A study of the survival means of the Black Rhino (Diceros bicornis) in the arid areas Damaraland and Skeleton Coast Park

By B. D. Loutit
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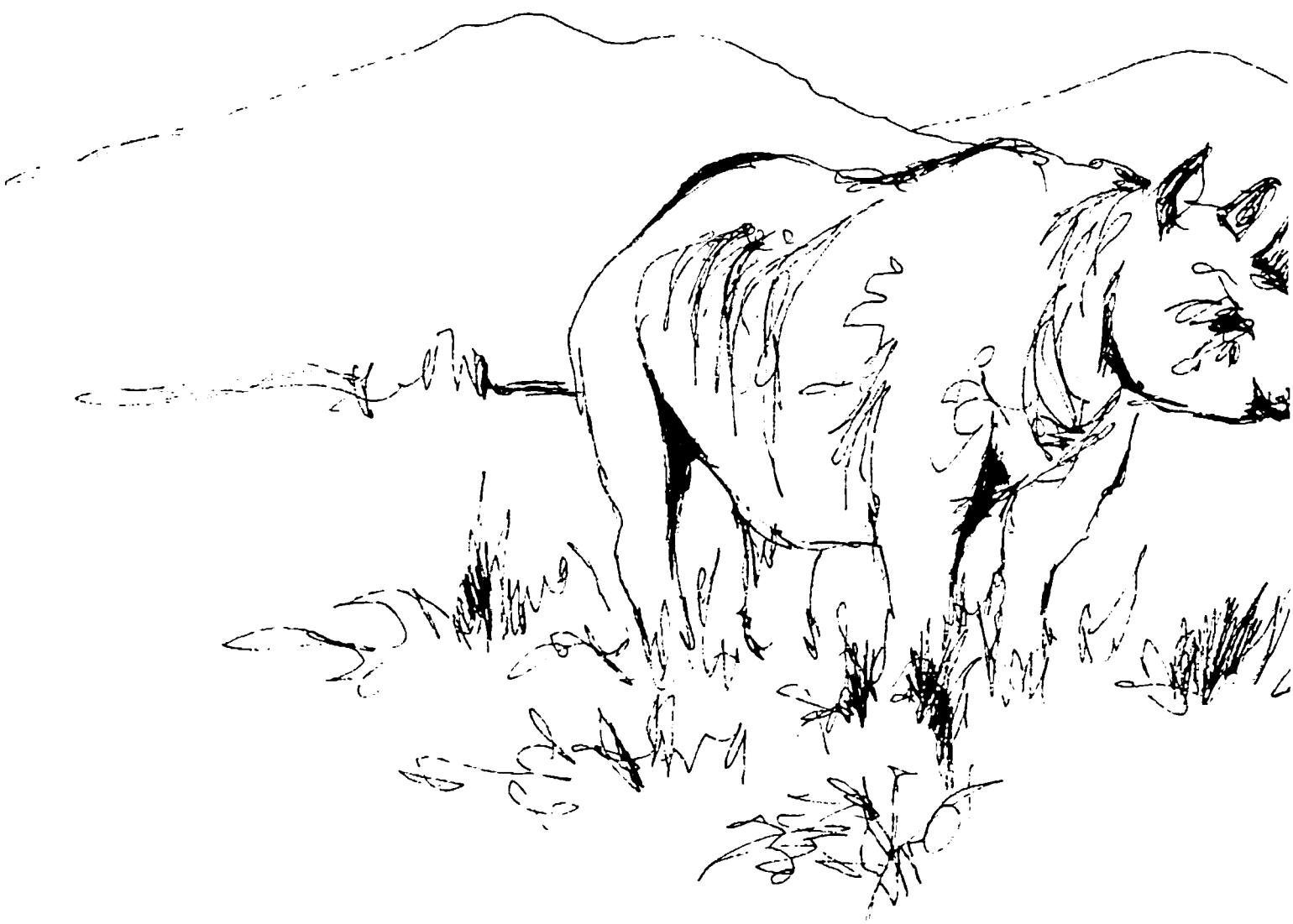
The Ugab river valley is an extremely rugged area consisting of open gravel plains which stretch from the Atlantic Coast inland for 15 km. The terrain then changes to a landscape of jagged biotite schist ridges of folded marble-banded rocks contorted by great pressure. The area in which these rhino survive is dominated by the great mass of the Duares or Brandberg and the dark rocky slopes of the Doros to the south. To the north of the boulder strewn quartz plains stand the towering fortresses of the Mikberg range. A cool wind blows off the Atlantic in the west and the east is bordered by derelict farms abandoned because of the extreme aridness, which made farming of stock or any other type of agriculture impossible. Prospecting for tin is still in progress and a number of small mines operate, but are of little or no consequence to the conservation of the rhino. The prospectors are however, beneficial to the overall protection of the rhino because of their personal concern and interest.

