

III.II The discovery of African rhinos

In the middle of the 18th century, it was known that there were rhinos in both Asia and in Africa, and that they had either one or two horns. However, the reports from Africa brought by sailors and traders were too vague for the naturalists in Europe to be convinced that the rhinos in Africa were all smooth-skinned and double-horned. The great French encyclopaedist, the Count of Buffon, could still treat all rhinos in one chapter without any divisions. The Swedish founder of systematics, Carl Linnaeus, listed two species, but the details in the description are confused enough to suggest that his material was inconclusive. He said that “*Rhinoceros bicornis*” was an obscure species, with two horns, from India, although now we believe that he meant the black rhinoceros then known from the Cape of Good Hope.

In 1750-1780, several travellers encountered rhinos in South Africa, and through their examination of dead specimens, their drawings and reports, it slowly became clearer that the African animals differed in many aspects from the heavy-armoured one-horned animals in India. Petrus Camper, a Dutch professor of anatomy, was the first to make the distinction unequivocally in a public dissection of a rhino head received from Africa in 1780.

The English naturalist William John Burchell was exploring the interior of South Africa when he came across some animals that were larger than others, and which had a prominent square upper lip. He shot one of them, took measurements, made drawings and brought the skull home. In 1817, he described the animal as a new species, which he called *Rhinoceros simus*. It has been established that, as least as early as 1838, this animal was called the white rhinoceros, while the smaller rhino with a prehensile lip known to Linnaeus and Camper was called black. Although these colours hardly describe the colour of the skins of these two species, the names stuck. The explanation that “white” is a corruption of an Afrikaans word, first suggested as late as 1931, is linguistically impossible and equally implausible as a host of other theories about the origin of the name.

When European hunters started to penetrate the African hinterland in search of ivory or sport in the course of the 19th century, African rhinos were still very common. It was not unknown to encounter 50 of these animals in the course of one day’s march. With the spread of firearms and increased settlement, it was inevitable that numbers of wildlife dropped in the areas that were opened up for trade and agriculture. Frederick Selous predicted in 1880 that the rhino would disappear within a few years. Such remarks helped to establish a new conservation movement, which successfully attempted to stem the tide in many areas.

The times of old, when rhinos were hiding behind every bush, have passed forever. But it is not too late to protect what is left. An African ecosystem without rhinos is both intolerable and inconceivable.