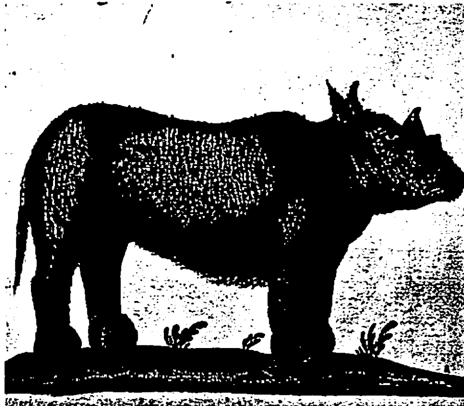
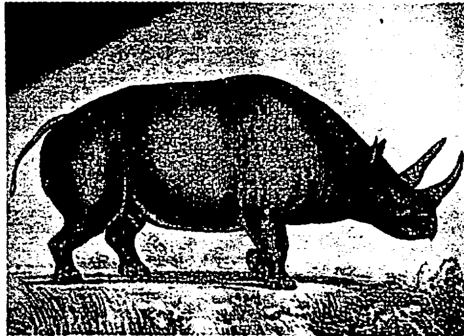
The bull-terrier of the bushveld is at bay. After 30-million years on earth, the pachyderm the ancients thought was made of steel armour and rivets, the one with the mean eye, the bellicose nature, the stubby legs and the turning-circle of a polo pony is about to die out — because man covets his horn. Can we let the black rhino disappear, like the unicorn, into mythology?



Photograph: THE ANTHONY BANNISTER PHOTO LIBRARY



Photographs: JOHN MICHELL

RHINO'S LAST STAND

Above: Thombi enjoys her last meal before flying to the United States

Centre: Dated 1835, this study of a black rhino comes from the book *Illustrations of Zoology in South Africa* by Andrew Smith — Africana Library

Top: One of the earliest paintings of an African rhinoceros. Dated 1690 by an unknown artist, it is part of a bound collection of wildlife studies now housed in the Africana Library

A wintery breeze swirled between the airport buildings as a very important passenger was gently loaded on to a Lufthansa flight bound for Houston, Texas. Thombi, a black rhino cow, tossed a load of lucerne with her horn and strained playfully at the bars of her crate as I leaned forward and touched the surprisingly soft skin on her muzzle. Would future generations, I wondered, also have the privilege of feeling the warmth of a living rhino?

All that interested Thombi, however, was another handful of twigs offered by her "nursemaid", Natal Parks Board warden Rodney Henwood. He would accompany her on the flight, sleeping on the sawdust beside her crate and helping her to adapt to her new environment. It was the last thornwood she would ever eat. From then on, Thombi's diet would include indigenous American plants on the La Coma Ranch in Brownsville, Texas, where she would join a small herd of exported black rhino thriving in captivity.

Thombi came from the Umfolozi Game Reserve where she was captured by Natal Parks Board rangers. They found snare wounds on both her back legs, one of which trailed a length of wire cable. One of the snares had bitten so deeply into her flesh that it was completely covered by scar tissue.

Thombi will bear the marks of that poaching attempt for the rest of her life. She will never return to Africa. But now, at least, she is safe. In the past decade, tens of thousands of rhino have not been as lucky. They have been systematically butchered by poachers in search of highly prized rhino horn to the point where these great, prehistoric beasts have become almost extinct.

Suddenly, the world has woken up to the fact that, unless immediate and drastic measures are taken to stop the carnage, no rhinos will be left alive in their natural habitat. In 1970 there were an estimated 65 000 black rhino — today there are less than 3 500. If the decline continues ▷

by JOHN MICHELL

at the same rate, ten more will have been killed in the time between my writing and your reading this.

No wonder the black rhino is so bad-tempered! Even the name given to this squat, loose-lipped battletank of the bush is wrong. He was called black to distinguish him from the so-called white rhino, whose name was corrupted from the German *weit*, describing its wide mouth. Neither species is black nor white.

The black rhino, *Diceros Bicornis*, otherwise known as the prehensile-lipped rhinoceros, is a browser who likes a juicy crunch of acacia just as much as a bunch of grass for his dinner. Thus, he frequents dense thicket rather than the open plain favoured by his "white" cousin. There are several differences in the species, the most marked being the black rhino's legendary choleric temperament (perhaps brought on by indigestion?).

He is one of Africa's most dangerous animals, 1 000kg-plus of volatile temper that will attack anything from a bush to a Land Rover. He can outrun a man and wheel like a polo pony. When aroused, an angry rhino will trot and prounce around, swaggering with rolling gait as he tries to pick up sounds and smells. Eyesight is not a strong point.

Even when browsing quietly, the black rhino is a formidable animal: his bulk and lethal horn have kept him relatively safe from predators for 30-million years, and his skin appears so impregnable that early European explorers thought it was put together with rivets.

Left alone, he is a peaceable beast, feeding in the morning and evening and sleeping in shade or a mud wallow during the heat of the day. The males tend to be solitary and nomadic, joining a cow only for brief periods of courtship. Copulation lasts from 20 to 35 minutes, and takes place several times a day. No one is on record as having seen a wild rhino giving birth. The mother-to-be hides in thick cover when her calf is due.

