





Twelve years ago,

almost to the month, I was erecting tents in the shade of a grove of ntombothi trees Spirostachys africana in the heart of what was then the Umtolozi Game Reserve. This encampment was to be home for my wife, Sharna, and me for the next year, a time during which I was to get to know rhinos both white and black - intimately. Walking in the wilderness, alone except for the wildlife I encountered, I learned at first hand the ways of these animals for which I quickly developed a great liking. My days would begin at first light or earlier, when I'd set off with a small backpack and a few essentials for wandering the hills and valleys of the reserve - my cameras, a small beanbag and a white pillowcase.

White pillowcase? I soon learned a few things about black rhinos: when they hear vou, they will come charging, huffing and puffing like a steam train, intent upon doing you grievous bodily harm; if there is no tree nearby into which to climb, you're in trouble; and they're pretty dumb, and shortsighted to boot.

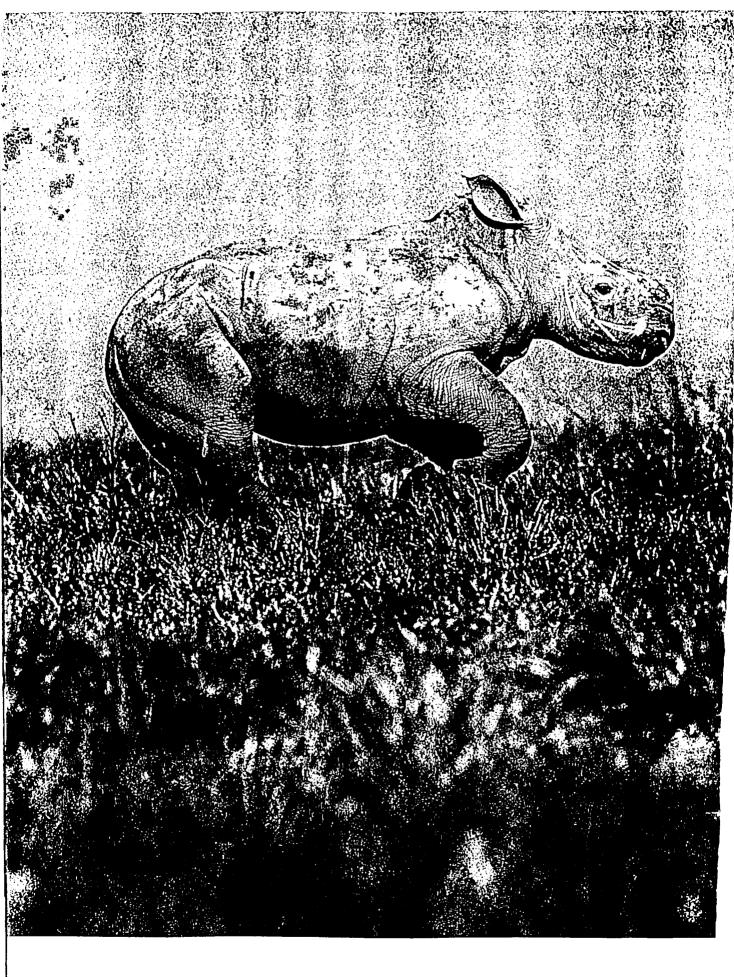
Soon after setting off each morning, I'd pick up a stone big enough to weight the pillowcase, but small enough not to be a burden. I'd slip it inside the pillowcase which I then rolled into a ball. With this in one hand, I'd carry a beanbag in the other, one camera slung over my shoulders and another in a pouch strapped around my waist. In the backpack would be a small waterbottle, spare film and camera batteries, a bag of raisins and peanuts, and a basic first-aid kit.

Once I had entered an area in which I expected to find black rhinos, I'd set my track according to the location of climbable trees. Marulas Sclerocarya birrea make good climbing trees, while thorny acacias do not. But often there was no choice. Sometimes there were no trees at all, only those small, scrubby thorn bushes beloved as browse by the irascible black rhino. Good place to find rhinos, bad place to be alone on foot!

