
A Crash of Rhinos

By Steve Shurter

*"The rhino is a homely beast
For human eyes he's not a feast.
Farewell, farewell you old rhinoceros
I'll stare at something less preproceros."*

Ogden Nash's observations surely echo the historic feelings for the rhinoceros. Aside from game wardens and a few zoo people, man's view of the rhino has, at best, been recreational or utilitarian in nature. Of the 170 odd species of rhinoceros that have roamed this planet at one time, only 5 now remain. Though not a wise investment species from an historical point of view, the recent unchecked human assault on the remaining rhinos has set off frantic alarm bells in all walks of conservation work. If we cannot save the rhino, what can we save?

Ancient cave wall illustrations attest to man's aged interest and relationship with the rhino. The first known documentations of captive rhinos were of Asian origin, captured for the Roman Emperor Augustus in 11 BC. However, Asian cultures have been utilizing rhino horn and other parts for thousands of years, as seen in artifacts from those periods.

Baluchitherium, an extinct rhino which lived in Central Asia in the Miocene period, is thought to be one of the largest land mammals to ever exist on Earth, standing at 30 feet tall and weighing 25 tons. Though not nearly comparable in size, its little cousin, the white rhino, at merely 3 tons and 5 to 6 feet tall, is the largest member of the rhino family of today. Once found from Central to Southern Africa, the white rhino nearly became extinct due to hunting in the early to mid 1900s. Through an extremely diligent and intensive effort by the South African Parks Board called "Operation Rhino" the southern white rhino was saved and now numbers over 6,000 individuals.

As a result, the first white rhinos, including our breeding male, Phil, were placed in captivity to enhance captive bloodlines and to insure that a breeding population existed outside South Africa.

Early captive rhino management found rhinos quite easy to keep alive and healthy, but it is another matter to breed them. Socially, the existing five rhino species are quite different according to the habitats and regions of the world in which they have evolved. So too at White Oak, alterations in the social groupings were made before successful breeding occurred. Now with the continuing contributions of our two matriarchs, Edith and Gloria, we have had four calves born here.

The southern white rhino inhabits open grasslands or veldts and is a strict grazing species, hence the wide mouth and long, lowered head. The white rhino's "family group" social structure may have evolved for protection reasons due to the lack of cover on the grasslands. We have recently relocated our white rhinos to their new home by Duck Island. This much larger enclosure provides our growing herd with acres of grass to enhance their diet and ample room for the expression of their natural behaviors.

The favored space the white rhinos held in front of the Old Lodge was a difficult void to fill. However, we hope the additions of Clem and Mwenda will be found equally as endearing. Though they are normally the color of the mud they rolled in during their morning "bath," Clem and Mwenda are black rhinos from Zimbabwe in southern Africa.

Through a cooperative effort between White Oak, the International Rhino Foundation (IRF), and the Parks Department of Zimbabwe, rhinos have been relocated from unprotected, danger areas in Zimbabwe to breeding facilities in the U.S. and Australia. Zimbabwe contains some of the most perfect black rhino habitat in all of Africa, and until recently, has been home to literally thousands of rhinos. The massive demand for rhino horn in Asia and the Middle East found its way to the African continent and caught Zimbabwe's rhinos unaware. Poachers decimated nearly the entire population before the Parks Department and agencies like the IRF could help organize to find, save, and protect the remaining black rhino. As part of these protection measures, Zimbabwe sent 30 rhinos to contributing institutions of the IRF to create a living population outside the country as a hedge against the possible loss of their own animals. And so Clem, Mwenda, Tortoise, Thombi, and Ngwete have come to White Oak.

Black rhinos may be the most adaptive rhino species found. They live anywhere from mountain forests to dry, almost desert bush-veldt. Their diet consists of many different plant species of which they eat the leaves, branches, and sometimes the roots. Because of this preference, they are almost always found in areas with tree and bush cover. They also tend to be solitary in nature, making the task of a captive introduction of two large, strong, and sometimes ornery beasts, complete with formidable weapons, somewhat tricky.

Mwenda was our first female black rhino to arrive at White Oak in 1992. After a successful introduction to Clem, she gave birth to a much anticipated calf, Tim, in March 1996. With the addition of the two females, Ngwete and Thombi, who came by way of Texas to live with Tortoise, our collection is now at seven animals and growing quickly.

In looking at the success story of the white rhino, we know that positive results in rhino conservation can be achieved through a concerted, cooperative effort. Alternatively, if neglected, the remaining endangered species like the black rhino may pass the point of no return.

The "crash of rhinos" at White Oak has and will continue to contribute in immeasurable ways as progenitors for the next generation of captive rhinos by fostering positive images on visitors impressed with their unique personalities and vitality, as inspirations for imaginative creations like "Phil's Dream" and Baryshnikov's "Dances for Rhinos" and for conservation efforts such as the IRF. The rhinos of White Oak are truly ambassadors for their kind and living testaments to the plight of their species.