

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Rookmaaker, L. C.** 2008. ENCOUNTERS WITH THE AFRICAN RHINOCEROS. A CHRONOLOGICAL SURVEY OF BIBLIOGRAPHICAL AND ICONOGRAPHICAL SOURCES ON RHINOCEROSES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA FROM 1795 TO 1875: RECONSTRUCTING VIEWS ON CLASSIFICATION AND CHANGES IN DISTRIBUTION. Schöningh Verlag, Münster, Germany, 148 pp. ISBN 978-3-86523-091-1, price (paper), €59.00.

This work, as stated on the inside of the title page, was 1st published last year in an online-only edition of the *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa*. You can download it for free, if you are so minded, but getting this beautifully produced print copy is well worth it not only for the convenience but for the sheer pleasure of the appearance of the fine illustrations, many of them in color (and 1 of them reproduced on the cover). The author, who founded and directs the Rhino Resource Centre (under the auspices of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources), is an internationally regarded expert on rhinos, taking a special interest in the history of knowledge of these remarkable and critically endangered animals. Reading this book, you will get some inkling of how rhinos, in southern Africa at least, were initially placed on the path to their present perilous conservation status.

Rookmaaker has tracked down all the important early written sources on rhinos in southern Africa up to 1875—47 in all. He records how early European travellers 1st met with rhinos in the Cape, exterminated them there, and gradually moved northward in Africa, exterminating rhinos as they went. From a 21st-century perspective, it is a dismal tale of slaughter: one gets the impression that most of these travellers did not shoot 1 or 2 rhinos, and examine them for their scientific interest, but killed every one that they happened to meet and left them

where they lay—and afterward, wrote about how brave they had been. Considering the large number of animals that were killed, the number of specimens that actually ended up in museums (in modern terms, were collected) is pathetic: 47 specimens of the black rhino, and 53 of the white rhino, according to tables 44 and 45 of this book. Moreover, almost all of these specimens—skeletal material, anyway—were collected by just 4 hunters: Burchell, Smith, Wahlberg, and Selous. A few of the rest provided a horn or 2 if we are lucky.

Nor were they particularly good observers. Rookmaaker recounts how many hunters were convinced of the existence of at least 4 different species, based mainly on the shape and relative length of the horns. It was, as the author records, Selous who eventually sorted it all out, and distinguished the 2 genuine species, the black and the white rhinos.

What we do have from the early explorers is a record of the former distribution in southern Africa of the 2 species of African rhino. Rookmaaker goes carefully over the records and locates them as far as possible, and maps them with his own commentary. This is an especially worthwhile aspect of the book—but the whole book is an extremely valuable bringing together of original sources with commentary and insightful analysis. It is also an interesting piece of historical research, documenting the attitudes of our forebears toward the natural world—that it was theirs for the taking. Quite justifiably, we are appalled at the slaughter of rhinos today for financial gain, but let us remember who began that ignoble tradition, and why they did it – not even for financial gain, but, essentially, for no reason at all.—COLIN P. GROVES, *School of Archaeology and Anthropology, Australian National University, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory 0200, Australia;* [colin.groves@anu.edu.au](mailto:colin.groves@anu.edu.au).