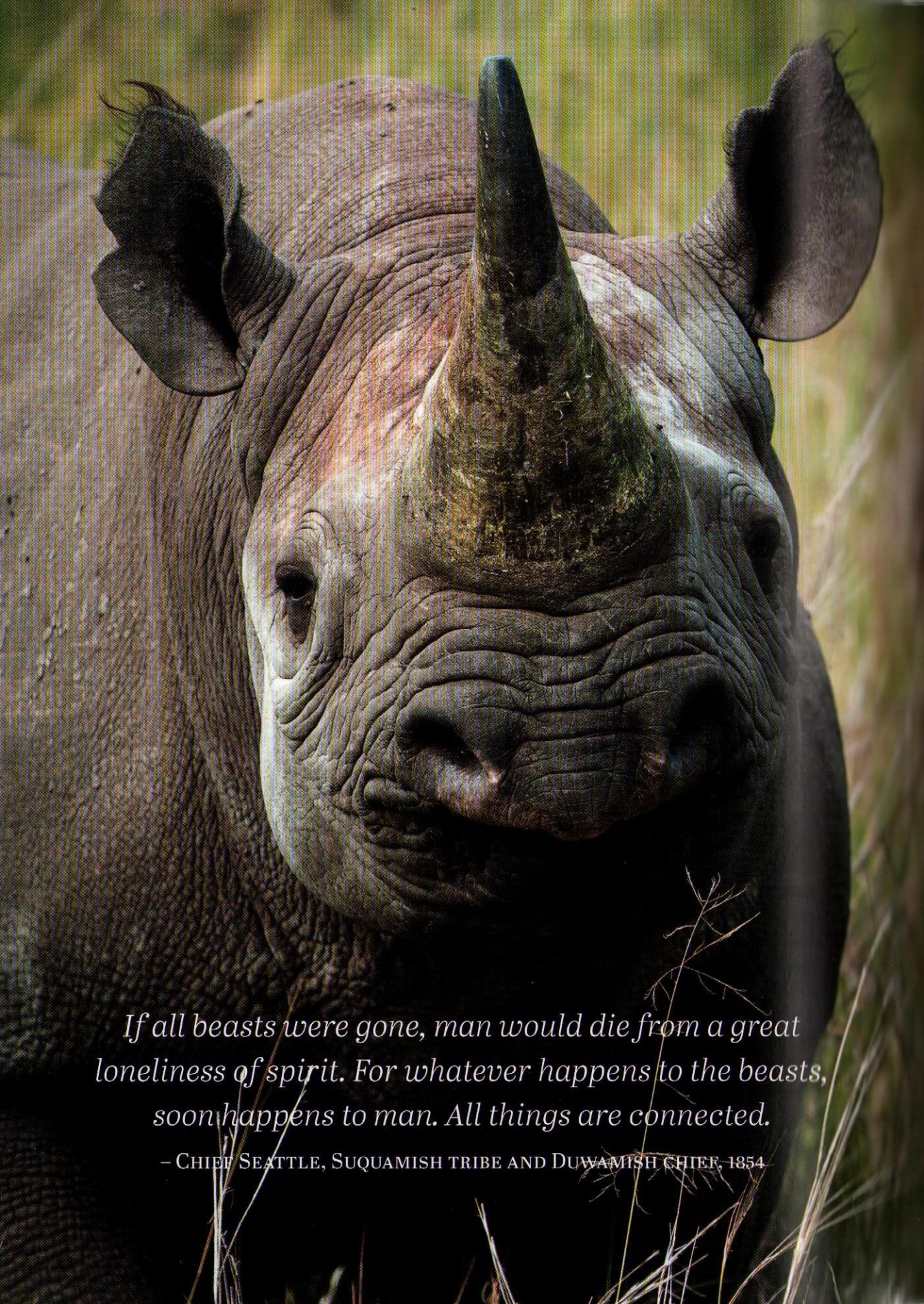


CHAPTER 6

Black rhino, white rhino – what's in a name?

THE STORIES AND STUDIES BEHIND THE NAMES

By Jim Feely¹



If all beasts were gone, man would die from a great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to the beasts, soon happens to man. All things are connected.

