

White Rhinoceros

Peter Johnson

So many animals owe their threatened status to the supposed medical or aphrodisiac properties of various parts of their bodies, that the combination of eastern medicine and eastern sex must be rated a major hazard on the snakes-and-ladders board of modern nature conservation. The single most important problem facing the world's rhinoceroses—including the white rhino—is that many Asians consider ground rhino horn to be a powerful aphrodisiac.

It was around the turn of the nineteenth century that the grass curtain hiding Africa's wildlife treasures began to part—and along with the revelation of what is probably the world's greatest natural history extravaganza came the discovery and first comprehensive description of a white rhinoceros. While James Bruce was wrestling with the first observations and measurements of the black rhinoceros in East Africa, William Burchell was collecting the first specimen of the white rhino at a tiny dot on the face of southern Africa's great Karroo sub-desert. That dot was Kuruman, and it is still very much on today's map as an asbestos mining town. By 1817 the specimen collected by Burchell had been described and catalogued, given the scientific name *Rhinoceros simus* (blunt-nosed), and become a dusty exhibit in the South African Museum in Cape Town.

Of course 'white', as in white rhinoceros, bears little relation to the animal's color, for the term derives from the Cape Dutch (Afrikaans) word *wyd*, which means wide. Where the white rhino is wide-mouthed the black rhino is snouted or pointed, these differences being adaptations to their respective feeding habits. The white (also known as square-lipped) rhino crops very short savanna grassland with the pulling action of a blunt-bladed suction lawn-mover, while the black rhino browses on leaves, twigs, and thorn-bush.

It has always fascinated me how incredibly

Stocky but hugely powerful, a white rhino peers at an intruding cameraman through typical savanna grasses. Once near extinction, the white rhino was saved at the last minute and is now off the immediate danger list



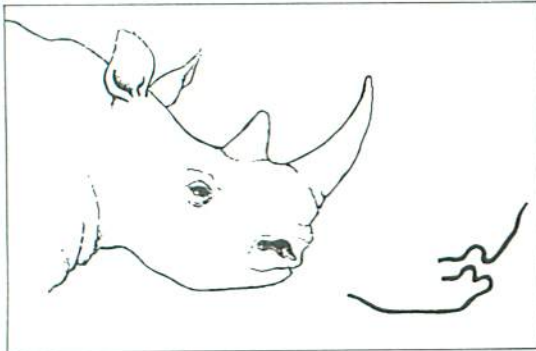
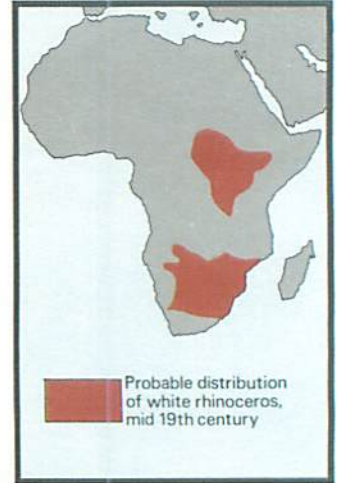


observant the early pioneers of Africa were of wildlife and how, in the fledgling days of the science of animal behavior, they often named the animal after its most significant physical feature—which in turn helped to place similar animals into their correct scientific groups. This early note by Baines of the white rhino's wide, square-lipped feature is a good example of this ability to record what was significant and reject the rest. Today we know the black rhinoceros as *Diceros bicornis* and the white rhinoceros as *Ceratotherium simum*, the inherent differences between the animals being such that they warranted placing in separate genera.