Most other animals steer clear of the rhino, except lion and spotted hyena which have been known to attack calves. The rhino's only friend is the oxpecker, the bird which feeds off parasites and sounds the alarm when danger threatens. His only enemy is man.

In the past ten years, the number of black rhino decreased by 99 percent in Kenya, 93 percent in Tanzania, and 96 percent in Zambia. It has become extinct in Uganda, Chad and Somalia. Rwanda has only 15 left, Cameroon 30 and Botswana four. Its fate is unknown in the Central African Republic, Mozambique and the Sudan.

The only glimmer of hope in these dismal statistics is the discovery of "a small population" of Javan rhinos, the world's rarest, in the jungles of Vietnam, where they were believed to have been extinct since the 1960s.

The founders of the Rhino and Elephant Foundation, Peter Hitchins, Anthony Hall-Martin and Clive Walker

In recent months there has been a massive upsurge in public awareness. The media is publicising the plight of the black rhino more than ever before and the man in the street, not normally very caring toward his fellow creatures, has responded generously in the only way he can: by giving money. Every little bit helps, but much more is needed if the nation is to win the war against poaching. As far as the rhinos are concerned, this is Armageddon.

Keith Mieklejohn, a big man with a big title — Natal Parks Board Conservator: Capture and Disposal — says the survival of the black rhino lies in anti-poaching units. "The game guards go around with antiquated 303 rifles while the poacher has the latest AK.

"The only safeguard is to have game guards who are well armed, well equipped and well trained. You MUST have a fast, efficient anti-poaching unit that can move at great speed and not have to rely on horses and bicycles. What we need is helicopters. I would like to see the South African Government do a hell of a lot more by equipping anti-poaching units properly."

Meiklejohn does not believe South African game reserves, because of their interior isolation, are any less vulnerable than others in Africa: "I guarantee I could spend a month walking through Hluhluwe, right through Umfolozi, and out the other end completely undetected. So how safe are we?"

Yes, he says, Jan Smuts Airport is the gateway for horn smuggled from Botswana, Zambia, Namibia and Tanzania, but he points out the difficulties faced by customs officials. "With containerisation of airfreight and seafreight, you can move anything you want into and out of South Africa. They just don't have the manpower to control that."

Why is it so important to rescue the species from extinction? Even Clive Walker, co-founder of the Rhino and Elephant Foundation and one of the most vociferous international campaigners for their cause, admits that the rhino is "to all intents and purposes a useless animal, and there are very few people who eat them. But we have never stopped lamenting the passing of the dodo, and there was never a more useless bird than that".

The rhino, says Walker, represents the flagship of African conservation: "If we allow them to become extinct, there's no knowing what will go next. When we knock the peg out from under one species, we may start a chain reaction that affects a whole lot of other things that could possibly be of benefit to mankind."

One way in which rhinos benefit us is through the tourism industry that earns South Africa R2 000-million a year. After lion, rhinos are the animals tourists most want to see, it is believed.

There is also the matter of national pride. South Africa is the last country in the world where the black rhino exists in relatively large quantities. We have

Photograph: Clive Walker

Blythe Loutit and Peter Hitchins, a founder of the Rhino and Elephant Foundation, examine rhino skulls in Damaraland

goofed so often in other fields that it is vital we show the world that in conservation, at least, we can get it right. We have access to more sophisticated anti-poaching facilities than other African countries and we are wealthy enough to back them up. Wealthy we may be, but are we generous enough to prevent the poaching epidemic from spreading south of the Limpopo? Says Walker: "The real war hasn't got to us — yet."

The battle lines are drawn, but the soldiers in the field are few. It is the men and women in khaki and velskoens who will do the actual fighting. Project Rhino, the Rhino and Elephant Foundation's specialist battalion, needs R1-million for starters. If that sounds like a lot, consider their needs:

- To monitor and protect the Damara desert rhino in Namibia, a rare subspecies reduced to 100 at last count in an area extremely vulnerable to poachers.
- To translocate vulnerable populations to safer areas. This requires helicopter searches, darting, crating and transportation.
- Vehicles and equipment for anti-poaching units. Five 4×4 vehicles for anti-poaching work are an urgent priority.
- Aerial monitoring and surveillance.
- Funding for an aerial survey in Mozambique's Maputu Reserve, where the government has called on South Africa for assistance in this.
- Support for the anti-poaching unit in Zimbabwe.
- The establishment of additional sanctuaries for black rhino.
- Monitoring international trade in rhino horn.
- An on-going public relations campaign to make the public aware of the desperate situation and to gather funds.

One of the most dedicated field workers is Blythe Loutit, based in Damaraland, Namibia. Her task is complicated by politics — Angola allegedly has used ivory and rhino horn to fund its war effort — but even granted a peaceful solution in the territory it will mean that demobilised soldiers, out of work and with a knowledge of weapons, will be tempted by the easy wealth of poaching.

