



# Under *fire*

Despite its indestructible appearance rhinoceros populations have been decimated by poacher's intent on harvesting its highly prized horn.

Compiled by Ashley van Schalkwyk





Who would mess with a rhinoceros? Only the grossly foolish, undoubtedly heartless and short-sighted would trouble this noble beast, endowed with great big horns, extremely tough hide, considerable size and a very short fuse. Tragically there are many humans who do - today the rhino is an endangered species caused by excessive poaching for their horns. Millions of years ago during the Miocene era this prehistoric looking mammal was abundant and widespread on the planet. All of the five remaining species of rhinoceros in the world have been hunted to near extinction. Two species of these odd-toed ungulates occur in Africa and three in Asia. Africa's rhino are endowed with not one but two great big horns on their nose and mid-forehead. The White Rhino and Black Rhino are the second largest animals in Africa after the African elephant and live to be 50 years old or more.

Rhinos have existed on Earth for more than 50 million years and have a glorious history. In the past, rhinos were

much more diverse and widespread (occurring in North America and Europe as well as in Africa and Asia). Today, only five species of rhino survive. These five species are further divided into 11 identified subspecies. All rhinos are under threat of, and all but one species is on the verge of, extinction. Without drastic action, some rhinos could be extinct in the wild within the next 10-20 years. Only about 24 500 of these marvellous creatures survive in the wild with another 1 250 in captivity. Of these rhinos, more than two thirds are white rhinos. There are only around 6 500 of the other four species combined.

Although only five species of rhinoceros precariously survive today, rhinos have a long and distinguished history. Since their origin about 50 million years ago, they have been an extremely diverse group, representing many different ecotypes: Some were like giraffes, some like horses, some like hippos, others like modern rhinos. The extinct rhinos were also more widespread occurring in North America and



Europe in addition to Africa and Asia. Moreover, rhinos were not confined to the tropics in the past but extended into temperate and even arctic regions.

The decline of Africa's rhinos is one of the greatest wildlife tragedies of our time. Like its African cousin, the black rhinoceros, the white rhinoceros has suffered from habitat loss and poaching for the international rhino horn trade. Rhino horn has two main markets; it is sold to Asian countries, particularly China, Taiwan and South Korea, for use in traditional medicine, and it is sold to Middle Eastern countries such as Yemen and Oman, which consider horn a prized material with which to make ornately carved handles for ceremonial daggers (jamiyas). The situation has only been exacerbated for the northern subspecies by civil war, civil unrest and poverty in both the DRC and neighbouring Sudan, which has weakened any conservation efforts. The northern white rhino was once widespread, with an estimated 2 250 individuals across five African states in 1960. In the ensuing years, however, poaching devastated populations to the point that, by 1984, numbers had fallen to a mere 15 animals, all restricted to the DRC's Garamba National Park. Habitat destruction and urbanisation have also affected white rhino populations.

A generally peaceful beast, the white rhino has something of a prehistoric, Jurassic Park look to it. Its springy gait belies its tank-like weight - an average of two tons. In fact, this is the second largest animal on land, and like most charismatic mega fauna, is found only in Africa. In South Africa rhino conservation has taken dramatic turns. Great battles have been fought to save the animal - the most famous by Dr Ian Player and a handful of men working to relocate white rhinos from the Umfolozi Game Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal

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(a sanctuary for most of the population) to other parts of the world between 1958 and 1964. Until then, no one knew how to transport rhinos. Dr Player asked a local doctor how much morphine it would take to drug a large animal like a hippo or rhino, and the medico snapped back irritably: 'A bucketful, man, a bucketful'.