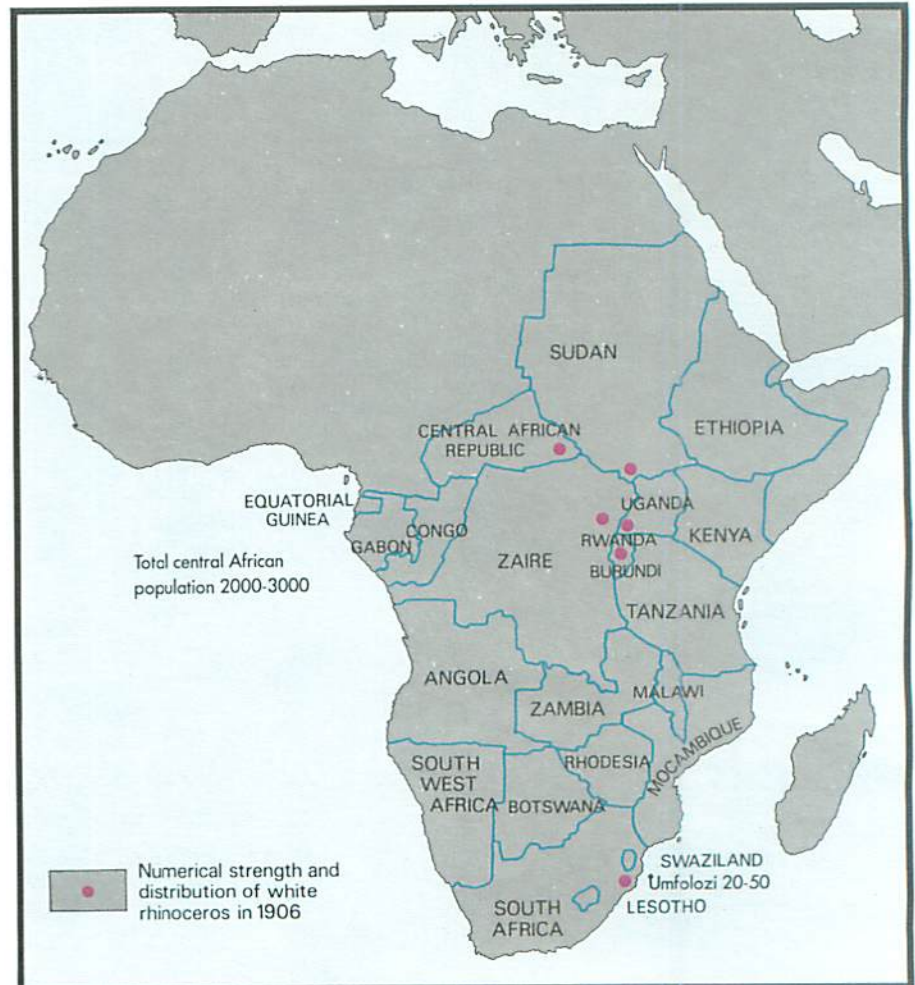
The next milestone in the scientific history of the white rhinoceros was about a century later, for it was then that the second form of the white rhinoceros was discovered and described. This was also a *Ceratotherium simum*, but an animal that was totally separated, geographically, from those of the south. In true colonial style it was named Cotton's white rhinoceros, with the

result that one can picture 'Cotton' sitting in a fine London club, probably sipping a scotch, under the glaring, glassy eyes of his very own animals mounted on the wall, the while regaling the establishment with a description of the beast's last thundering canter into history. Too true—into history—for it is Cotton's animal that now stares at extinction, as surely as this rhinoceros must have faced the man who first collected it.

In 1961, in an attempt to try to stave off what even then seemed inevitable, some members of this northern 'race' were caught and moved to the sanctity of what was then known as Murchison Falls National Park, in Uganda. At that time there were reputed to be about 2,000 of these creatures left in all central Africa, primarily in the Sudan, Zaïre, the Central African Republic, and Rwanda/Burundi. By 1970 the numbers were down to two or three hundred animals. And today? Almost certainly gone. Of course, there is always hope, until the last one is gone—



Detail of specialized 'grazing lip' of the white rhino



a ray of hope—but it must now be very faint.

The status of the southern white rhino is a totally different story, one of incredible conservation, protection, enlightened animal management, and no doubt luck too. Where once the animal had ranged and been plentiful, in viable habitats, over all southern Africa, from the Cape to the borders of Zambia, it was extinct—except for about 50 in one tiny part of South Africa's Natal Province, by the year 1900. The explorer-hunter Frederick Courtney Selous records it in the southern part of Rhodesia (Matabeleland) between 1872 and 1880. Rhodesia's last white rhino was shot by a Mr A. Eyre in 1895 at Mazoe, near Salisbury: it too found its way to the museum in Cape Town. In Botswana it disappeared between 1880 and 1890.

The year 1906 is the date from which the animal's slow and heavy plod to survival can be traced, for in 1906 there were between 20 and 50 of them in the Umfolozi Game Reserve, in Zululand. And that was all, anywhere. (As it

