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THE BLACK RHINOCEROS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Few other animals have, throughout their history, been associated with so much myth, superstition, zoological ignorance and confusion as the rhinoceros. They have suffered ruthless persecution and senseless depletion while being exposed to extremes of human greed and complete disregard of the value inherent in creatures which were present long before the emergence of man. In fact, few people know, and less care, that the rhinoceros is the **last survivor** of a very diverse family of animals that once walked the earth. When man emerged during the Ice Age, of all these creatures only four different rhino clans had survived the millions of years. Once distributed over large parts of Eurasia in various species, including the woolly rhino that was contemporary with the mammoth, the rhino family is now reduced to three species restricted to a few small isolated areas of Southern Asia, and two species occurring in various parts of Africa.

The black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*) is the only member of the family which is still fairly abundant over large parts of Africa.



Past and present distribution of the black rhinoceros in the Republic of South Africa.

However, it is as incompatible as all the other species with expanding cultivation and agricultural development taking place all over the African continent. Various field studies have shown the sensitivity of this species to human disturbance and poaching; and combined with late sexual maturity, a long gestation period and single calves born once every three years, the increase of a rhino population is dependent on the longevity of the females. These facts explain why the black rhinoceros can, and has been eliminated from large areas of its former range. Briefly, it has disappeared in all the West African countries, in Cameroon

and Chad it has been drastically reduced; the species is rare in Ethiopia and might have been exterminated in Somalia. In most other countries, apart from its strongholds in Tanzania and Kenya, the black rhinoceros is almost entirely restricted to game reserves and national parks where its survival is dependent on the protection afforded. However, in the long term, the success of such protection is dependent on the correct management of the habitat and of the game populations.

In the Republic of South Africa the black rhinoceros was formerly wide spread, the earliest reference to this species is from the diary of van Riebeeck written in 1652, who reported their occurrence on the slopes of Table mountain. The presence of rhinos, as well as of other indigenous animals was incompatible with European settlement, resulting in their systematic extermination through hunting and the destruction of the natural habitat. The last black rhinoceros was shot in 1842 in the Orange Free State (Kroonstad district) and 1853 in the Cape Province (Port Elizabeth area). At the end of the 19th century they were only to be found in the Lydenburg district of the Transvaal. The last record of their occurrence in the Transvaal was made in 1936 when an old female was

seen in the Kruger National Park. In Natal and Zululand the species was gradually exterminated, as were other animals, until 1890 when both species of rhinoceros, with other game animals, were declared Royal Game. The special permission of the Governor or the Resident Commissioner was necessary before Royal Game could be shot. In 1895 a proclamation gave the rhinoceros absolute protection. However, in 1897 another proclamation repealed and re-enacted that of 1895 in which the black rhinoceros was placed under a separate schedule and a licence requiring the payment of R20 for each animal was demanded, not more than two being allowed to any one applicant. During 1897 the Hluhluwe and Umfolozi game reserves were proclaimed, thus affording absolute protection to the rhinoceros species in these two areas.

A small population of black rhinoceros was also to be found on the Makatini flats in Tongaland. This population was given complete protection in 1912 by the proclamation of the Mkuzi game reserve. For several years, prior to 1912, the area had enjoyed the unofficial protection of the then resident Magistrate at Ubombo.



The Act of copulation is prolonged and after sixteen months a single calf is born.

Photograph: P. Hitchins



The Black Rhinoceros spends much of the heat of the day in dense shade or immersed in muddy pools or muddy wallows.

Photo: P. Hitchins

The following table illustrates the distribution and numbers of black rhinoceros occurring in the Republic of South Africa.

Area	Number
Zululand	
(i) Game reserves:	
Hluhluwe	192
Umfolozi	56
Mkuzi	51
Ndumu	26*1
(ii) Outside Game reserve	
'The Corridor', unallocated state land between Hluhluwe and Umfolozi game reserves.	65
Makathini flats, north of Mkuzi game reserve ..	approx. 10
Sub Total ...	400
Natal	
iTala Nature Reserve	2*2
Cape Province	
Addo Elephant National Park ..	7*3
Transvaal	
Kruger National Park	30*4
Total Population	439

Note:

- *1. 15 animals introduced between 1962 and 1970 from Hluhluwe/Corridor/Umfolozi complex and Mkuzi game reserve.
- *2. 2 animals introduced in 1973 from the Makathini flats.
- *3. 7 animals introduced in 1962 from Kenya.
- *4. 20 animals introduced from Hluhluwe game reserve in 1971 and 10 animals introduced in 1972 from Rhodesia.

The present distribution of the black rhinoceros is thus a poor reflection of the

past. The position of the rhino population in Zululand is not at all clear, as the future of Umfolozi game reserve was threatened with deproclamation in 1972; in 1973 the press disclosed that the Department of Water Affairs was considering the construction of three dams which would inundate some 24% of the reserve. The future of the unallocated state land, known as the 'Corridor', between Umfolozi and Hluhluwe game reserves has also not been decided upon. Mkuzi game reserve has also been threatened with deproclamation so that the area can be used for agricultural purposes with water to be supplied for irrigation from the J. G. Strydom dam on the Pongolo river. Ndumu game reserve has recently been incorporated within KwaZulu Territorial Authority, and, as yet, the future of the reserve has not been resolved.

Assuming that the future of the Zululand game reserves is secure, what is the position with regard to the black rhinoceros populations which are now in the vicinity of optimum numbers? In order to relieve this population density and to ensure the survival of the species in as many **different** protected areas within their former range, a programme of translocation would have to be embarked upon. The Natal Parks, Game and Fish Preservation Board have already taken this into account by reintroducing twenty black rhinoceroses to the Kruger National Park and two to the iTala Nature Reserve (can probably only support a total population of thirty animals). With the present demands for land for agricultural purposes and settlement it seems that no more land will be set aside with suitable habitats for the black rhinoceros, with the exception of the area that was recommended as a conservation area by the St. Lucia Commission of Inquiry to the South African Government in 1966. Thus, in view of the current situation regarding the black rhinoceros population levels and the lack of forthcoming conservation areas with suitable black rhinoceros habitats, the most logical step would be to continue the restocking programme of this species into the Kruger National Park, and, at the same time make **conservative effort on a national basis** for the acquisition of suitable land for future restocking.