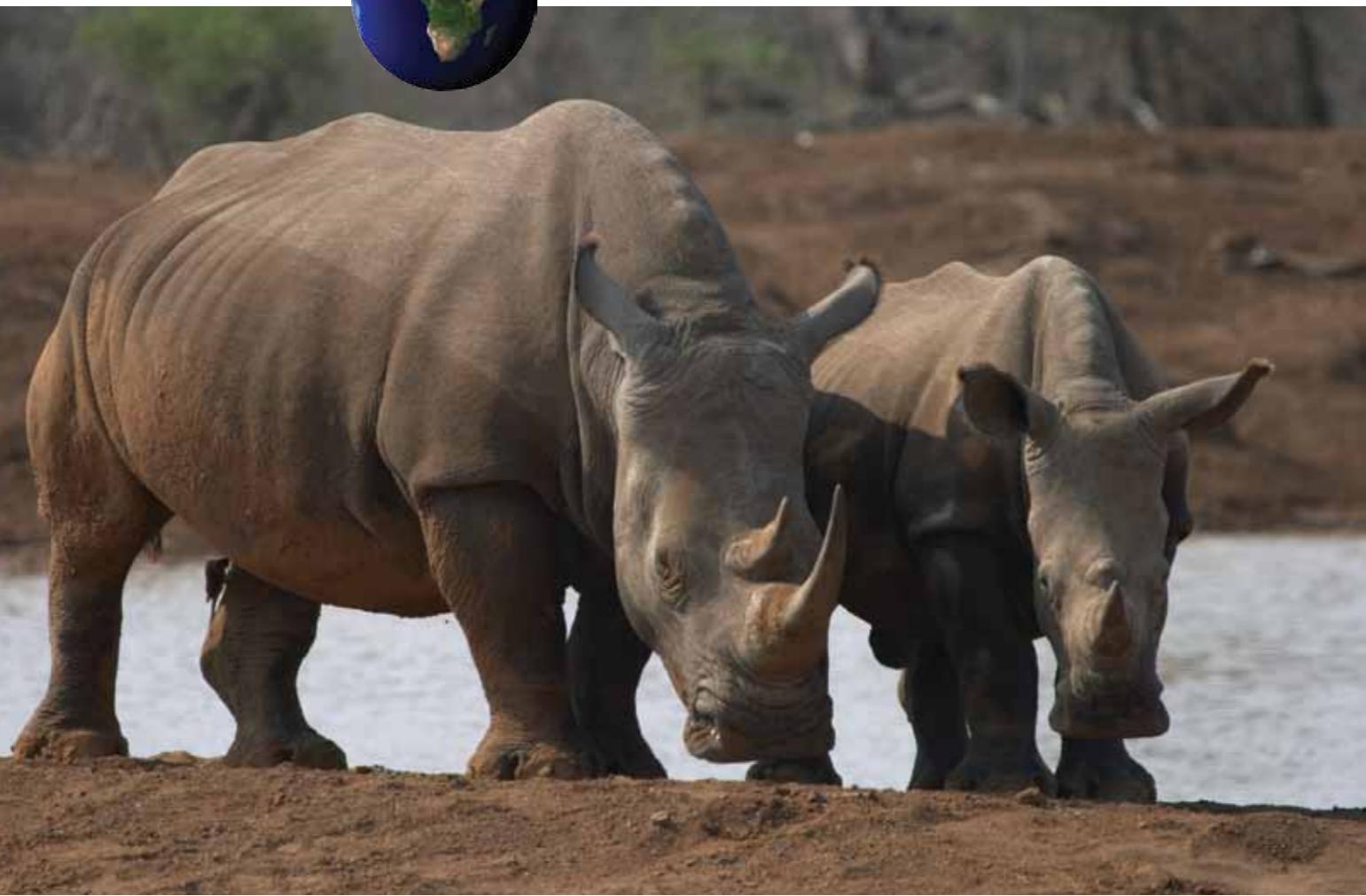
White rhino conservation received a tremendous boost in the early 1990s when these behemoths were allowed to be privately owned by South African game farm owners. White rhino in South Africa today number well over 10 000 and the species, once critically endangered, is now only on the near-threatened list. Its "wide" square muzzle is adapted

to cropping large mouthfuls of grass and being a grazer it naturally prefers grasslands and savannah woodlands. Far more peaceful and sociable than its cousin the Black rhino, the White rhino happily coexists in groups of up to a dozen. They have a wide range of vocalisations and also communicate

by touching, usually rubbing against each other when they're in a friendly mood. The Square-lipped Rhino has a distinguishable hump on the back of its neck and a proportionately larger head. Dominant males are territorial and greet each other with a ritual of repeatedly locking horns, backing off, sweeping the ground with their front horn before locking horns again. Fighting only gets serious when there's a female in oestrous.

Many southern white rhino are now concentrated within protected areas such as fenced sanctuaries, conservancies, rhino conservation areas and intensive protection zones. Effective management strategies have resulted in surplus animals being translocated to set up new populations within and outside the species' former range. In a number of

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countries, populations are now managed by both the state and the private sector, increasing their long-term security. Selling limited sport hunting of surplus males, for example, attracts large revenues and powerful incentives for private sector conservation, and generates much needed funds to help pay the high cost of successfully monitoring, protecting and managing rhino. All rhino were listed on CITES Appendix I by 1977, prohibiting international commercial trade in the species and their products. Following the continued rise in numbers of the southern white rhinoceros subspecies, however, the South African population was downlisted in 1994 to Appendix II, but only for trade in live animals to 'approved and acceptable destinations' and for the (continued) export of hunting trophies. Domestic anti-trade measures and legislation were also implemented in the 1990s to help reduce illegal trade, and some game managers immobilise white rhinos and remove their horns to deter poachers.

