

Trunk Tops

Summer 2002

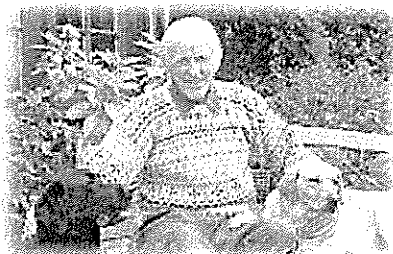
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The Rhinoceros - Extinction is forever

By Dr. William J. Jordan, Veterinary Surgeon



It is always with a sense of awe that one sees the great mammals of Africa for the first time. In the case of the rhinoceros, a hint of mystery is also added, for this animal is a quite remarkable relic of a remote and bygone era. It is a link with the past – the sort of animal that helps with the difficult task of actually believing in dinosaurs.

Rhinos have been in existence for a very long time – some 70 million years. today, the crucial question isbut for how much longer? There are five species of rhino throughout the world, all of which are teetering on the verge of extinction. The three Asian species are in a worse position than the two African species. There are probably less than 1,600 individuals left in the whole of Asia. In Africa the numbers are slightly greater, but have dropped precipitously in the last two or three years. This critical situation has been caused by the activities of man alone.



One of the rhino's ancestors may have been the largest land-living mammal ever, and even today the rhino is the heaviest land mammal apart from the elephant. A fully grown White rhino may stand some two metres (over six feet) high at the shoulder and weigh nearly four tonnes.

With such a bulk to maintain, it is no wonder that the animals consume prodigious quantities of food. They are herbivores, preferring succulent plants when available and drinking very little water. Unfortunately, many of the hundred or so species of plant that they eat are those cultivated by man in his plantations – and man is intolerant of such competition.

The largest of the five species of rhinoceros is the White rhinoceros of Africa. Its title is a misnomer, because it is actually slate-grey in colour. The 'white' came from a misunderstanding of the descriptive word 'wilde' used by the early Boers, which means 'wide', and refers to the animal's very wide mouth, with squarish lips. A less misleading name is Square-lipped rhinoceros. The White rhino is a dedicated grazer, using its wide mouth like a lawnmower to demolish swathes of grass.

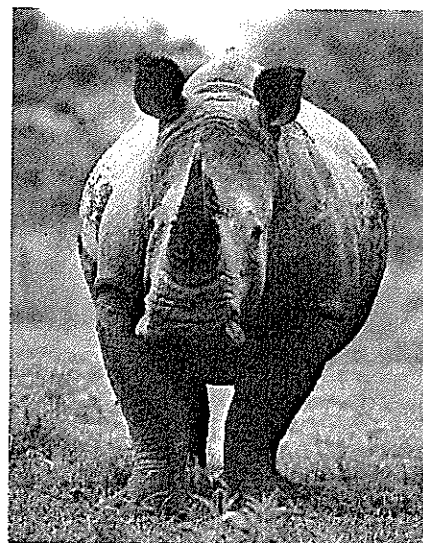
White rhinos were once common over a wide area of southern Africa, numbered in thousands. Then the white man came along, settling the land and enclosing and clearing vast areas for farms and homesteads. The erection of fencing adequate to keep out determined, strong and heavily armoured rhinos was too difficult a task. The settlers' answer was simply to destroy the animals to save their plantations and farm crops.

Also joining in the slaughter were big game hunters, trophy collectors, and traders in rhino horn and skin, used in eastern medicines and potions, so that by the beginning of this century the White rhino had all but been wiped out.

It was with considerable alarm that in 1906 the Natal Parks Board realised that there were probably only between 30 and 50 individuals left. These were all in a park (small by African standards) called the Umfolozi Game Reserve. Not only did those in charge of the park successfully protect these precious few animals, but they also kept secret from the rest of the world just how small their number

was. It was a great surprise therefore, when the announcement came in 1959 that Umfolozi now contained a herd of 600 White rhinoceros. By 1964, the number had increased to about 1,600 and the reserve could hold no more.

Subsequently many animals have been transferred to other reserves, in Zimbabwe, Botswana, Mozambique, Angola, Uganda, Kenya, Sudan and various parts of South Africa, as well as to major zoos in Europe and the USA. There are now several thousand White rhinos outside the Umfolozi reserve.



The other African species is the Black rhino (like the White, actually a shade of grey). It is a smaller animal, with a narrower mouth and a pointed, prehensile upper lip. It is a browser rather than a grazer, with a diet of leaves and twigs and bark plucked from shrubs and trees. Black rhinos have the reputation of being more irascible – or perhaps one should say less placid – than White rhinos.

Black rhinos were at one time more numerous than White but sadly no longer, and are under threat, for they live in smaller pockets, in areas that are not so well protected. Their original range extended in the bush from the Cape to as far north as the Sudan and Somalia, and across from Angola to Kenya. In the last two or three years their population has been severely depleted, by some 70-90%. In the whole of Kenya probably only a few hundred remain. No-one knows how many there are in Tanzania, which a few years ago contained one of the largest populations. It is certain that some Tanzanian parks have none.

The countries that are home to the rhinos do want to protect them. However, that means guards and equipment, and not all the countries concerned can afford such things, despite some moderate income from tourism.

One of the surviving strongholds of the Black rhino is the Aberdare National Park in Kenya. It is one of the most spectacular wildlife areas in East Africa. It is a mountainous area containing a wealth of species including the endangered Black rhino and many elephants. It is famous for the Treetops Hotel where Princess Elizabeth was staying when her father King George VI died and she became Queen 50 years ago.

There is one major problem. The land around the park is fertile and intensively farmed, which is a great attraction to wildlife as an easy source of food. Elephants, baboons, as well as other species, come out of the park at night to feed on crops and destroy more than they eat, so they are shot by the farmers. Many are injured and retreat to the park to suffer.