One morning I was picking my way cautiously through a scrubby but otherwise open valley bottom in the heart of the Corridor linking the Umfolozi and Hluhluwe game reserves. I knew there were two black rhinos in the area as I'd spotted them from the hillside as they fed contentedly on freshly sprouted acacia shoots. By the time I got down to their level they were nowhere to be seen. From experience, I knew they'd probably settled down for a nap in the long grass. Napping rhinos fall into two categories: they are either highly alert light sleepers. >

OPPOSITE AND BELOW While the black rhino may at times appear to have a certain myopic 'cuteness', it is renowned for its irascibility and unpredictable behaviour.







ready to leap to their feet in full-attack mode at the snap of a twig, or they are so out of it you could drive a Centurion tank past them without disturbing their slumbers.

Carefully I made my way towards where I thought I'd be able to see where they were sleeping. The air was still, the sun beat down as it can only in the valleys of Zululand, and a vellow-billed kite soared overhead, watching with nonchalant interest. A puff of wind eddied up the valley. Suddenly the grass erupted about 20 metres to my left. These were the full-attack-mode rhinos! No sooner had that registered in my mind than they were coming straight at me in steam-train fashion: mommy in front, 'teenage' junior (probably two to three years old) at her shoulder. There were no trees nearby, no cover anywhere, and no Centurion tanks. Bravely, motionlessly, I stood my ground. At the very last moment, as the two rhinos bore down, I flung the white pillowcase across their path. It fluttered defiantly, then snagged on a small acacia, hanging in full view. I dropped flat at the same time...

'Ah-ha, there it is,' the rhinos must have thought, for they swerved and smashed powerfully into, over, through the offending pillowcase. Junior took a passing swipe with his horn as he thundered by, still close on mother's heels, then the two fearsome but almost blind beasts continued victoriously across the veld, huffing and puffing with their tails curled tightly over their rumps.

After a while, once I'd stopped shaking, I retrieved the pillowcase, barely the worse for wear and ready to fight another day. A grin wreathed my face, adrenalin levels settling. Love those animals...

Anyone who has spent time with rhinos, particularly on foot, will have developed a certain fondness for them. And, if they're an adrenalin junkie, doubtless they'll admit to a preference for the black rhino. Its irascibility and unpredictability (or rather, predictability, for 99 times out of a hundred you know it'll attack), allied to a myopic curiosity and vulnerable cuteness, make the black rhino one of the more endearing big game species. The white rhino, on the other hand, comes across as a timid, slow-witted, lumbering idiot.

Former Natal Parks Board ranger Tom Yule, with whom I shared many rhino stalks, used to refer to the white rhino as the 'blockhead' of the bush, because of both its apparent lack of intelligence and the shape of the cranium. Yet, in southern Africa at least, more accidents involving humans and rhinos seem to happen around these supposedly more >

An exuberant white rhino calf gambols through the veld in KwaZulu-Natal.

BOTTOM 'I carried on taking photographs as the rhino approached, my apprehension rising as I found the need to zoom out to a wider and wider angle. The termite mound offered scant protection from a beast of this size."

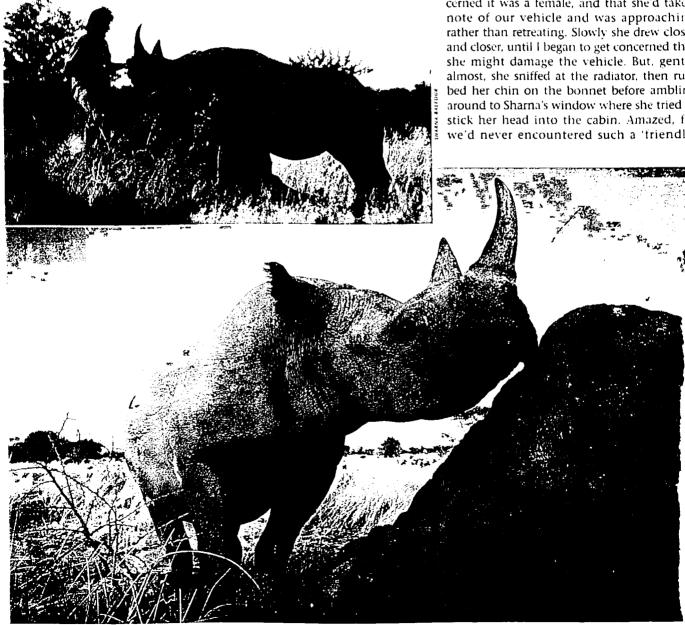
BELOW 'Wondering desperately where my wife was with the vehicle, I put out my hand and tried to fend off the inquisitive black rhino."

