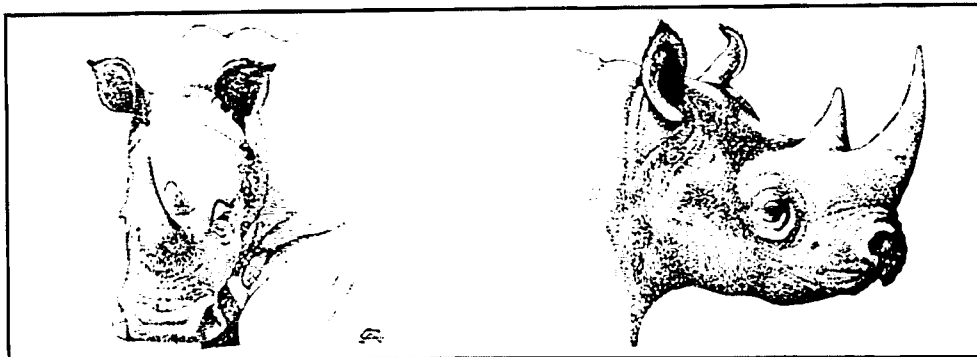


Rhinoceros in the Orange Free State

C.D. Lynch



Head of the White rhinoceros (left), showing the square-shaped lips, and of the Black rhinoceros (right) showing the prehensile hooked lip

Illustration: Sanner & Smithers, 1960

Definite accounts of White rhino, *Ceratotherium simum*, occurring in the Orange Free State during historical times appear to be lacking. Bigalke (1963) doubts whether the species ever occurred in the province, a viewpoint also held by Du Plessis (1969) (cf. his map on past distribution).

Bryden (1899), on the other hand, although uncertain as to whether the first pioneers encountered White rhino in the OFS, thought that they did, since similar grassy plains existed south of the Vaal River as in the southern Transvaal, where the species did occur. Vaughan-Kirby (1920) also says that there is no contrary evidence that the species did not occur south of the Vaal River.

Whatever your views of the above might be, circumstantial evidence indicates that the White rhino at

least occurred prehistorically in the OFS. Material evidence of White rhino excavated at Florisbad indicates that the species probably inhabited the central OFS approximately 100 000 years ago (Brink 1987). While bone and tooth fragments of White rhino from historical times are still lacking, it is probably true to say that on ecological grounds there is no reason to doubt that the species roamed the grasslands of the OFS.

The lack of documented reports on the White rhino's occurrence in the OFS during historical times, however, precludes any estimate of when it became extinct here. According to various references in Du Plessis (1969), the species became extinct during the mid to late 1800's in the Transvaal and at the turn of the 19th century in the Cape Province. It only just sur-

vived in Zululand and, fortunately, through concerted conservation efforts, has since increased to such an extent that thousands have been relocated within and outside of South Africa.

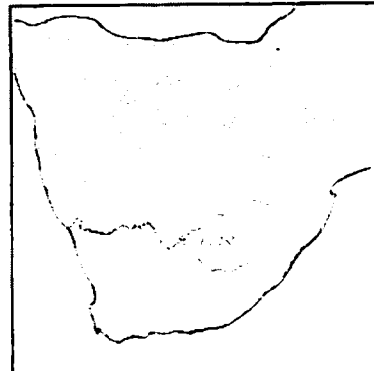
But what about Black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) in the OFS? Earlier records, in many instances, do not distinguish between the Black rhino and White rhino. Therefore such references cannot be assessed accurately. The prehensile upper lip of the Black rhino, indicating its adaptation as a browser, in comparison to the broad lip of the White rhino, which is a grazer, is probably the most noticeable distinguishing characteristic. Hence the alternative colloquial names of Hook-lipped rhino and Square-lipped rhino.

In view of the Black rhino generally inhabiting well-developed wood-



Past distribution of the White rhinoceros

(after Du Plessis 1969)



Past distribution of the Black rhinoceros

(after Du Plessis 1969)

land or scrub-covered veld, it is perhaps not surprising that Du Plessis (1969) could find no 'on the spot' records of its presence in the OFS in any of the works of travellers who visited the area. However, there are unsubstantiated references to the species' occurrence in the OFS. Sclater (1990) writes that the last recorded Black rhino was killed in 1842 at Rhenoster Kop, just south of the Vaal River in the Kroonstad district. Lydekker (1926) also states that the species occurred in the province, but says that it was exterminated by about 1853. Skead (1987) appears to be very

sceptical about all these reports, which have subsequently also been quoted by other authors, and fully discusses his reasons for being so.

Any further doubts of the Black rhino's occurrence in the OFS can, however, be allayed by the two skulls in the collection of the National Museum, both of which appear to be of animals which lived during historical times. One was found in the Vals River on the farm Letitia in the Kroonstad district (2727Cd) and the other on the farm Telegraafstontein in the Fauresmith district (2925Ac).

Considering the findings of Du Plessis (1969) this is perhaps not too unusual, as Black rhino could have found suitable browse in parts of the OFS, especially along the numerous water courses and rivers, where particularly acacia trees and shrubs were plentiful. According to references in Skinner & Smithers (1990), Black rhino became extinct by about 1880 in the Cape Province and in 1936 in the Transvaal. Fortunately small numbers survived in Zululand and these have since, as with the White rhino, increased considerably.



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