— CHIEF SEATTLE, SUQUAMISH TRIBE AND DUWAMISH CHIEF, 1854

Dispelling the myth

It has been fascinating in my lifetime to witness the birth, growth and acceptance of a piece of pseudohistory and the legend that it is comprised of. This chapter is the widely accepted explanation of how the white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*) got its name, which is such an inaccurate description of its outward appearance. Its skin colour is largely determined by the soil of its surroundings, overlaid on a medium-grey colour by its wallowing in mud and rolling in dust, as it is too for the black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*).

In the 18th and 19th centuries Afrikaner hunters called the white rhino the *wijd* (mond) *renoster* (wide [mouth] rhinoceros) in colloquial Dutch and Afrikaans. When early English-speaking travellers and hunters heard this name, they mistook the sound of *wijd* (*weid*, *weit*, *wyd*) for 'white', hence the English name.

The earliest mention in English of the name white rhino was made by John Barrow² in describing his travels in Namaqualand in the present Northern Cape during 1798. There he met a Griqua Afrikaner who told him that in his youth he had killed 'seven camelopardales [giraffes] and three white rhinoceroses in one day'³ but did not say where. This conversation must have been conducted in Dutch or Afrikaans, the informant using *kameelperde* and *wit(te)renosters*, and not their English translations.

The earliest written use in Dutch of both the names, white and black rhino, was made by Petrus Borchers in a letter to his father in 1802.⁴ Borchers, then in his teens, acted as assistant secretary and scribe to the commissioners of the Truter-Somerville expedition to the Tswana people at Dithakong (earlier known as Lattakoe), north-east of Kuruman in 1801–1802. Their report to the Cape governor was submitted in English,⁵ but Borchers had probably prepared the original draft in Dutch. (Where some minor discrepancies occur between these accounts, such as in dates/spelling, I have followed the official report.) His first observation referred to a male of the 'black variety' of rhino killed by Jacobus Kruger near Kuruman on 27 December 1801.⁶ The second described a female 'white' rhino killed south of Kuruman by Kruger and Meintjes van den Bergh on 30 December 1801. In a separate account written in English by William Somerville, the first animal killed was called a 'black two-horned rhinoceros' with no mention being made of the second animal.

OPPOSITE: The notches in both ears of this black rhino enable 'monitors' to identify the animal in the field and to record details of condition and position. Photo: Dana Allen.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: An unusual picture of both a black rhino and a white rhino at a waterhole. Photo: Clive Walker.

Of the first rhino killed, it was noted that the 'upper lip was more pointed and hung over the lower lip' as Somerville also recorded. The Setswana name was seikloa, the name (keitloa) for the black rhino used during the 19th century. It was recorded that the upper lip of the second animal killed was 'more flat', and that its Setswana name was magooe, which is clearly a phonetic rendering of the name mogohu still recently in use for the white rhino.