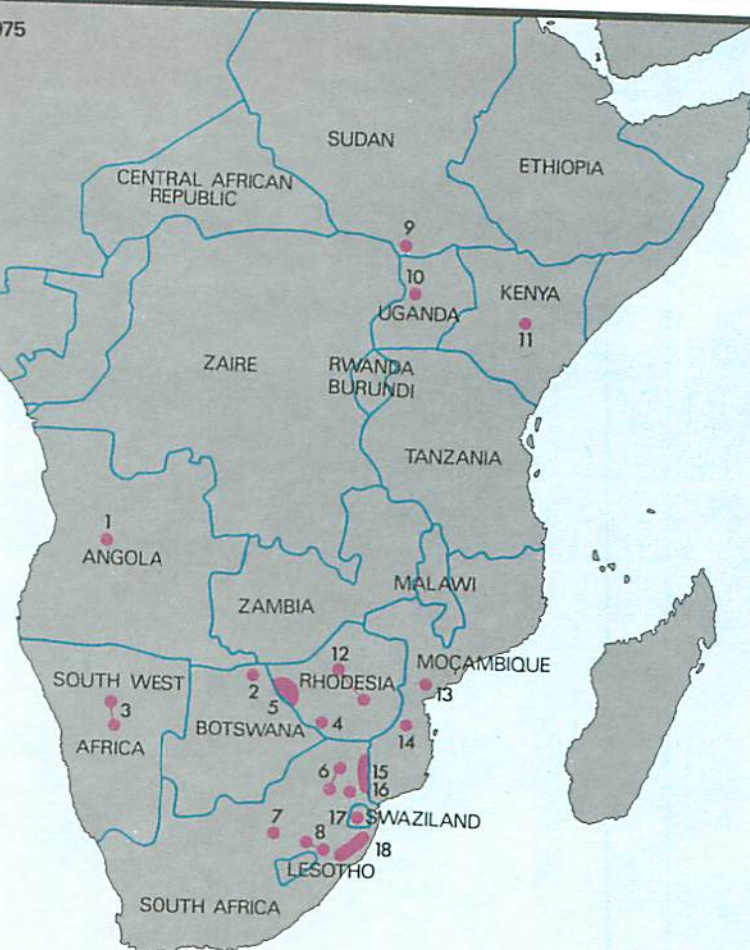
happens, they numbered many less, at that time, than Cotton's creatures in central Africa.) Between 1906 and 1936, when the animal's numbers had increased to 226, the Natal Parks Board kept very quiet about the state of their white rhinos—and rightly, too, for they well knew what poaching for horn and supposed 'sport' hunting had done to the northern populations.

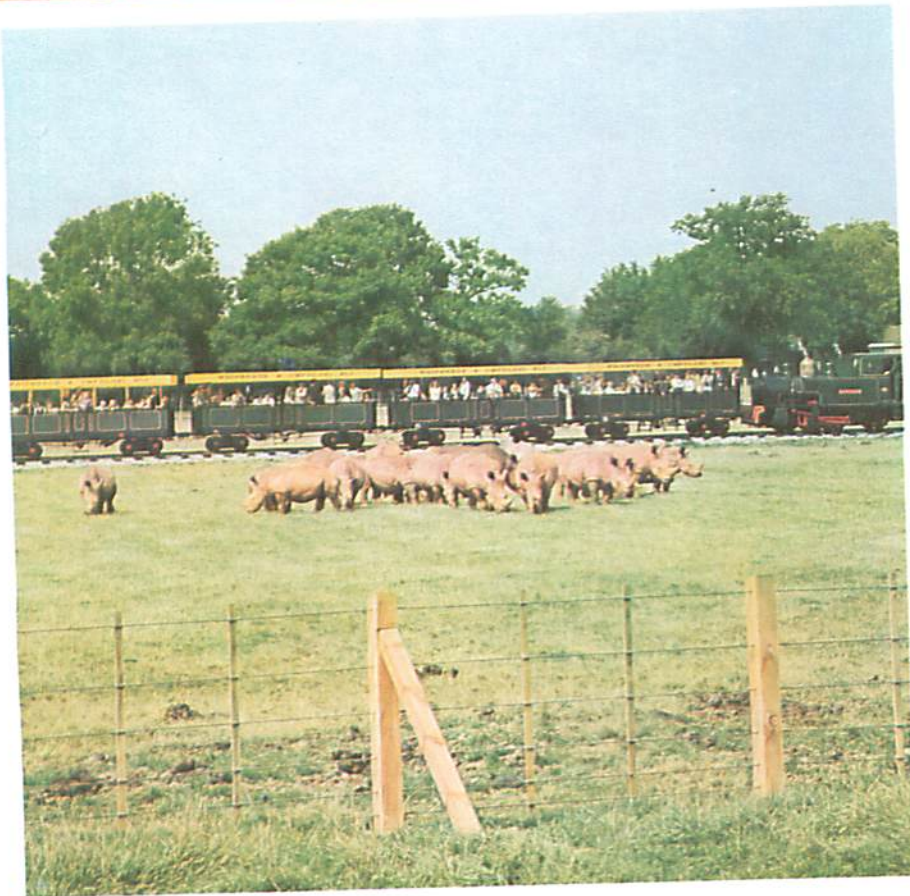
While it should never be imagined that conserving any animal is easy, at least in the case of the white rhinoceros the course of action that had to be taken was direct and pretty obvious. Total protection was the key, and that is precisely what the Natal Parks Board applied. Apart from Game Conservation staff, nobody was allowed near the white rhinos in Umfolozi; any animal that wandered out of the reserve was immediately herded back; constant surveillance was maintained; laws with drastic consequences for those interfering with the animals were brought into force; and a complete ban on any