There are a number of regional and continental African rhino conservation initiatives that advise on or support effective conservation programmes. These include the IUCN SSC's African Rhino Specialist Group, the SADC Rhino Management and Rhino Recovery Groups, the Rhino and Elephant Security Group and the SADC Regional Programme for Rhino Conservation. Thanks to the concerted efforts of conservationists, researchers and

concerned individuals, particularly in South Africa, southern white rhinos have recovered from just a single population of between 20 and 50 animals in 1895 to about 17 500 today, with an additional 750 animals in captive breeding institutions worldwide, and are now the most abundant kind of rhino in the world. Rescued from near extinction a century ago, this subspecies stands as one of the world's greatest conservation success stories. Nevertheless, poaching pressure remains an ever-present threat and, with 99% of all southern white rhinos occurring in only four countries, the subspecies is still vulnerable and we cannot become complacent about its conservation.

Sadly, the outlook for the northern white rhino doesn't look so bright. The Garamba project had managed to conserve the population at about 30 rhinos from the late 1980's up to 2003, but an upsurge in poaching resulted in it declining to only 4 animals in 2006. The most recent surveys have failed to find any evidence of this subspecies in Garamba National Park. If the northern white rhino has now become extinct in the wild, its survival may now depend upon the successful breeding of the small number of rhinos held at Dvur Kralove Zoo in the Czech Republic.

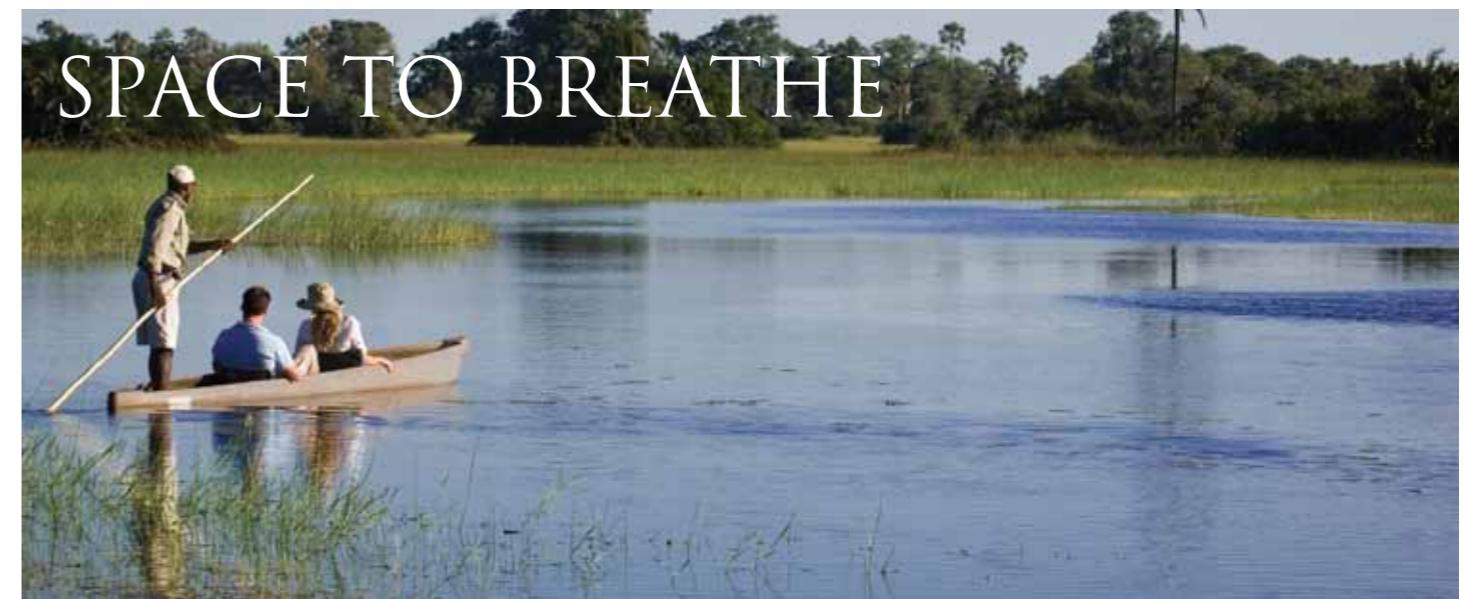
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