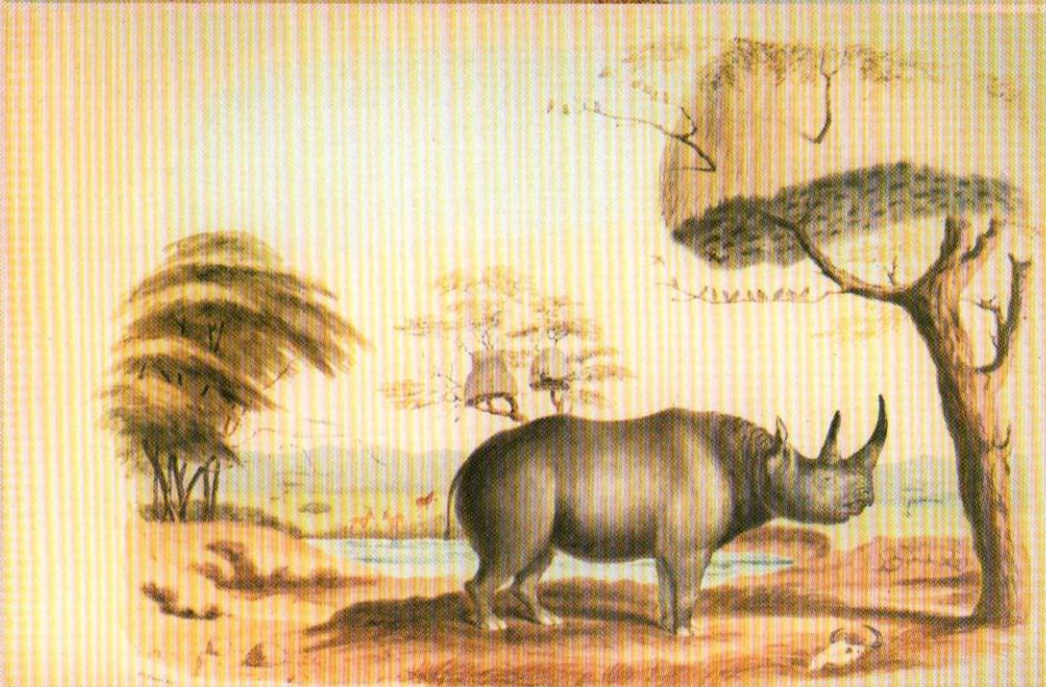
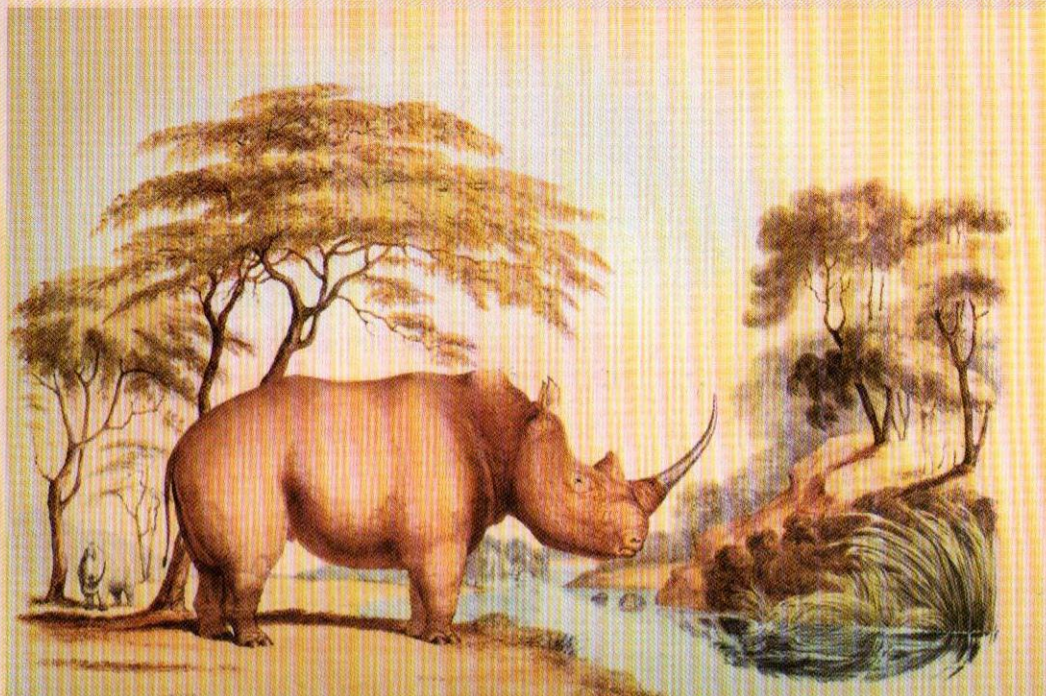
These accounts confirm conclusively to me that the animal killed on 27 December 1801 was *D. bicornis*, and the one killed on 30 December was *C. simum*. The second animal was described as being smaller than the first, thereby indicating that it must have been immature, since an adult white rhino of either sex is larger than an adult black rhino.

Concerning the female rhino killed, Borchers stated (in translation, original in Dutch): 'She was of the type known to us as the white rhinoceros ... I expected this animal to be entirely white according to its name, but found that she was a paler ash-grey than the black. I suppose that when the rain falls this animal is cleansed of mud and other impurities and will appear lighter at a distance, and put the derivation of the name down to that' Thus the oldest written record in Dutch is unequivocally of both 'black' and 'white' species under those names and not any other. Furthermore, the recorder himself saw and described the carcasses of both animals and gave their Setswana names in a way that identifies them beyond doubt, in my opinion. Clearly, the factoids are not true. Unfortunately, neither Borchers, Truter nor Somerville asked Kruger how the names were derived.

