

# The Rhinoceros has managed to live on planet earth for 23 million years.

Written by John Bassi, as published in the SAFlyer magazine, July 2005

This story is dedicated to the five rhino that were poisoned for their horns up in the Limpopo in May 2005.

The two species of rhino that we are most familiar with are the Black and White, both of which have been around for 4 million years. But, like everything else we have touched, us humans, who can only brag about an existence of a few thousand years, are doing a great job of putting an end to that.

An introduction....

Once common throughout Africa, except in the far southern tip, rhino were almost exterminated during the 17<sup>th</sup> century by European settlers, in fact by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the white rhinoceros was reduced to only one population of 50 to 100 animals.

These remaining rhino were confined to the Hluhluwe-Unfolozi Game Reserve and, through the efforts of visionary individuals who intentionally understated the total population down to around 20 animals, politicians were convinced enough of the urgency and proclaimed the first game reserve in 1897. This makes the Hluhluwe, St Lucia reserves the oldest reserves in Africa.



The Black rhino was not doing much better and had been shot to extinction in the Cape by 1880. By 1930 the total population was down to around 180 animals and the last Black rhino in the Kruger National Park was recorded in 1936. The proclamation and protection of these reserves, coupled with the advances in technology, drugs and capture

techniques has led to both species of rhino being saved from extinction, at the last minute. By 1990 almost 3500 white and 180 Black rhino had been bred and translocated out of the nucleus of rhino from Natal reserves to form new populations both in Southern Africa and abroad.

The name of the white rhinoceros is now entrenched and originates from the name given to them by the early Dutch hunters, witte renoster, or in Afrikaans, witrenoster, a name referring to the wide lip, which was used to distinguish them from the black rhinoceros. These names were used back in 1801, so have been in use now for some 200 years even though both rhino species are the same gray color. The actual coloration of the rhino is determined from the color of the soil on which they live, mud wallowing and dusting. There are many, seriously obvious differences between the two species, differing size, habitat, habits, diet, social structure, behavior and more, but the most obvious character that differentiates them is the size and shape of their lips. The white has a square lip while the black rhino has a hooked lip, both are adaptations for their feeding habits.

And both species of rhino are killed for one simple thing, their horn, composed of a mass of tubular filaments similar in substance to hair. These outgrowths of the skin are attached to the bone of the skull, much the same as a finger nail.

Just before you double-check the cover to make sure you are in fact reading the SA Flyer and not Mammals of Southern Africa, and just before you start wondering where the "flying" is in all of this and what the hell's he on about, please remember that somewhere along our human greed and possession filled life, someone decided that it would be a cool thing to carry a dagger on a belt on reaching manhood. The more intricately carved the more status, and the bigger the man. What was designed by mother nature as a weapon for these magnificent 'bulldozer's on four legs' - a serious defense item attached to your nose - has become a traditional 'ego weapon' in some areas of the World, but hey, I guess those humans need it more. Back a long time ago some impotent, greedy, exploiting, uneducated \*\*\*\* decided that ground rhino horn would be just the thing to get off on and the use of rhino horn as an aphrodisiac caught on. Then again, so did other things catch on, like burning a person at a wooden stake for being outspoken. During many a rhino capture over the years where we have had a need to drill or remove part of a horn for scientific purposes, the predictable comments from the peanut gallery of guests is always some chirp about "hey, you going to share some of that horn dust?" Well, I have and so have all the other people I have worked with, ended up choking with rhino horn powder (which smells like burned hair ), up my nose, down my throat, in my eyes and ears and trust me, all it did was made my sinuses block and that's IT.

Game farming has become a sought after occupation/past time and owning rhino has become possible through the successes of the Natal Reserves conservation efforts. Rhino are valuable, an adult cow has sold for up to R250 000.00 in the past. This value to breeding rhino privately has encouraged people to invest in rhino as assets that breed and grow, positively increasing the rhino population throughout South Africa. It has spread the risk, but it has also reduced security and created questions about the genetic diversity of the population, since rhino all came from one source. With little control over the

buying, selling and movement of rhino from one transaction to another, nothing much has been done to monitor inbreeding. Also, many rhino live in remote places where there is no form of monitoring, patrolling or accountability, where they can live or die and no one would know. This is why it is vitally important to continually monitor, implement ear notching and micro chipping projects, and to produce identikits for each rhino.



Sadly though it's almost impossible to be everywhere all the time and with the increasing growth of squatters bordering onto many reserves, the sheer mass and pressure of humanity is toppling the wall. Poaching is on the increase, the hunger for protein and money, easy targets walking around waiting to get tangled up in a wire snare or drink from a poisoned water hole. There

are wealthy educated people who say openly, "why worry about rhino, what's all the fuss about, rhino don't benefit the people". Yes, well, then let's just all give up and forget about trying to do anything to protect anything.



The point is that the very air we breathe, the water we drink and the soil we get food from, is actually being threatened and destroyed at a greater rate than we are losing rhino, but you can't measure it or see it, it's a sinister event creeping up and one day will just happen to be too late. Rhino along with all other natural things are a bench mark, a measure of how well we are doing to keep the planet alive. Are we going to sit back

and lose the war? I don't think so.

(And just in case you're still wondering where the helicopter is in all this, the answer is simple. Chances are it's out right now, as you read this, trying to make a difference.)