docile blockheads than with their more aggressive black cousins. I would guess this is primarily as a result of lack of caution and respect. They are, after all, big wild animals between two and three tonnes in weight and with a sharp pointy bit at the business end. As such, they should be accorded due respect.

The timidity of rhinos would be amusing if it were not so sad, considering their demise at the hands of poachers. One day, while shooting a television documentary. I was asked to crawl close to where a large white rhino cow lay sleeping in the open veld. She slumbered on, blissfully unaware as I inched ever closer. I was probably less than four or five metres away when she suddenly awoke, scrabbled to her feet and rounded on me. I scrambled upright on to my knees and, as she lowered her head to charge, I clapped my hands and velled for all I was worth.

The result was almost embarrassing. The disoriented rhino got such a fright that she swerved and lost her footing, falling flat on her side before again struggling to her feet and making off at full speed. We all laughed afterwards, particularly as the cameraman had got such a fright that he missed the shot, but I realised too that the outcome could have been far more serious, both for myself and for the rhino.

On another occasion Sharna and I were in the remote western part of Namibia's Etosha National Park when we spotted a black rhino walking through the bush. While it is common to see black rhino by night at the floodlit waterholes in Etosha, daylight sightings are more rare, so we were keen to photograph this one. After watching it for a while we discerned it was a female, and that she'd taken note of our vehicle and was approaching rather than retreating. Slowly she drew closer and closer, until I began to get concerned that she might damage the vehicle. But, gently almost, she sniffed at the radiator, then rubbed her chin on the bonnet before ambling around to Sharna's window where she tried to stick her head into the cabin. Amazed, for we'd never encountered such a 'friendly'



black thing in the wild before, I carefully slipped out of the vehicle and took a few shots of this encounter before the rhino turned and ambled off into the bush.

Emboldened by the apparent 'couldn't care less about you' attitude of the rhino, but still fully aware of the potential for aggression. Lasked Sharna to slip behind the wheel of the vehicle and be ready to intervene should anything go awry.

'I'm going to circle around ahead of her and try to get better light for some more shots.' I told her, 'If she makes any move in my direction you're to drive between us so I can escape.'

I moved off and got into position behind a small termite mound, from where I was able to photograph the rhino as she moved slowly towards me. Eventually she must have become aware of the sounds of the camera, for her curiosity was aroused and she began walking determinedly in my direction. I clicked off a few more shots, and then relaxed a bit as I heard the 4x4 starting up. Time seemed to stand still. The rhino got closer. I took some more shots, she looked straight at me, I took another shot and climbed a little higher on the termite mound. Clapping my hands did not seem like a good idea - black rhinos charge at

noises. I reminded myself. Where's the car? ... must be coming, should be here...

The rhino was now on the opposite side of my termite mound, head outstretched towards me, snuffling noises coming from her snout. She advanced, so I put my hand out, flat on to her nose and gave a little shove. 'Go away!' I muttered under my breath. The rhino shoved back, liking this game. I ventured a look over to where the car should be. There it was. And there was my dear wife, concentration on her face, camera to her eve, clicking away unconcernedly!

'I could see it was friendly. There was no sign of aggression or danger,' she explained later. 'What an amazing rhino, why were you looking so scared?'

We subsequently discovered that this rhino had been returned to the wild after having spent most of its early years in human company, raised as an orphan by the park's former veterinarian and his wife. Some time later she was adjudged fully re-integrated into the wild when she produced her first calf.