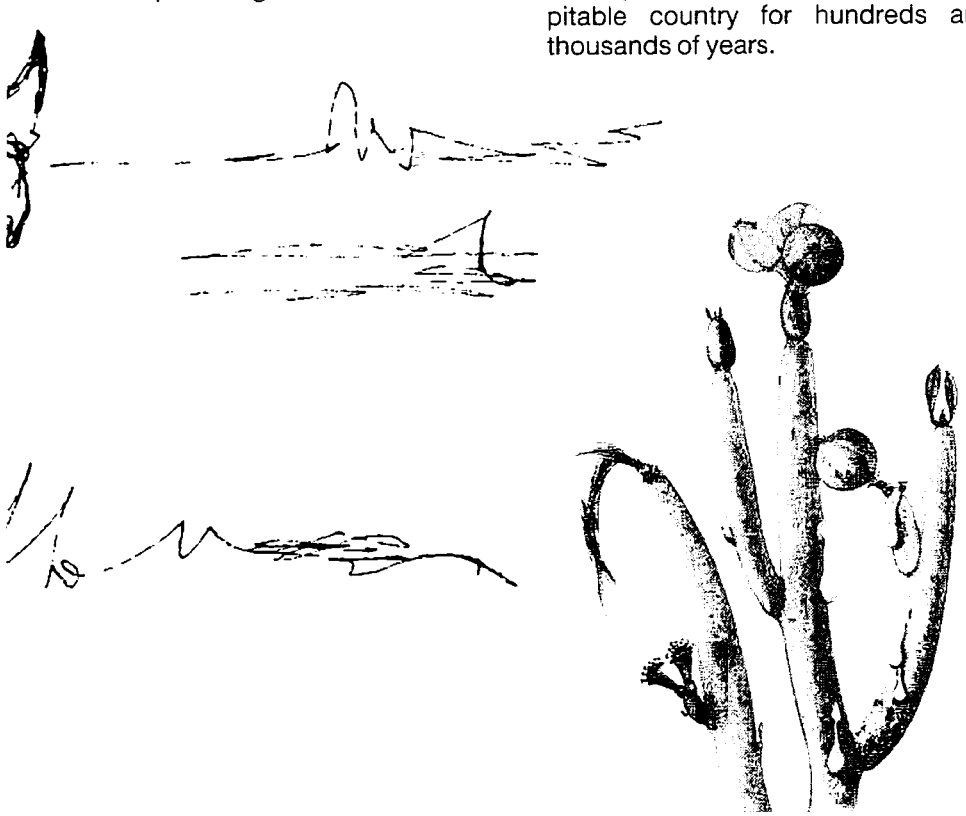


Photograph: Garth Owen-Smith

Since 1978 observations of the movements of the rhino have led to the understanding of established routes used by certain individuals of this discrete population. Their range covers an area of some 3 000 square kilometres. The majority of the routes logged have been outside of farming areas, but while very little movement occurs within occupied farms, the tendency during the driest times, is for those animals on the fringe areas to wander further afield in search of water, thus becoming more vulnerable to poaching.

History

Between 1970 and 1972 a number of black rhino were removed from the upper Ugab and central Ugab valley in Damaraland and transported to Etosha National Park by the Department of Nature Conservation and Tourism, in an effort to better protect them. This left behind a relic population in the western arid country where the terrain was too rugged to allow the capture team to successfully operate. The presence of heavily used rubbing stones is proof enough of the presence of rhino in that inhospitable country for hundreds and thousands of years.



Euphorbia damarana *by Blythe Loutit*

A plant species of importance

An interesting and important plant is the *Euphorbia damarana*. It is western Damaraland's most well known vegetative feature. The strange greenish-grey bushes dot the spectacular landscape of flat table-topped mountains as far as the eye can see. Rhino have been noted feeding on the small, round, yellow fruit, picking them delicately from the ends of the finger-like branches. They have also been seen chewing the succulent tips of the branches, to extract the milky latex then leaving the chewed portion dangling like pony tails from the bush. During very dry periods which may last for years, the *Euphorbia damarana* provides an important source of moisture when waterholes are few and far between.

The elephant and rhino which survive to the north of the veterinary fence, where they endure much rockier country and have been feeding on the rocky slopes of the mountains, are known to rest their sore feet by trampling down large bushes to rest and sleep on the soft mattress which they provide.

Some of the bushes are so large that they are frequently utilised by the rhino for the shade they provide.

Euphorbia damarana Leach was, as recently as 1975 described as a new species by L.C. Leach, who noted certain characteristics which undoubtedly separated this Euphorbia from *Euphorbia gummifera* and *Euphorbia gregaria*, more than 300 kms to the south. A fourth very similar species is known from southern Angola.

References
Court, Doreen (1981). *Succulent Flora of southern Africa.* Bothalia, (1975). Volume 11, No 4. L.C. Leach.