Later in 1841, William Cornwallis Harris, an Indian army officer who was a visiting hunter and an accomplished artist, gave the names the 'square-nosed or white rhinoceros'. In the caption he gave witte rhinoster as the Cape colonists' name, and mohooohoo as the Setswana name. The latter is clearly another phonetic spelling of the modern name mogohu for the white rhino. In the caption that depicts the 'African rhinoceros' (black rhino, *D. bicornis*), Cornwallis Harris gave the colonists' name as rhinoster and the Setswana as borili.⁷ He had hunted in both the present North West and Limpopo provinces in 1836.

A. Steedman recorded each species under the names black and white near Mafeking in 1826. Andrew Geddes Bain also noted 'white' rhino in the Mafeking area in 1826, and both rhinos under these names on a tributary of the Molopo River in 1834, while James Alexander (1838) likewise recorded both species with these names in central Namibia in 1836/37.

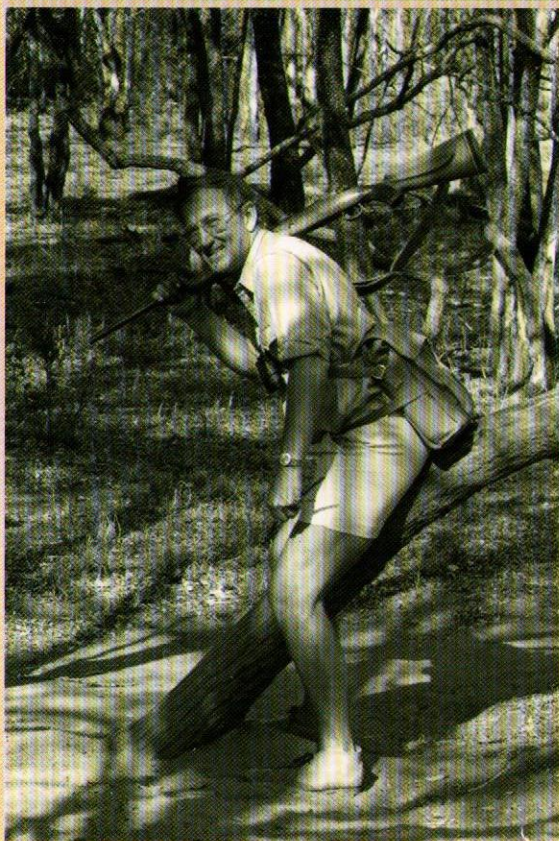
Thereafter, throughout the 19th century other hunters travelling in the white rhino's historical range and writing in English, such as Charles Andersson (1861), Thomas Baines (1864), William Baldwin (1894), Gordon Cumming (1850) and Fredrick Courtney Selous (1881, 1908), consistently used the names black rhino



TOP AND BOTTOM: Paintings by Cornwallis Harris in 1836 depict a white rhino above and a black rhino below. Note the soil colour variation as observed by the artist.



ABOVE: Note the variation in the skin tone due to the light falling on the rear rhino. Photo: Quintus Strauss.



LEFT: The author of this chapter, Jim Feely, demonstrates the action rhino take in when using tree trunks to rid themselves of ticks. Photo: Eric Thorburn.

and white rhino. Selous was fluent in Afrikaans, as no doubt were at least some of the others. He often accompanied Afrikaner hunters and would not have misunderstood them. However, one writer who did not use a common name was William Burchell, either in the original scientific description of *Rhinoceros simus* or in the account of his travels.

From this brief history, I believe it is clear that:

- The Dutch and Afrikaans name for *C. simus* has been wit(te)renoster since at least the end of the 18th century, as recorded by Barrow, Borchers and Harris, and this is correctly translated as white rhino.
- The Dutch and Afrikaans name for *D. bicornis* gained the qualifier of 'swart' (black) at the same time as the other was named 'wit'.
- These names originated in the country inhabited by San, Griqua and Tswana north of the Orange River where both rhinos occurred together. By the late 18th century many Griqua were of mixed descent, as Barrow noted, and were bilingual speakers of Afrikaans and Khoekhoe. Consequently, it was probably they who were the first to use these names in Afrikaans and Dutch, as is suggested by Barrow's report.

Rookmaaker (2003) in his detailed study of the name 'white rhino' concluded, on the evidence quoted above that: 'The English adjective cannot have evolved from a Dutch or Afrikaans word. This derivation should no longer be used in popular texts to explain the name of the rhinoceros called "white".' By this he meant any Dutch or Afrikaans word except wit(te), from which it was translated. But he did think that the accounts of Barrow or Borchers might 'hold the key to the truth', having also quoted the same passage in Borchers's letter used here, although omitting that it was translated from Dutch.

