

# GLAZA FACTS

By Linda Countryman

# RHINOCEROS

RHINOCEROS UNICORNIS (Indian)

R. SONDAICUS (Javan)

DIDERMOCERUS SUMATRENSIS (Sumatran)

DICEROS BICORNIS (Black)

CERATOTHERIUM SIMUM SIMUM (Southern White)

C.S. COTTONI (Northern White)

CLASS: Mammalia

ORDER: Perissodactyla

FAMILY: Rhinocerotidae

GENERA: Rhinoceros

Didermocerus

Diceros

Ceratotherium

STATUS: All are endangered

Rhinoceros are such unusual creatures that in order to understand them, we must first look into the past. Although they appear to us to be very large (second only to elephants among land animals today) some of their ancestors were truly giants. The biggest of these, *Baluchitherium*, who lived around 30-million years ago, stood as high as 18' at the shoulders and was probably about 27' long; only a few dinosaurs and whales were bigger than *Baluchitherium*. And there were dozens of other rhinoceros cousins of various shapes and sizes, most of which do not look like rhinos to us since horns were not then a common feature.

The very early rhinos were much like early horses - they were small and had long, slim running legs. Through the years, however, some developed short, heavy legs, while others adapted to a semi-aquatic life. Some even grew a coat of hair, such as the woolly rhinos which were drawn by the cavemen in Europe.

Like modern rhinos, the multi-ton ancient giants were herbivorous and posed little threat or danger to others around them. They were found in North America, Europe, Asia and throughout Africa, in all kinds of habitats and were the dominant animals of their time. Most of them became extinct at least several million years ago and only five smaller species survive today in the tropical regions of Asia and Africa. These, though, weigh only from one to four tons.

Of these five species, the black and the white are found in Africa. They have smooth skins and carry two horns on their snouts. The great Indian rhinos of Asia have skin with heavy folds, resembling armor plating and patterned with rivet-like tubercles. They carry only one horn. The horns of rhinos are unique as they are formed of compressed hair and will re-grow if broken. The horns of other animals such as cows or antelope, have a bony core growing out of the skull and will not re-grow.

All rhinos share similar habits, resting during the hot hours and eating the rest of the day. Most are browsers, dining on leaves, but the white rhino moves like an efficient lawn-mower, chomping on grass. Rhinos tend to stay in one place, beating well-worn paths or tunnels through the brush to reach water. It is a rare day when a rhino does not enjoy at least one good wallow in a muddy river bank.

Oxpeckers and cattle egrets help eat the parasites on their bodies, but a thick coating of mud also helps keep them cool.

Rhinos generally live alone, except during mating time or while a female is raising her calf. Only the white rhinos regularly live in small herds. During courtship, the bull actively pursues the cow. They will snort, bellow, stomp and shove until the bull gives up or the cow relents. There is no fixed breeding season and rhinos are not known to mate for life.

When it is time to deliver her calf (usually a single birth) the cow seeks a covered, bushy area. She continues to avoid contact with other rhinos until her calf is at least half grown. The new calf may weigh 80-120 pounds and is on its feet and nursing within a few hours (this is typical of all hooved animals for whom flight is the first line of defense). Despite their great size, healthy, adult rhinos are extremely agile and have no enemy except man. Other predators rarely get past a determined mother to attack her baby.

The bond between the cow and her calf is exceptionally strong, so much so that if the mother dies, the young rhino might stay by the body and possibly starve to death. When all goes well, however, they remain together until a new baby is due and then the mother drives off the older calf.

Rhinos may live up to 50 years, but most never reach that age due to hunting and poaching. For centuries, the people of many Asian countries have believed that various parts of the rhino are strong medicine, especially the horn. Even though poachers know they may be shot on sight they are still willing to take the chance because they can make so much money from the sale of the horn. And, unfortunately, they are successful enough to be pushing the rhino to the edge of extinction.

This pressure, when combined with tremendous loss of natural habitat and the rhinos' low reproductive rate, have reduced their range and numbers enormously. There may be fewer than 60-80 Javan rhinos alive today and only about 150-300 of the hairy Sumatran species. The great Indian still numbers about 1,000-2,000 and their African cousins are doing somewhat better.

While this may be a discouraging story, it cannot be denied that rhinos have been on a down-hill slide for thousands of years. However, man has served to accelerate their disappearance.

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