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RUNNING *the Gauntlet* AGAINST EXTINCTION

ROWS and rows of rhino horns lie in the stifling African dust. Representing the fruits of poachers' labours and the wasted carcasses of hundreds of rhino, left to rot after the horn harvest, these horns are destined for a variety of illegal uses: as aphrodisiacs in the East, as medicinal remedies for chest pains, lumbago and snake bites, and as handles for prized traditional Yemenese daggers.

Superstitions about the powers of rhino horn are found many centuries back in history, when it was believed that a rhino horn had the ability to detect and neutralise poisons - courtiers in the Tang and Ching dynasties of China presented rhino horn goblets to their emperors, depicting Taoist scenes of immortality, as the recipient,

using the goblet, could never be poisoned.

Thickness and pliability made the skin suitable for making shields in ancient warfare, and even today in India, strips of the hide are worn as rings in order to ward off evil spirits - extending the belief of the absolute power of the rhino.

Immortal the emperors may have been, but all five species of rhino are faced with the very real possibility of extinction.

Although there are only two naturally occurring groups, in Natal and in East



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A white rhino with its cleaning and warning service, the oxpeckers

Africa, breeding programs in Southern Africa have been relatively successful, particularly with the so-called White Rhino.

Its colour is not in fact that different from the Black Rhino, but it has a fondness for rolling in dust and mud that give it a lighter appearance.

It is also thought that the name is an Anglicization of the Dutch "weid", used to describe the wider mouth of this species, and that the true



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LEFT: A young white rhino calf with its mother in the Pilanesburg nature reserve

ABOVE: The white rhino youngster stays with its mother until it is 12 months old

RIGHT: The signature horn is the feature which has led the rhino to the brink of extinction



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meaning was lost in translation. It is this wider mouth that is the easiest way of distinguishing between the two African species, and which has given it the alternate name of the square lipped rhino. It also has a pronounced hump between the shoulders, further indicating its identity.

The white rhino, its favourite territory being open acacia savanna with abundant short grass, grazes the grass of the bushveld in the early morning or evening, cropping it as short as 1cm from the ground. This is in contrast to its cousin, who browses on the leaves of low-hanging branches.

The white rhino is also the more placid of the two, and has been successfully tamed. It is quite a sociable species, with groups of five to seven subadults a common sight, and they will congregate at watering holes in groups of up to 11.

Bulls have their own territories of approximately 3km² depending on the quality and abundance of food, and mark it as such

with urine, and with the scattering of dung middens. A bull will allow other males into his territory, usually en route to water, but then they must behave in a submissive manner. This includes using a dung midden, but the intruding male does not scatter the dung, as the dominant one would.

Occasionally bulls will fight, but an inner instinct ensures that some common sense remains - rhinos are slow breeders, and although their fights can cause quite severe injury, with pushing and sparring of horns, they do not fight to the death, almost as if aware that every individual is necessary for the survival of the species. Once a party to

**Hunting of
RHINOS
is illegal
as they are
registered
as a CITES 1
SPECIES.**

the fight has realised that he is on the losing end of the argument, he indicates his capitulation by signalling with his ears.

The rhino cows have a home range of between six and 20 km², overlapping those of several males. If the females try to leave his territory, the male will often try to herd them back.

After a gestation period of 16 months, the young are born, usually one every three years, weighing in at around 40kg. They start grazing after about one week, but continue suckling from their mother for 12 months. During this year they moult their tough outer skin twice. In contrast to the black rhino, whose young follow the mother, the young white rhino precedes it mother on their travels, being guided by gentle nudges to the flanks or buttocks.

The youngster's eyesight is more acute than that of its parents, who rely heavily on oxpeckers, which are always around to feast off the ticks carried by the rhino, to warn of danger.

This danger is predominantly in the form of humans with guns, but also includes lions, who have been known to kill youngsters for a meal.

Other causes of death are mostly natural, with large animals sometimes getting stuck in mud or between rocks, or being drowned in floods, and even falling off cliffs.

However, their biggest threat is the human poacher - in spite of CITES which forbids any trade in the animals or their parts.

Poaching is unfortunately still rife, threatening all five species of rhino with certain extinction. 

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White Rhino

Get older 16 months

Normal lifespan 30 years

**Average weight Male 2000kg
2200kg**

Female 1400kg, 1500kg

**Artificial insemination, 2001, successful
and female, Hilde and Harry**



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N FLIGHT, cranes are often mistaken for storks, with their head straight but are easily distinguished by their shorter bill and the presence of some sort of ornamental character about the face. Their loud cries in flight are also characteristic, in contrast with the voiceless storks. Birds stand up to 1.5m tall on their exceptionally long legs, and have a wingspan of up to 2.4m.

All varieties of cranes consume a wide range of both animal and vegetable matter. Grasshoppers, crickets and worms are popular, as well as frogs, reptiles and grains.

Both male and female cranes have spectacular display dances, most often seen just prior to the mating season.

Most cranes build nests in fairly shallow water, in sheltered areas protected by water plants. Both male and female generally assist in construction, by piling vegetation into a heap up to 2.4m across.

Clutch sizes may go up to four eggs, and the eggs vary in colour between the different species: some are light blue, others spotted olive green.

Both male and females take part in incubation, which takes between 28 and 36.

Chicks are covered with tawny or grey down, and can walk and swim after a couple of hours.

Parents are very attentive to the youngsters, although survival of the fittest is often evident, when the stronger chick of two pecks the other so badly that it runs away, and dies of neglect.

Families remain together for up to nine months, and when the next generation is on the way, the parent birds chase the young away. The youngsters then join with others of a similar age, until they are ready to breed, which is between two and five years of age.

Elegant and sophisticated in appearance, the crowned crane has a delicate golden coronet on its head. A black head and white cheeks add to its striking appearance, along with a red throat at the top of a star-

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AVIAN *Sophisticates*



ting white neck. Both male and female are identical in appearance, but young birds are browner in colour, with feathered cheeks and somewhat small and ragged crests.

They are found from the King William's Town area eastwards up to Kenya and up to Congo, frequenting the borders of swamps.

They are usually found in family groups or in pairs, and were once fairly common. However, their numbers have decreased in recent years, due to the drainage of many swamps, and people trying to tame the young ones as pets.

Southern African tribes hold the crowned crane in high regard, believing that their presence brings rain to the dry land. The Xhosa people call it "Ihem", which strongly resembles the birds' call in flight.

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ZOOLOGICA



**FOR A
POWING TIME
VISIT THE ZOO
DURING
CARNIVORE
WEEK**

**20-26
SEPTEMBER 1997**

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The Zoo's core business is conservation, education, recreation, tourism and wildlife research. It carries out this core business with enthusiasm and integrity for the benefit of civil society at local, national and international levels. The Zoo is dedicated to democracy, human rights and a healthy sustainable environment for all peoples of South Africa.

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