On another occasion, when attempting to photograph black rhinos coming to drink at a waterhole at night, I experienced again how timid they can sometimes be. I was out on foot in the open near a remote waterhole in Etosha, the only light being that of a full >

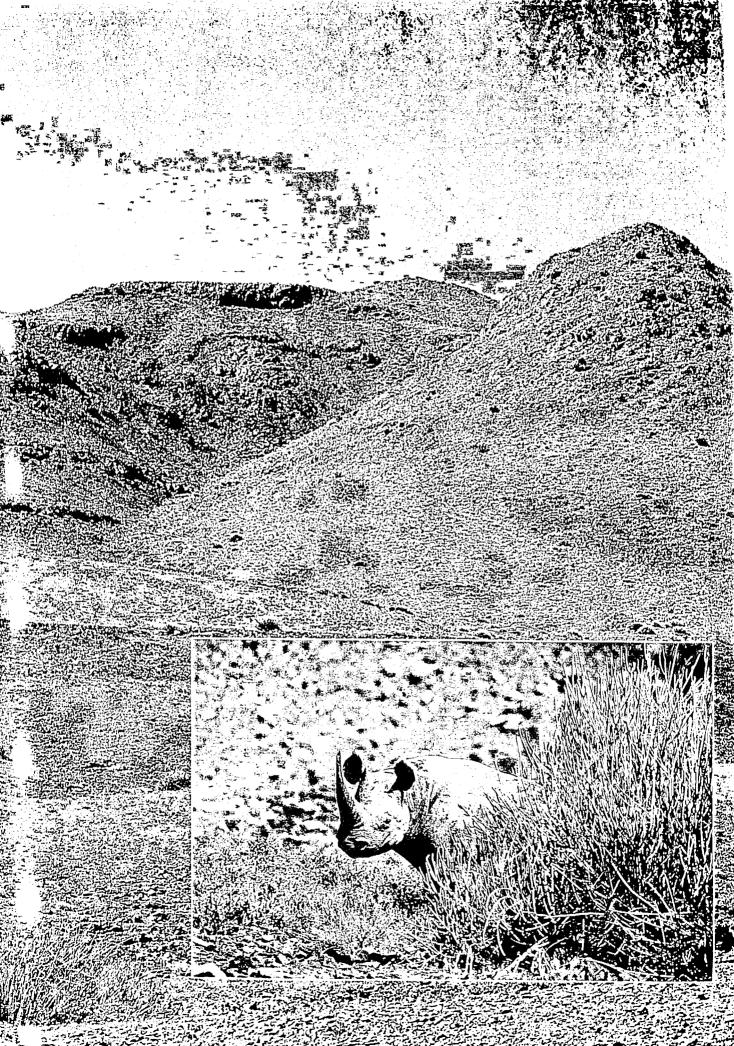
BELOW Tails curled tightly over their rumps, white rhinos browse in their KwaZulu-Natal sanctuary.

OVERLEAF The desert-dwelling black rhino of Namibia have adapted to life in this harsh and unforgiving environment. travelling long distances to water only once or twice a week.

OVERLEAF, INSET The desert black rhino appears to be far more alert than other rhino; this bull, fast asleep at the time, heard my approach from more than 50 metres.









East African black rhino, such as this one photographed in the Ngorongoro Crater in Tanzania, tend to have longer and thinner horns than their southern counterparts, possibly as a result of dietary differences.

moon overhead, when I noticed a rhino making its way towards the water. Rigged out with a motor-driven camera and two flash units, I carefully moved towards the nervous animal, trying not to stumble over rocks and alert it to my presence. I needed to get within 15 metres - the range of the flashes with the slow-speed film I was using - and was also fully aware that there was no cover anywhere should the rhino decide to get aggressive. As it happened. I dislodged a stone and the rhino swung towards me with a snort. I froze. then slowly lowered myself to the ground. The rhino was by now marching very determinedly in my direction so I looked around for somewhere to hide.

Nearby was a hole, less than a metre deep and about the same across. As the rhino continued its approach. I scuttled over and dropped into the hole. There was nowhere for me to go, so I resigned myself to the situation and resolved to concentrate on getting a few shots as the animal lumbered towards me.

