

Naturalist's Niche Natuurhoekie

BLACK RHINOS

John Ledger



What weighs 1 000 Kg, is very blunt at one end and very sharp at the other and may suddenly come crashing towards you through the vegetation at high speed, sharp point forward? As many a wildlife researcher has discovered, this adrenalin-stimulating phenomenon is also called the Black Rhinoceros, *Diceros bicornis*. And the reason why the African bush is not littered with the remains of rhinoceros victims is two-fold: the aggressive, unpredictable creatures have very poor eyesight, and their numbers have been so depleted in recent years that contact between humans and Black Rhinos is now a rare event.

No other large mammals have declined so rapidly as the world's five species of rhinos over the past fifteen years, from a total population of over 70 000 in 1970 to fewer than 14 000 in 1985. The Black Rhinoceros has suffered the most catastrophic population crash from 65 000 to only 7 000 individuals in the same timespan. In prehistoric days a charging rhino was a fair counter to arrows or spears, but the Twentieth Century offers humans the upper hand. Primitive muzzle-loaders, high-powered hunting rifles and automatic military weapons have been used to kill some 58 000 Black Rhinos in fifteen years, and all this slaughter has been to get hold of the sharp point at the end of the nose - the rest of the mighty beast is most often discarded, left to rot in the sun or provide vultures with a tough meal.

The alleged aphrodisiacal qualities of ground-up rhino horn are widely propagated in the lay press, but a wide range of other pharmacological attributes are ascribed to this traditional medicine. In South East Asia, rhino horn preparations are prescribed for reducing high fever, and have been for over 2 000 years. The other main use for rhino horn is to fashion dagger handles for men in North Yemen, the country that imports the greatest amount of horn. Because of dwindling world supply, the Black Market price of rhino horn has soared to at least 50 000 USDollars per kilogram, and a poacher will risk his own life to kill a rhino for its horn, for which he can probably obtain just 100 USDollars from an agent!

If you see a Black Rhino with a bleeding lesion behind its shoulder, don't worry. It is not a wound caused by a misdirected shot, but the result of an infection of a filarial worm. The vector has not yet been identified, but is probably one of the various flies that visit the lesion and keep it active by their probing. The rhinos to worry about are those whose blood has flowed from gunshot wounds. Nothing can bring them back.

SOME STATISTICS ON THE BLACK RHINO

At the turn of this century there were probably more than one million Black Rhino throughout Africa.

By 1960 their numbers had dropped to 100 000.

By 1970 there were 64 000.

By 1989 a mere 3 000 still existed.

By 1930 the Black Rhino in South Africa had dwindled to 150 animals in the Hluhluwe and Mkuzi Game Reserves. There are now 600 animals in the country, 360 of which are

held in Natal Parks Board reserves. This means that South Africa, with a mere 650 Black Rhino, holds 20% of the world's Black Rhino population.

In 1960:

- Kenya boasted 20 000 Black Rhino; they are now down to 400, half of which are kept in special security enclosures.
- Zambia had 3 000. Less than 100 survive today.
- Zimbabwe lost 450 Black Rhino after 1984, mainly

through poaching from Zambia.

- SWA/Namibia has 400 Black Rhino. Etosha Nature Park Reserve alone has lost 16 animals this year.

At the present rate of decline there is a very real danger that, by the end of the 20th century, the Black Rhino like the Dodo will be a mere memory in the minds of mankind. It is human demand that is causing the deaths of these animals, and it is only through human awareness and care that they can be retrieved from the brink of extinction.
- Jeff Gaisford, Natal Parks Board.