

BOOK REVIEWS

THE RHINOCEROS OF SOUTH ASIA by L.C. (Kees) Rookmaaker, pp. liv+ 835, illustrations and maps. Published by Koninklijke Brill b.v., Leiden, The Netherlands. 2024. Size: 29 cm x 25 cm. Price not mentioned
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Of the five species of rhinoceroses, two are found in Africa and three in Asia. Of these, two now survive only on the brink of extinction in Southeast Asia, having disappeared from South Asia altogether. This book is an exhaustive record of the three species that once lived among us. It is often said that ‘the devil is in the detail’. Allow me to take the liberty of turning this around: in the case of this work, God is in the detail.

The length of the book testifies to its exhaustive nature and to the meticulous scholarship of its author, who has spent a lifetime studying rhinos across the world. His annotated bibliography of all known literature on the five species of rhinos, from the earliest times to 1982, is a monumental work. The book under review is a worthy successor to that effort. For the reviewer—who happens, in this case, to have co-authored a history of the Greater One-horned Rhinoceros—evaluating this work is no easy task.

The book is divided into three parts, each devoted to a single species. The largest – section 531 pages – is on the Greater One-horned Rhinoceros, which still survives in India and has even made something of a comeback.

Rhinoceros unicornis, endemic to South Asia, is deeply woven into the region’s history and culture. The book traces its presence from geological, prehistoric, and protohistoric times to the present. It documents evidence in rock art, Mohenjo-daro, and the Mughal court, among others. It maps its historical range in detail. While Babur is known to have hunted rhinos near Lahore, present day readers may be surprised to learn that 4,000 years ago they were found as far west as Gujarat too! Mughal paintings suggest rhinos were once widespread across Awadh (present-day Uttar Pradesh) and beyond. Joachim Bauntze’s chapter, remarkably, illustrates their profuse representation in Rajasthani art of the 17th and 18th centuries, even when the species had already disappeared from the region.

During the British colonial period, rhinos were relentlessly hunted with high-powered rifles for sport. In Nepal, the Ranas staged grand hunting expeditions for themselves, British royalty, and their guests. Rhino fights were also organized in Awadh and Baroda, among other places. All of these are meticulously recorded in the book, with illustrations. From near-extinction to its resurrection is a roller coaster story which is told here in exhaustive

detail – so much so that there seems little room left for additions or corrections.

The other two species – the Javan Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*) and the two-horned Sumatran Rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) – also once inhabited South Asia, though the region was their least-preferred habitat. They are two of the three mammals that became extinct in South Asia during the 20th century, the third being the cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*), which is now enjoying a return. These two rhinos appear primarily in historical records from the British period, though local references may once have existed.

Despite the author’s Herculean efforts, the story of the Javan rhino is confined to just 84 pages, while that of its Sumatran cousin occupies 62 pages. This reflects not a lack of scholarship, but the scarcity of records. The smaller one-horned rhino is described in detail, including its taxonomic history. From about 1770 onward, written accounts by British observers became available, along with illustrations and later photographs. These are meticulously documented, including an extraordinary photograph of Lady Mary Curzon, wife of Lord John Nathaniel Curzon, Viceroy of India, astride a Javan rhino in Junagadh in November 1900 – apparently a pet of Nawab Rasulkhanji of Junagadh.

The Javan rhinoceros was already in decline in South Asia by the 19th century. Only 39 individuals were recorded in captivity during that period, and its last presence in the region is noted in 1909. Research suggests its final stronghold was in the Sundarbans of present-day India and Bangladesh, as well as the trijunction of North Bengal, Bangladesh, and Assam.

The Sumatran rhinoceros, the only two-horned species in Asia, is likewise fully described, with illustrations and taxonomic details. Its presence in South Asia was even sparser than that of its Javan cousin. Only nine individuals were recorded in captivity, and just 26 sightings, captures, or kills are documented between 1862 and the present. Astonishingly, the species may have survived in Manipur until the 1990s and in Nagaland until 1999.

Its South Asian range once extended from east of Dhaka to Chittagong (now Chattogram), Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and North Bengal.

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Taken together, the three species appear to have shared the trijunction landscape of North Bengal, Bangladesh, and Assam. Sadly, we know almost nothing about their interactions with one another or how they divided their ecological niches.

The reviewer, a historian of animals for the past three decades, finds this book to be the most comprehensive and instructive account ever written on the three species of rhinos and the reviewer can say with confidence that it shall remain the definitive source. While the Greater One-horned Rhinoceros is thriving once again in India, the

Javan and Sumatran rhinos cling precariously to fragmented habitats in Southeast Asia. The book's greatest value lies in its complete record of these two species, which no longer roam South Asia.

On the downside, the book is unwieldy – it weighs nearly three kilograms and is difficult to navigate. That apart it is very expensive making it beyond the reach of most readers. Nevertheless, its incomparable content makes it a 'must read' for general readers and specialists alike, and an indispensable addition to every library.

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