Southwards of the Orange River, the black rhino continued to be known as just the renoster or rhinoster at least until 1841. Not long afterwards in 1853, or possibly 1858, the last of its kind in that region was killed near Port Elizabeth. This had been its name from the time when it was first encountered by the early Dutch settlers near Cape Town in the 17th century. They knew no other African rhino for more than a century thereafter that would have warranted distinguishing it specifically.

The names of the two species are a contrasting pair whether in Dutch and Afrikaans or in translation. As Teddy Roosevelt and E. Heller in 1915 said, 'The black rhinoceros has not received its common English name because its coloration is actually blacker than that of the other species, but rather to contrast it with the other African rhinoceros which has been so unfortunate as to have the designation "white" bestowed upon it.'

Since the names do not describe the skin colour of either species, they could allude metaphorically to their differing reactions to humans: swart referring to that species' well-known aggressiveness, with wit as its opposite for the inoffensive animal. Swart in Afrikaans and 'black' in English have similar metaphorical allusions to anger, danger or threat, as for instance in *die swart kuns*, *swart kyk*, 'the black art', 'things looked black', 'a black look'.⁸ However, wit in Afrikaans does not have the allusions that 'white' has in English; in both languages they are just the opposites of swart or black.⁹

Behavioural differences between the two species

Thus, I would argue, the derivation of the name swart should be the issue with wit as its opposite, and not vice versa, as Roosevelt and Heller and most other writers have supposed. Nevertheless, there is neither etymological nor historical support for this idea. This difference must have been as significant to hunters of both rhinos as those in their outward appearance. In 1802 Somerville said of the black rhino, 'This animal is the most ferocious that Africa produces ... for when wounded he seldom fails to fly to the place from which the shot came.' Conversely, in mitigation, Borchers at the same time wrote: 'One must surmise that much more is told of the ferociousness of this animal than is actually in his nature.'

A famous early report of black rhinos' bellicosity described Simon van der Stel's close encounter with one near Piketberg, in the present Western Cape in 1685. Alexander (1838) described this behavioural difference between the species: 'The white rhinoceros ... is a timid animal compared with the savage black, which commonly charges whether wounded or not, whereas the white variety tries to effect an escape.'

However, nine of the 10 etymological theories identified in the literature and discussed by Rookmaaker (2003) consider only the white rhino and its physical appearance, ignoring both the black and the behaviour of both. Borchers's response to the name wit or white rhino in 1802 (quoted above) was echoed by nearly every writer after him. The earliest suggestion that the original Dutch and Afrikaans name for *C. simum* was not wit(te)renoster, and that another adjective had been misunderstood by English speakers, was a speculative proposal made in 1931 by Charles Pitman, first game warden of Uganda. At that time the northern white rhino (*C.s. cottoni*) still occurred in western Uganda, although it later became extinct there. He thought that a Dutch word meaning 'bright', 'shining' or 'great' might

have been used instead of wit, but did not give an example of such use.

Thereafter the idea seems to have lain dormant in South Africa until revived by Charles Astley-Maberley (1963), who wrote: 'There have been a variety of suggestions as to why the species became known as "white", the best I think being that offered by T.R.H. Owen – that it is a corruption of the term "wyd mond" or "broad-mouthed" originally applied by the old Boer hunters.'

The originally speculative suggestions of Pitman, Van den Bergh and Owen were clearly made in ignorance of the early 19th-century reports. They evolved into factoids in publications after 1963. These ignored the fact that no historical example of such a use had ever been produced in their support. And they went on being repeated, although not by Reay Smithers. He accepted my comments on his draft manuscript on the white rhino, omitted the speculation about the name, and relied on documented facts in *The Mammals of the Southern African Sub-region*, which became the standard work.

Short and pithy, swart or black with its opposite wit or white have remained firmly in everyday use for more than two centuries to distinguish the African rhinos. As a pair they are an appropriate metaphor in Afrikaans and English for a well-known difference in the rhinos' reactions to humans – at least today, if not used originally. Thus the names will no doubt continue in common usage, whatever their etymology or the alternatives preferred by zoologists.

*One thing is certain, no other African animal
has attracted as much attention to its name as
has the white rhino.*