I took the photographs, noticing the rhino flinch slightly every time the camera fired and the flashes were triggered. Soon it was too close for comfort, and coming closer. Black rhinos are not as big as their white cousins, weighing only about one tonne, but when your head is down at ground level and the animal is looming ever closer, they look huge. I knew I could not make a run for it, and I didn't have my white pillowcase. Then I remembered previous experiences with rhinos in Umfolozi, when they'd also jumped

at the sound of the camera, but only become truly alarmed when I used the motor drive. The rhino was now probably less than two metres from me, head and horn down at my eye level and looking mean and agitated. I quickly slid the switch on the camera across to the motor-drive function and noisily fired off a burst of six or seven frames. The rhino jumped back as though shocked, spun around on the spot and took off across the rocky terrain at full speed.

Over the years thinos and their pachyderm relatives the elephants have become firm favourites and, given the choice, I'd prefer to spend time in their company ahead of any other animal. While the rhino may not be cuddly and charismatic, nor does it display social behaviour recognisable as 'human-like', the combination of timid vulnerability and overt, pretentious aggression gives it a decided 'cuteness' in my eyes. Perhaps another aspect that makes both rhino and elephant more enjoyable photographic subjects in my opinion is that both are better studied and photographed on foot.

Namibia's Kaokoland and Damaraland regions are a favourite area of mine for photographing both the big pachyderms, parily because the harsh setting makes for wonderful photography, but also because the terrain is best covered on foot. Neither walking nor stalking is easy, for often there is little cover and even less in the way of refuge should an animal get belligerent. Fortunately the environment here is of equal importance and the best photographs do not require a very

close approach, for I prefer to show these 'desert-dwelling' rhino and elephant within their habitat.

Another favourite place for rhinos – perhaps I should say the favourite place – is Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater. As one of the natural wonders of the world it can become extremely busy and over-run with tourists in high season, but it is still one of Africa's most spectacular game-viewing destinations. Many of the animals are resident all year round, including a number of black rhinos that are among the most accessible in Africa. In all my visits to Ngorongoro, I have never failed to have good sightings of these animals. There are few settings that can compare in beauty with the Crater, for the backdrop of the near-vertical, 600-metre-high forested walls creates

an atmosphere without compare. Unfortunately today there is little chance of seeing black rhinos in the wild in other parts of Tanzania, for those that have been reintroduced to the Serengeti are located in an area where there are few tracks and no offroad driving is allowed.

When choosing an area for our study of rhinos 12 years ago, we'd selected Umfolozi because it was, we believed, the spiritual home of rhino conservation. It was here that efforts to save these ungainly beasts from extinction had had their beginnings a century before, and here they would probably come to an end one day. Today, we see little reason to change that perception.

South Africa, and specifically the former Natal Parks Board (subsequently KwaZulu- >

The myth of the horn

The demise of the rhinoceros in both Africa and Asia resulted from a huge surge in commercial poaching that began in the early 1970s and continued through the '80s and '90s. Ironically, the reason for the assault on the species is to obtain the horn, the animal's means of protection.

This keratinous mass of hair-like fibres is not an aphrodisiac. It never was and never will be. This is a common misconception whose origin is difficult to trace. The Chinese (and other Orientals) have always used powdered rhino horn only as a fever-reducing drug – and, apparently, with some scientific justification, as recent studies have shown. The use of rhino horn as a curative drug is centuries old, and probably led to the gradual demise of eastern rhino populations. The rarest rhino of them all, the Javan rhino *Rhinoceros sondaicus* numbers a mere 50 today, and the Sumatran *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis* is estimated at 300–400. (In the 19th century they were considered garden pests!)

The recent boom in Middle and Far Eastern economies was probably the major cause of the sudden increase in commercial poaching. Sought-after commodities like rhino horn were no longer the privilege of the wealthy, but were available to the newly affluent. In Oman and Yemen, arguably two of the biggest consumers of African rhino horn, every adult man now carries a traditional dagger (djambiyya), and if it has a rhino horn handle it is the ultimate status symbol among the newly rich. Rhino horn is so highly regarded because it polishes to a sheen and patina like translucent amber.

