

# Black Rhino, White Rhino: what's in a name?

By Jim Feely

It is a pseudo-history which has no connexion with the real world, and is made up of factoids. A factoid looks like a fact, is respected as a fact, and has all the properties of a fact except that it is not true. (Oliver Rackham 1990)

It has been fascinating to witness in my lifetime the birth, growth and acceptance of a piece of pseudo-history and the two factoids that comprise it. This is the widely accepted explanation of how the White Rhino *Ceratotherium simum* got its name, that is such an inaccurate description of its colour. Like that of the Black Rhino *Diceros bicornis*, this is determined by the soil of its surroundings, overlaid on its medium-grey skin by wallowing in mud and rolling in dust.

The first factoid is that in the 18th and 19th centuries Afrikaner hunters called the White Rhino the *wijd [mond]renoster* (wide [mouth] rhinoceros) in colloquial Dutch/Afrikaans. Second is that English-speaking travellers and hunters mistook the sound of *wijd* (*weid, weit, wyd*) for 'white' hence the English name. Accordingly, they did not translate the name after all.

The earliest mention of the name White Rhino in English was by John Barrow in his 1798 journal that describes his travels in Namakwaland in the present Northern Cape Province. There he met a Griqua Afrikaner who told him that in his youth he had killed 'seven camelopardales [*giraffe*] and three White Rhinoceroses in one day'. This conversation must have been conducted in Dutch/Afrikaans, the informant most probably using *kameelperde* and *wit(te)renosters* and not their English translations.

This was followed shortly after by the report to the Cape governor from the commissioners of the Truter-Somerville expedition in 1801–1802, to the Tswana people at Dithakong (earlier known as Lattakoe) north-east of Kuruman. The expedition's report in English was probably drafted by its young assistant secretary and scribe Petrus Borchers. It mentions a male of the 'black variety' of rhino killed by Jacobus Kruger near



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Black Rhino

Kuruman on 27 December 1801, and a female 'white' rhino killed south of Kuruman by Kruger and Meintjes van den Bergh on 30 December 1801. In a separate account also in English, William Somerville called the first animal killed a 'black two-horned Rhinoceros'. He did not mention the second animal.

Of the first rhino killed, it was noted that the 'upper lip was more pointed and hung over the lower lip', and the Setswana name was *seikloa*. This was a name (*keitloa*) for the Black Rhino used during the 19th century. It was recorded of the second animal killed that the upper lip was 'more flat', and that its Setswana name was *magooe* (now spelt *mogohu*). These accounts confirm that the animal killed on 27 December 1801 was *D. bicornis*, and that killed on 30 December was *C. simum*.

The earliest written use in Dutch of the name White Rhino was made by Borchers in a separate letter written to his father in 1802. Concerning the female rhino, he stated (in translation, original in Dutch): 'She was of the type known to us as the White Rhinoceros. . . I expected this animal to be entirely white according to its name, but found that she was a paler ash-grey than the black. I suppose that when the rain falls this animal is cleansed of mud and other impurities and will appear lighter at a distance, and put the derivation of the name down to that . . . ' (emphasis added). Thus, the oldest written record in Dutch is unequivocally of both the 'white' and 'black' rhinos under those names and not any other. Furthermore, Borchers himself saw and described the carcasses of the animals killed and gave their Setswana names in a way that identifies each beyond doubt. Therefore, the factoids cannot be true, and the English names are, indeed, translations.

From this brief history, it is clear that: 1) the Dutch/Afrikaans name for *C. simum* has been *wit(te)renoster* and nothing else since at least the end of the 18th century; 2) the Dutch/Afrikaans name for *D. bicornis* gained the qualifier of 'swart' (black) at the same time as the other was named wit; and 3) both names originated in the country north of the Orange River and west of the Vaal where both rhinos occurred together.

The area was inhabited by the Bushman, Griqua, Khoekhoen and Tswana peoples. South of the Orange only the Black Rhino was found, where it was known in Afrikaans as *renoster* without qualification as none was needed.

By the late 18th century many Griqua were of mixed descent, and were bilingual speakers of Afrikaans and Khoekhoen. Their men were mounted on horses, armed with firearms and noted for their addiction to hunting. Consequently, it was probably they who were the first to use these names in Afrikaans/Dutch. This is implied by Barrow's report and clearly stated by Andrew Geddes Bain who was accompanied by a Griqua hunter. This man told Bain (undoubtedly speaking Afrikaans) that

*Zwart* (Black) and White were the Griqua names of two rhinos he killed while travelling northward of Kuruman on 4-5 August 1826.

The names do not describe the colour of either species. But they might allude metaphorically to their differing reactions to humans: *swart* referring to that species' well-known aggressiveness, with *wit* as its opposite for the inoffensive animal. *Swart* in Afrikaans and 'black' in English have similar metaphorical allusions to anger, danger or threat. It may also be significant that the names of the Black Rhino in isiXhosa (*umkhombe*) and isiZulu (*ubhejane*) allude to anger.

The behavioural difference must have been as significant to hunters of both rhinos as the differences in their outward appearance. In 1802 Somerville said of the Black Rhino: 'This animal is the most ferocious that Africa produces. . . for when wounded he seldom fails to fly to the place from which the shot came.' Alexander described the behavioural difference in 1838: 'The White Rhinoceros. . . is a timid animal compared with the savage black which commonly charges whether wounded or not, whereas the white variety tries to effect an escape'.

Consequently, I would argue that the derivation of the name *swart* is the issue. *Wit* is merely its opposite. Not vice versa, as many writers have supposed. However, I have not found direct support for this suggestion, although Alexander's remarks in 1838 come close. Nevertheless, it makes better sense of the history and natural history.

Charles Pitman, colonial game warden of Uganda, was the first writer to suggest that the original Dutch/Afrikaans name for the White Rhino was not *wit(te)renoster*. This was in his 1931 book *A game warden among his charges*, in which he repeated his suggestion earlier published in a magazine. At that time the northern White Rhino occurred in western Uganda, hence his interest. Thereafter the idea lay dormant until 1963, when Charles Astley-Maberley revived it in South Africa. He wrote: 'There have been a variety of suggestions as to why the species became known as "white", the best I think being that offered by T.R.H. Owen—that it is a corruption of the term "wyd mond" or "broad-mouthed" originally applied by the old Boer hunters.'

But these suggestions were without foundation, and clearly made in ignorance of the late 18th/early 19th century reports. They evolved into factoids after 1963. Publications thereafter have gone on ignoring the fact that there is no historical example of such a use. And they continue to be repeated, although not by Reay Smithers, who relied on documented information in 'The Mammals of the Southern African Sub-region'.

Short and pithy, *swart*/black with its opposite *wit*/white have remained firmly in everyday use to distinguish the African rhinos for more than two centuries. As a pair they are an appropriate metaphor in Afrikaans and English for a well-known difference in the rhinos' reactions to humans. Thus the names will no doubt continue in common usage, whatever their etymology or the alternatives preferred by zoologists. But, what is to be done about the 'northern white' rhino remains to be seen. It is now recognised as a distinct species (*C. cottoni*), that is, sadly, extinct in the wild. However, one thing is certain - no other African animal has attracted as much attention to its name as has the White Rhino.

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White Rhino

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