World populations of non-captive white rhinoceros in 1975

- 1 12 sent to Angola in 1967. Present population?
- 2 Chobe National Park ± 16
- 3 On private farms + game reserves in SWA there are ± 20
- 4 Rhodes Matopos National Park ± 20
- 5 Wankie National Park ± 35
- 6 Loskop Dam + other Transvaal Reserves ± 35
- 7 Willem Pretorius Game Reserve ± 20
- 8 Queen Elizabeth Park + Midmar Dam ± 15
- 9 Nimule National Park?
- 10 Murchison Falls National Park?
- 11 Meru National Park ± 30
(intro from South Africa)
- 12 Kyle + Macbrwyn Parks ± 30
- 13 Gorongosa National Park ± 6
- 14 Maputa Game Reserve ± 15
- 15 Kruger National Park ± 180
- 16 Sabi-Sand Game Reserve ± 20
- 17 Mlilwane Game Reserve ± 15
- 18 Ndumu Game Reserve ± 30
- Mkuzi Game Reserve ± 12
- Umfolozi + Hluhluwe Reserves ± 1300 on farms etc.

+ 500 others







White rhino (above left) was photographed in Uganda and is therefore of the northern race; but these animals have not benefited from such strict conservation measures as those in South Africa (above right) and the northern race may now be extinct. So successful have the South African measures been that surplus animals have been translocated to other countries, and even to zoos—like the herd (below) at Whipsnade, England

information on the animals' status was maintained.

Many of the rhinos' behavioral patterns assisted in this protection, for they are territorial to a considerable degree, they have quite particular habitat preferences, and they are gregarious. Strangely, females have the habit of making their offspring precede them wherever they go, while the reverse is the case with the black rhino. To illustrate just how sedentary they are, there is the interesting record of the pair which, after being introduced to the Wankie National Park in Rhodesia, from Umfolozi stocks, wandered a good deal until they found a suitable micro-habitat within the park. They established themselves at a waterhole way out in the dry western part, but died two years later when poor rains failed to fill the pan where they had taken up residence.

In 1959 the Natal Parks Board chose to lift a corner of their veil of secrecy and announced a population of 567 white rhinos in Umfolozi, with about 40 others wandering outside but within the immediate vicinity of Umfolozi. Though the species was considered to be off the critical list, it was still a 'red' statistic. Then, as though in some strange and historic head-down charge, the white rhino population grew to about 1,600

by the early sixties. Recovered from the brink of extinction, there were now enough to start rebuilding the wild populations throughout the sub-continent.

Slowly at first, deliveries began with four animals to Meru Park in Kenya, another four in 1968 as a present from Prime Minister John Vorster of South Africa to the people of Botswana at their Chobe National Park, ten to Swaziland (to Ted Reilley's Mlilwane Game Reserve), sixty in 1962 to Rhodesia, ten to Mozambique (for Gorongosa and Maputa), ten to Angola, twelve to private game reserves in South-West Africa, and many others to the Kruger National Park, and other game reserves in Natal and in the Orange Free State. Private buyers for game farms in South Africa's Transvaal Province were also supplied, and then exports were started to safari parks and zoos in Japan, Britain, the United States, and Europe.

Today the white rhino is doing well in all those conservation areas to which it has been reintroduced, and almost without exception these ex-Umfolozi stocks have been breeding and thus locally augmenting their numbers. The story is sheer pleasure now, for Umfolozi's population is kept stable at about 1,200 animals, and any excess over this number is moved out, not by



killing or 'culling', but by live removal or transfer to anybody whose reasons for wanting one (or more) fit the exacting requirements of the Natal Parks Board. In fact, those who apply for stocks of white rhinos and are granted their request get their animals for nothing: they only have to pay for the transportation from Umfolozi. Since 1962, over 2,000 animals have been exported from Umfolozi.