Fortunately, demand for rhino horn for use in these daggers has decreased in recent years, thanks in part to a declaration by the religious 'Grand Mufti' in Yemen to the effect that causing the extinction of a species such as the hino through demand for its horn is contrary to the teaching of the scriptures. Moreover, in 1997 the Yemen Government signed the CITES agreement (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora),

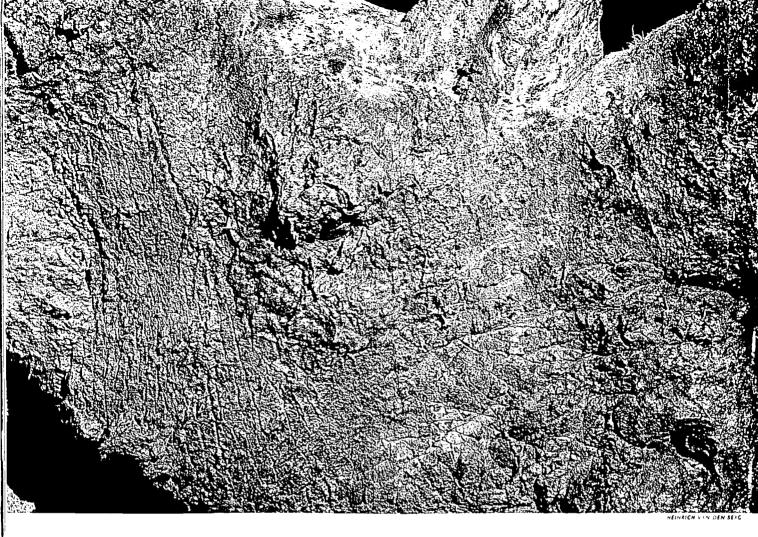
signifying its intention to support international bans on the trade in rhino horn.

In the Far East, however, the demand for rhino horn medicines is still great and likely to remain so, as the belief in their efficacy is strong. With support now coming from some scientific studies, it is likely that rhino horn will remain on Oriental shopping lists for the foreseeable future.

Believed by the Chinese to have medicinal qualities, rhino horn comprises little more than keratinous hair-like fibres, not much different from a human fingernail or a cow's hoof.



BRUARY 2001 RHINOS 4



A wallow in mud is an integral part of a rhino's day, especially in hot weather.

Natal Nature Conservation Services, now known as KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife), still leads the way in rhino conservation efforts, and overall numbers of rhinos - on the African continent at least - are rising. Latest census reports indicate that there are now more than 13 000 African rhinos in the wild, an increase from 8 300 in 1992, but still way down on the 100 000-plus of 1960.

Realists accept that rhino numbers will never recover to those 1960 heights, and in some areas the figures still look particularly grim. The sad reality is that the populations of two of the six African rhino subspecies are very small, and may even be declining. The northern white thino Ceratotherium simum cottoni today exists in only one location in the strife-torn Democratic Republic of Congo, in a population of between 24 and 31 animals. The even more endangered western black rhino Diceros bicornis longipes is now reduced to a population that may well number fewer than 10 animals scattered across northern Cameroon.

In Zimbabwe, land invasions and lawlessness mean that the rhinos that did survive there are in peril again, and the once-famous black rhinos of the Zambezi Valley appear to have gone. On the other hand, it is heartening to hear reports that black rhinos have been seen again in the Matusadona National Park along the shores of Lake Kariba.

Ten years ago, there were perhaps 5 000 white and 3 500 black rhinos in Africa. The latest statistics from the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) indicate that there are now 10 300 white and 2 700 black rhinos in the wild (the black thino population sank to about 2 450 in 1992). As much as 94 per cent of the white rhino population is in South Africa, many on privately owned land (according to WWF. 20 per cent of the world's white rhinos are on private land in South Africa).

Growing numbers of black rhinos are now also finding their way into private ownership on reserves such as Lapalala in the Waterberg. Indeed, apart from the KwaZulu-Natal reserves such as Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Park. Itala and Mkuze, a few specific areas in the Kruger National Park, Swaziland's Hlane National Park, Namibia's Etosha National Park, the Matobo National Park in Zimbabwe, Kenya's Lake Nakuru National Park and Tanzanias Ngorongoro Crater, the private reserves and sanctuaries are probably the best places to observe Africa's rhinos today. WWF statistics indicate that 98 per cent of Africa's rhinos are protected in four countries: South Africa. Kenya, Namibia and Zimbabwe.