The solution is to erect an electrified fence powered by solar panels, and a local charity called Rhino Ark was formed in 1988 to assist the Kenya Wildlife Service to finance the fence project, first to protect the salient area in which the game lodges and mobile safari camps operate; and then to embark on the even more ambitious task of encircling the entire Aberdare conservation area with a game proof fence – strong enough to resist elephant pressure, powered with

electrification to keep wildlife inside the fence and to curb illegal log extraction, snaring and poaching of wildlife, especially rhino.

Even more importantly, the fence has brought harmony between the wildlife inside the fence with the farmers who live outside it. The farmers can sleep easily at night without fear of crop destruction and entry into their land by dangerous game.

Since 1988, Rhino Ark has raised over Ksh. 100 million (USD 1.3 million). The money has been contributed almost entirely from thousands of individuals – mainly Kenyans and also tourists and visitors – who see the value of the scheme.

Fund raising began in a small way, and has continued to escalate every year.

By mid 2002, sufficient funds will have been raised to have completed four sections each 40 Kilometres in length totalling 160 Kilometres – just over half the full distance and stretching along the entire eastern side of the Aberdare range from Nyahururu in the north to Chinga in Othaya district at the southern end of the range. This is already the longest conservation fence in the East Africa region.

A further 156 Kilometres needs to be fenced to encircle the Aberdares on its west and southern boundaries.

The aim is to complete this as quickly as the funds can be raised.

Rhino Ark has set a target of completion by 2005.

A report of a study in 1999 says *"As a method of discouraging conflict between wildlife and humans, and specially the damage to crops caused by larger mammals, the fence has proved to be a very effective tool"*.

"If the success of the fencing where it is in place is repeated around the rest of the Aberdare conservation area, then it is likely that this essential natural resource can be preserved for generations to come".

Until recently wooden posts were used and not only are they expensive but it depletes the forests of Kenya where there is a looming timber crisis. So Rhino Ark did some lateral thinking and began to make posts from plastic waste which helps to relieve the country of choking plastic pollution. The waste is used raw without cleaning, fed into a milling machine and then through the extruder into a mould. The posts are 6 inches thick and 10 feet long. They have several advantages over wood. The electric wire can be fixed directly to the post without insulation. It is more difficult for baboons to manoeuvre over the smooth fence posts as they now do with wooden posts. The post doesn't break like the wooden post when leaned on by an elephant. They bend and spring back up again. They are, of course, cheaper.

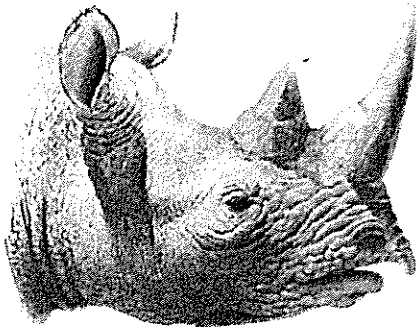
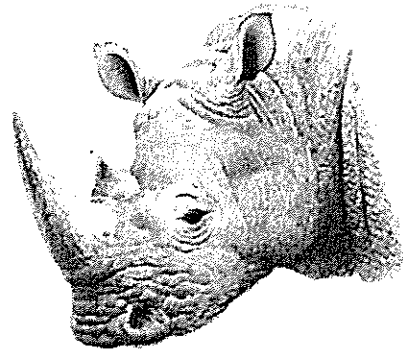
It is a most worthy project. The fence protects wildlife from poachers, protects farm land, recycles waste plastic and take the pressure off forests.



Photographs © Steve and Ann Teon

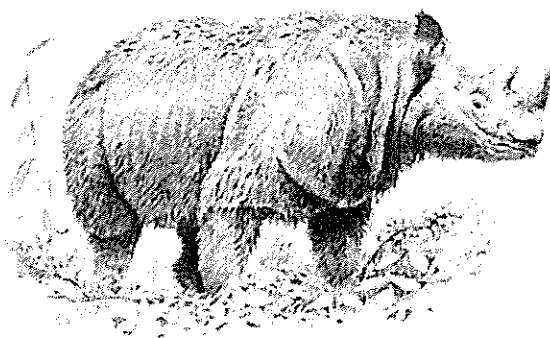
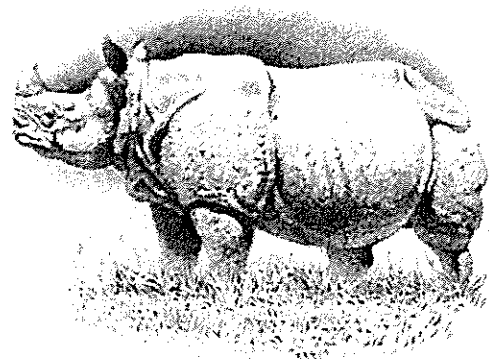
Rhino Around the World

White Rhino - is the most common type of rhino, which has successfully bred from a small population in Natal, South Africa.



Black Rhino - is the rarest of the African rhino and over the last two decades the numbers have declined due to widespread killing by poachers.

Indian Rhino or Great One Horned Asian Rhino - is found in Northern India Nepal. It has only one horn and its body is covered with shields of thickened hide.



Sumatran Rhino or Two Horned Asian Rhino - is found in the rain forests of Indonesia, Malaya and the islands of Sumatra Borneo where it is susceptible to habitat destruction and poaching. It has long hair to give it a wooly appearance.

Javan Rhino or Lesser One Horned Rhino - is the rarest and the most endangered of rhinos. It is very secretive and found only in thick forest in Java in the Malaya Peninsula.