Though there are no more than 4,000 of these prehistoric connections with the animal past in all the world, nevertheless the IUCN and Natal Parks Board are delighted at the removal of the southern white rhinoceros from the *Red Data Book* list of animals threatened with extinction.

Even if the white rhino's conserved areas in southern Africa were to disappear, there would still be the 'exported' populations around the world from which to re-draw stocks.



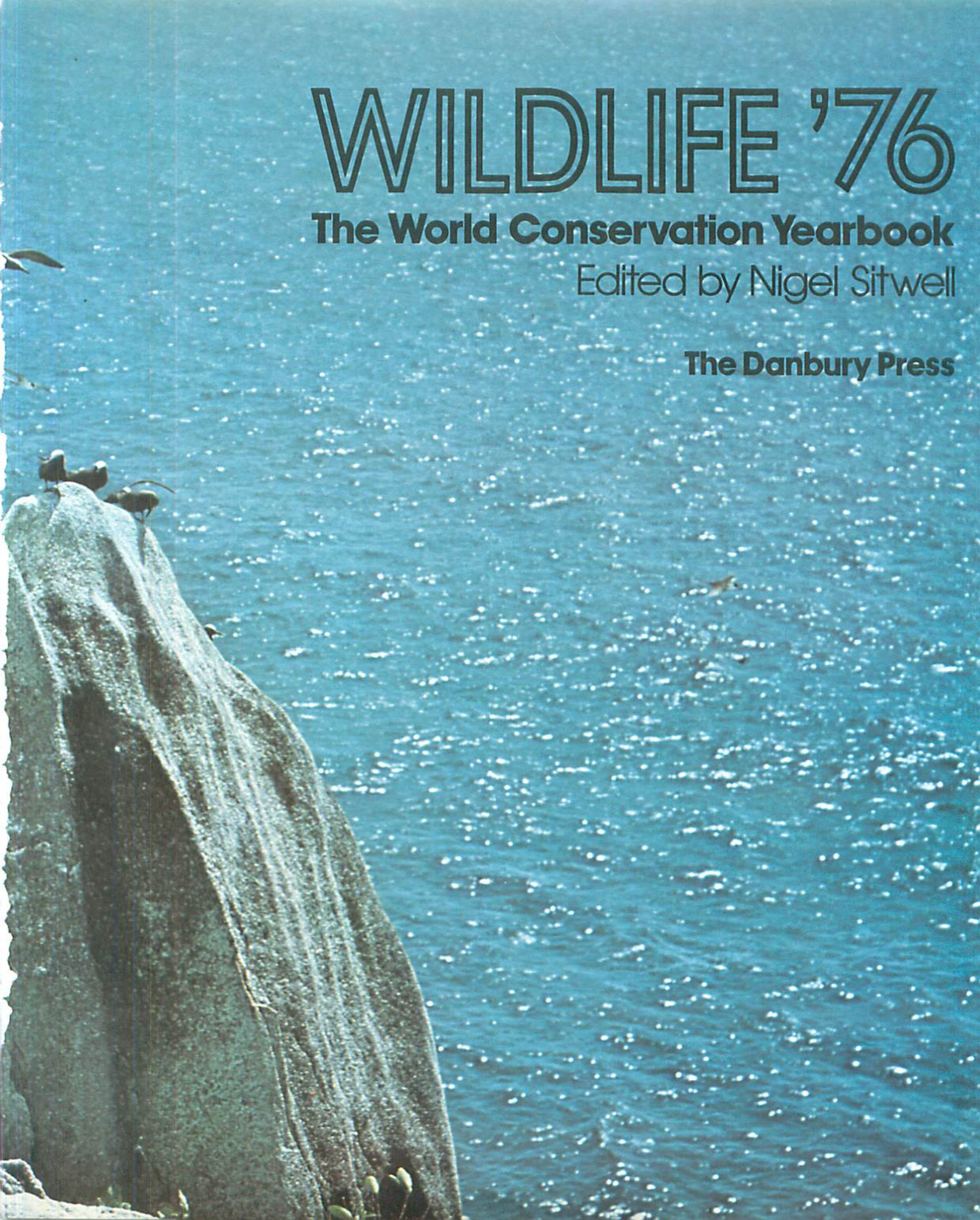
Now safe from extinction these white rhinos happily drink and wallow at a waterhole. The word white comes from the Afrikaans word 'wyd' meaning wide; it refers to the shape of the mouth, which is adapted to grazing grass, and so has nothing to do with the animal's color

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