Kenya, which had a population of about 20 000 black rhino 30 years ago, suffered badly at the hands of commercial poachers in the 1970s and '80s, and today has only some 400-odd survivors. Apart from a few private sanctuaries, perhaps the only place in the country where there is a good chance of seeing a rhino is in the small Nairobi National Park on the outskirts of that city. A few rhinos have been re-introduced to Tsavo National Park - home to more than 9 000 black rhinos before Somali poachers wiped them out - and I was pleased to hear on a visit to the Masai Mara last September that two rhinos were being seen regularly in the Ol Kiombo area, with a few others occasionally sighted around the reserve's headquarters at Keekorok.

The overall increase in rhino numbers is gratifying. What would Africa's wildernesses be without flagship species such as these hulking behemoths? But there is little room for comfort. A serious threat to all rhino populations is still posed by the continuing decline in government funding for wildlife conservation across Africa, resulting in reduced staffing levels in many game reserves and national parks; by the ongoing demand for rhino horn in the Middle and Far East; by high unemployment and resulting poverty in most rhino range states; by the growing

clamour for land; and by civil and internecine wars in many parts of the continent and the ready availability of arms. Even in countries where a shoot-to-kill policy has been introduced to stop poachers, starving people will still risk their lives in this way.

'Even though overall numbers are positive, there is no room for complacency,' confirms Dr Martin Brooks of KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife and chairman of the IUCN's African Rhino Specialist Group. 'One of the greatest challenges facing the future of rhino in both Africa and Asia is maintaining sufficient conservation expenditure and field effort.'

Dr Brooks points out that successful conservation of rhino habitat comes at a high price – as much as US\$1 400 per square kilometre a year. It is becoming increasingly obvious that Africa cannot fund its conservation efforts alone, and that continued and increased support from international donors and bodies such as WWF will be necessary to ensure the survival of not only the rhino, but all Africa's wildlife and wilderness areas for future generations.

Eleven years ago, concluding a chapter that looked to the future of rhino conservation in the book *Rhino – The Story of the Rhinoceros and a Plea for its Conservation*, I wrote '...all this will be of little avail if \(\right\rightarrow

"...the combination of timid vulnerability and overt, pretentious aggression gives the rhino a decided "cuteness" in my eyes...'
Two white rhino calves playfight to test their strength.



Poachers, who took no more than the horns in order to satisfy demand from the Middle and Far East, killed more than 90 per cent of the world's rhino population over

the past three decades.

attention is not paid to the equally important aspect of educating and obtaining the support and co-operation of rural communities ... and here educating does not mean teaching rural Africans the white man's values. Man. impoverished Africans regard game reserves and conservation areas as part of their problem, barring access to grazing, raw materials and game products, particularly in view of the punitive policing of these areas. Perhaps if some of the money going into building up the force of game rangers and increasing policing were to be redirected at integrating local communities into conservation programmes and providing direct benefits, some headway towards breaking the impasse could be made. Certainly, reinforcing game guards, buying guns and erecting electrified fences can only be a short-term holding option. Making the wildlife directly valuable to people surrounding the reserves, so that they themselves will want to cultivate it and protect it for reasons that make practical sense to them, is the only long-term answer to the problem."

It is pleasing today to see that this is, in fact, the direction being taken by the majority of enlightened conservation authorities in Africa, with neighbouring communities of even the once-conservative Kruger National

