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SPOTS & STRIPES



Vol. I, No. 1

March, 1964



THE WORLD OF RAJKUMARI

In warm quarters next to a boisterous tribe of pygmy hippos, Rajkumari, the National Zoological Park's Indian rhinoceros calf, has prospered through her first winter. She will be a year old in April. Pampered, yes, but with good reason. Along with Tarun, the zoo's senior Indian rhino, "Rajy" represents a once-great race of mammals, now rare in the wild and prized by zoos.

She looks like a crisp 900-pound miniature of Tarun. Skin studded with round tubercles falls in deep folds as if laid on in metal plates. Child rhino though she is, "Rajy" already shows the strikingly prehistoric look characteristic of her species. A massive "armored" body on stumpy legs. A puzzled look, as if somewhere in her slow brain lay a clouded remembrance of an age of Earth much kinder to rhinoceroses. Nonetheless she is a playful youngster in her rhino-ish way, bunting her keepers' legs, inviting rough-house. She has an enormous appetite, consuming six quarts of calf-starter milk a day along with plenty of hay, fresh fruit and vegetables.

On the end of Rajkumari's somewhat boat-shaped head, a prominent bump holds the bud of a horn, traditionally the most valued part of a rhino's anatomy. Good arguments favor a theory that the Indian rhino was the original unicorn. Marco Polo, upon seeing one of these animals in his travels, wrote a detailed and disappointed account of how a "unicorn" really looked.

Beliefs in unicorns faded, but superstitions about flesh-and-blood rhinos did not. Rhino horns and virtually every part of the big animal's body have been used for centuries in the Orient for almost innumerable rites and cures. In chunks or powdered, it is still sold for aphrodisiacs and thorn removal, for easing childbirth and testing for poison. Prices up to \$2000 have been paid in recent years for large horns.

The market for rhino horn over the centuries has been met by relentless killing. Today all three Asiatic rhino species are threatened with extinction. Surviving great Indian rhinoceroses are largely in scattered sanctuaries in India, with some thought to be left wild in the Nepal Terai. Both "Rajy" and Tarun came from India's famous Kaziranga Sanctuary in Assam. Here visitors ride elephants through a sea of giant grasses to view rhinos.

Published by

THE FRIENDS OF THE NATIONAL ZOO

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The great Indian rhinoceros may reach a height of more than six feet at the shoulder and can weigh up to two tons. Bulls grow horns up to nine inches long. Female horns may be longer and sharper, probably because they are less battle-worn. Surprisingly, the Indian rhino makes equal use of its sharp lower incisors in battle.

The first captive Indian rhinos in the western world were apparently those kept in the menageries of Roman emperors. After Constantine, there was a gap of about 1200 years before a rhino was presented to the King of Portugal early in the 16th century. A few years later, an Indian rhino was sent by Portugal to Rome as a gift to the Pope, but was shipwrecked en route. Sketches of the salvaged carcass supposedly inspired a well-known woodcut by Albrecht Durer.

(J. A.)

Rhinoceros Notes:

Five species of rhino survive in the world today, three in Asia, two in Africa. The National Zoo has three species -- the great Indian, the white or square-lipped (Africa) and the African black. The other two kinds, the Javan and the Sumatran, have been virtually unknown in captivity until a recent expedition secured three Sumatran, sent to Copenhagen and two other zoos.

Rhinos are generally accepted to be the second largest land mammal, though average hippo weight exceeds average rhino weight. The biggest rhino species is the African white, which can reach 6 1/2 feet at the shoulder. Large horns can measure three feet, record specimens over five feet. The Indian rhino is a close rival for size, but horns are smaller.

The plural of rhinoceros is rhinoceroses, awkward as it may seem.

Africa's black rhino, the commonest today, is infamously bad-tempered in the wild. It can reach speeds of 40 M. P. H. in a charge. By contrast, Africa's big white rhino is placid.

Rhinos have poor vision. Their reasoning power is vague at best. They have keen hearing and sense of smell. Rhinos belong to the same zoological order as tapirs and the horse family, - the Perissodactyla, or odd-toed ungulates.

Only the great Indian and Javan rhinos are single-horned. The other three species have a second horn on their skulls.

Rhinoceroses at the National Zoo are sprayed with baby oil daily to keep their skin in good condition. No such pampering in the wild, where animals suffer from many skin troubles when droughts cause water-holes to dry.