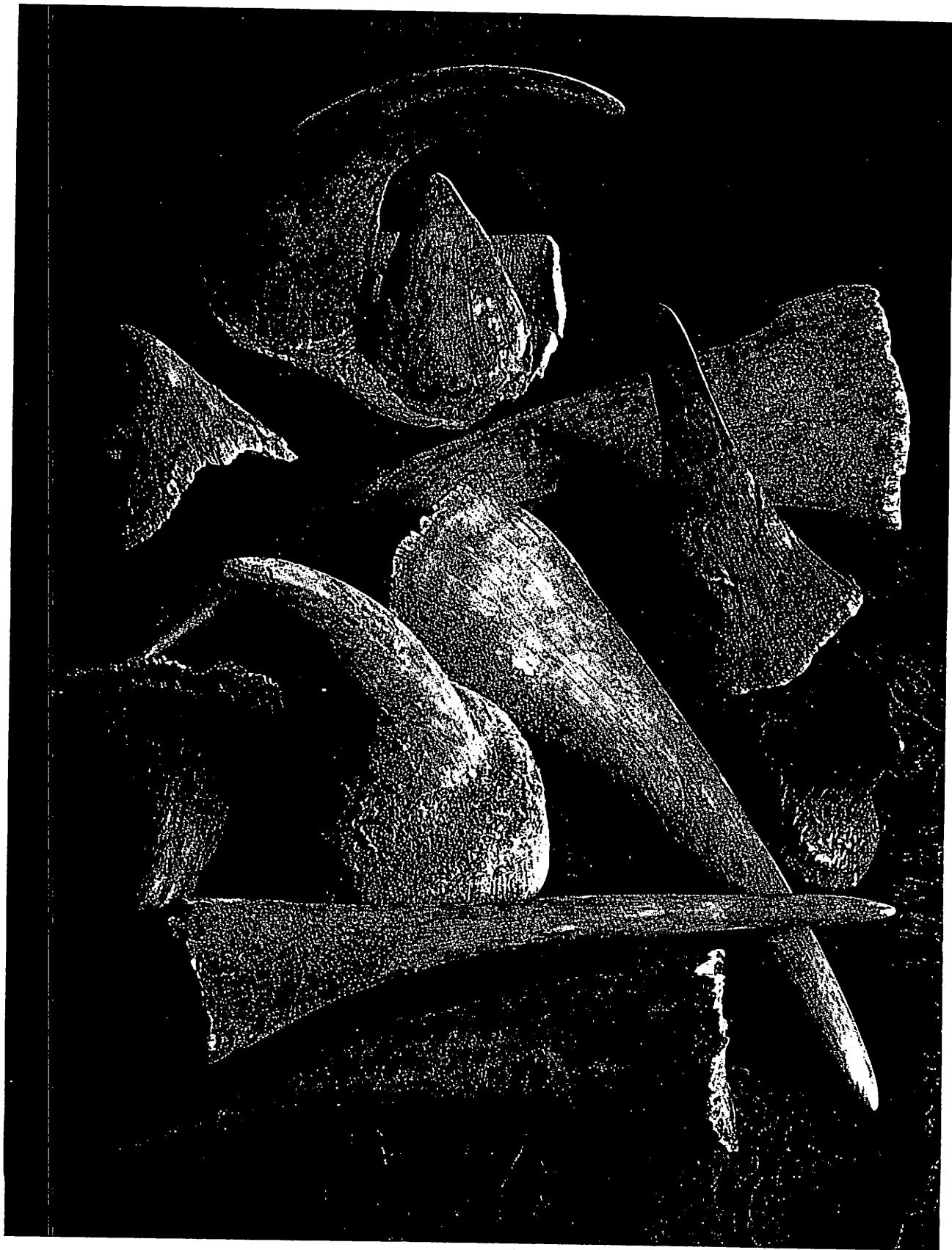
Modern rhinoceroses do represent a remnant of past glory: they were once maximally prosperous, rather than preposterous. Their enormously successful fossil forebears included *Paraceratherium*, the largest land mammal of all time—eighteen feet high at the shoulder and a browser of treetops. Their extensive ecological range included small and lithe running forms no bigger than a goat (the hyracodontines), and rotund river dwellers that looked like hippopotamuses (the teleoceratines). Moreover, modern rhinoceroses are a vestige within a vestige. The formerly dominant order of odd-toed hoofed mammals has now dwindled to three groups: the rhinoceroses and the tapirs, each barely hanging on, and the horses, given an artificial boost and a new lease on life by human needs for transport and human foibles for warfare and wagering.

A dilemma, in technical terms, is a problem with two logical solutions, each untenable or unpleasant. We speak of being caught on the “horns of a dilemma,” in reference, I suppose, to the crescent moon with its two points, or horns (or perhaps to the devil himself). The dilemma of the rhinoceroses also rests upon two aspects of their distinctive and defining horns. On one point, horns mark the rhinoceros’s fascination as both preposterous and alluring—a sign of fame and therefore a desired trophy for Western hunters. On the other point, horns inspire legends of utility for alleviating various human ills, particularly sexual impotence in males—and the few remaining horns have therefore become a prize for poachers and a substance nearly beyond price in Eastern pharmaceuticals.

We all have a personal breaking point, where moral indignation swamps dispassionate analysis. I can read about human desecration of animals with reasonable equanimity in the face of great sadness, but I fall into predominant anger when I encounter the numerous stories of magnificent creatures slaughtered in vast numbers for single parts deemed desirable (often so frivolously) or useful (often so fallaciously) to humans: elephants only for their tusks, buffaloes for their tongues, nightingales for the same organ (for use in Roman banquets) and gorillas because some people will buy ashtrays made of large primate paws. Rhinoceroses, sadly, are victims of this same outrage: their most distinctive evolutionary markers become the brands of their destruction.

I wish I could portray naturalists as perennial opponents of such exploitation. We certainly function in this manner today, but our past does not always measure up to current practices. In a former age, one that viewed nature as an unlimited bounty and men as masters of all, naturalists often collected in a wanton manner—as though scientific study demanded a mass transport from live in the field to dead in a museum drawer. Rosamond Purcell’s photograph depicts just some of the specimens in a “miscellaneous bin” of rhinoceros horns in the collection of my own institution, the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard. These specimens range from horns bought by the museum director Alexander Agassiz from Ward’s of London in 1877 to animals shot by hunters on safari and donated to the museum as late as 1936. Detached horns, often severed with pieces of surrounding skin. The part that dooms the whole. A strangely beautiful picture of elegance separated from a symbol of ungainliness. Do we not witness here the moral equivalent of preposterous? •

ROSAMOND PURCELL is an artist and photographer who lives in Boston. **STEPHEN JAY GOULD** is Agassiz professor of zoology at Harvard University.



Rosamond Purcell, Collection of Rhinoceros Horns, 1994