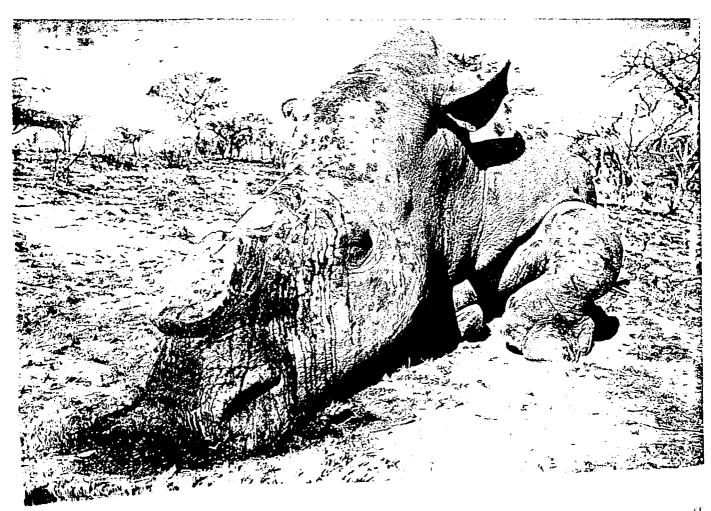
Park now seeing direct benefits from the park's proximit, and, indeed, its existence.

In conclusion, there are real grounds for hope for the future of African rhinos. Conservation strategies will, however, have to pay far more attention to the likely trade-offs that will come about by integrating realistic conservation goals into the social ind economic development agendas of modern Africa. In the words of WAVE's Raoul du Toit, 'Maximum protection or rhinos is attained when, in addition to law enforcement at the national and international levels, they are supported within a social and economic environment in which they are seen locally as assets.'

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Dard and Sharna Balfour are the authors of Rhino: The Story of the Rhinoceros and a Plea for its Conservation (Struk, 1991). They spend most of each year travelling the African continent, researching and photographing its wildlife for books and various international publications and magazines.





Black rhinos favour thicket edges and savanna where there are shrubs and herbs; white rhinos prefer short-grass savanna, but with access to thick bush cover for shade.

Although all rhinos are herbivores. the black rhinoceros is principally a browser, using its prehensile upper lip to grasp stems and branches. whereas the white rhino is a grazer, preferring short grass species.

BREEDING

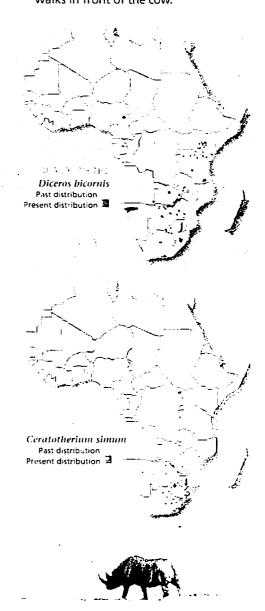
At any time of year for both species. Interval between births is 2-5 years.

GESTATION PERIOD

15-16 months in the black rhino; 16 months in the white rhino.

OFFSPRING

In each species a single calf is born. The black rhino calf browses for the first time before it is a month old, but suckles for up to a year. It walks next to or behind its mother. The white rhino calf begins grazing at about the age of two months, and walks in front of the cow.



Four subspecies of black or hook-lipped rhinoceros (Diceros bicornis) are recognised today. Their scientific names and current distribution under free-ranging conditions are as follows:

- D b. bicornis Namibia, South Africa (Augrabies NP)
- D b. longipes Cameroon
- D b. michaeli Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa (Addo NP)*, Tanzania
- Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zimbabwe

The white or square-lipped rhinoceros (Ceratotherium simum) has two subspecies, the southern and the northern white rhino

- C. s. simum
- Botswana, Côte d'Ivoire*, Kenya*, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland,
- Zambia, Zimbabwe
- C. s. cottoni

Democratic Republic or Congo

(Source: IUCN/SS	African	Raing	Specialist	Group.	1990;

Black rhinoceros subspecies

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Cameroon			1		30			30 🐰
Chad.					0			0 1
Côte d'Ivoire								
D R Congo		22	22					
Ethiopia						0		0
Kenya	47		47			>521		>521
Malawi							25	25
Mozambique							?	?
Namibia	63		63	440-458				440-458
Rwanda						15		15
South Africa	4 062		4 062	5		17	555	577
Swaziland	60-100		60-1 00					
Tanzania						265-285		265-285
Zambia	6		6				>106	>106
Zimbabwe	208		208				>1 754	>1 754
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Mozambique						13	13	
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