Part of Blythe Loutit's campaign is to educate local inhabitants, many of whom are illiterate, to convince them that it is in their best interests not to co-operate with poachers. "Tourism is the only really viable proposition for a harsh, low-rainfall region such as Damaraland and the black rhino is one of the strongest tourist attractions in the world," she says. Of the 100-odd in her care, almost a third have been "adopted" by groups or individuals who put up R1 000 (see box).

Opinions on how to halt poaching differ between various experts.

It would seem practical to simply remove the horns and sell them, but dehorning is a controversial procedure because at this stage it is not known how the painless operation will affect the rhino.

Primarily, the animals use their horns for defence against spotted hyena and lion, which attack their young. Horns are also used for territorial fighting, although most aggressive encounters are resolved by confrontation and display of prowess. Potentially lethal animals like rhino can't afford too many real fights. Horns are also used in food gathering, but this is not a crucial factor.

The main argument against dehorning is that, at the base of the horn there is an outcrop of bone. To avoid cutting this bone, a few centimetres of horn has to be left — quite enough to satisfy poachers who have been known to kill even baby rhinos with "button" horns. Also, the thick bush of the black rhino's habitat means that poachers will shoot a partially concealed animal without determining the size of the horn.

The crisis in Namibia has forced conservationists to remove horns, however, and the effect are being keenly monitored. Dehorning is logistically expensive, and horns grow again at the rate of approximately 7cm a year. (The black rhino's life expectancy is between 40 and 60 years.) All the animals in any given area have to be dehorned so that there is a power balance, and the hyena/lion factor has to be taken into account.

The darting process is traumatic to the animal and observers note that horns lost in the wild sometimes grow into unconventional shapes, less useful than normal horns.

Also, other parts of the rhino carcass — skin, toenails, genitals — remain saleable. Experts maintain that poachers are inclined to shoot first and determine the extent of their booty later. Fortunately, the price of horn is so high compared to other rhino parts that poachers may be deterred from risking their lives for the relatively inexpensive bits.

Creating a glut by dumping horns on the market is possible, but also has drawbacks. Wildlife organisations like the Natal Parks Board have stashed millions of rands worth of horn, gleaned from natural deaths and dehornings due to translocation trauma. But the current stockpiles would not satisfy the market for long and would only promote the cult of rhino horn to future generations.

Fake horns would be too expensive to manufacture. Inevitably a process would be found to test their authenticity. Re-educating Middle- and far-Eastern consumers would be almost impossible. Logistics aside, their rhino myths and beliefs are more than 1 000 years old. The only way to protect the rhino it appears, is through fire power.

Poachers, with their often rudimentary knowledge of weapons and hunting, are not famous for clean kills. Their victims are likely to be riddled with automatic gunfire — a process of torture that might last hours, if not days — and could possibly have their horns hacked out with a panga before they are dead. ▷

You can blame the slaughter of rhino mostly on the North Yemenese, who pay a fortune to give their adolescent sons dagger handles, or jambais, made from rhino horn, to celebrate their coming into manhood.

Jambais, or daggers with rhino horn handles, are worn in the belts of Yemeni men as status symbols

Humans responsible for the bloody carnage of rhinos fall into several categories, ranging from the poacher to that little old Oriental man drinking toenail tea. The impoverished poacher will get about the equivalent of a year's salary. The Oriental gent will fork out a stiff fee in middle-class terms, but not exorbitant compared with medical bills, for his balm. The Yemenis pay the equivalent of a snappy motorbike for the dagger handle. Rhino products are consumed also in Taiwan, Singapore, China and Korea. But it is the shadowy middlemen who pocket the major profits of the rhino trade, estimated at between $3-million and $6-million annually.

Corruption is also rife in South Africa. Taiwan may be the centre for the illegal trade in rhino horn, but the gateway is Jan Smuts Airport. "South Africa has become the biggest supplier of illegal rhino horn in the world," says Dr John Ledger, director of the Endangered Wildlife Trust.

We must not blame the Oriental trade only, however. Hunters in the last century decimated entire herds of wild animals in South Africa. English gentlemen who explored southern Africa in the 19th century boasted about how many animals they could shoot in a single day. Captain Sir William Cornwallis Harris, writing in his journal of 1836, noted "hosts of rhinoceroses . . . that daily exhibited themselves, almost exceeding belief". He wrote about the black rhino's "want of intelligence, and piggish obstinacy . . . subject to unprovoked paroxysms of reckless fury". He shot rhinos with impunity, and casually mentions his more notable triumphs: ". . . we counted no less than twenty-two of the white species of rhinoceros, and were compelled in self-defence to slaughter four".

James Chapman, who travelled across the subcontinent with the artist Thomas Baines in 1868, describes how he waited in a dug-out where rhinos came to drink. First he shot a large male, then he potted another two before knocking off a female. Five more were wounded, and the rest managed to get away. The next day, having given up tracking the wounded, he shot only one rhino. Not surprisingly, Chapman believed the rhino would soon become extinct, as indeed it already was in the Cape.

Paradoxically, one of the success stories in the Save the Rhino campaign is that of the white rhino population — which had declined to a mere handful in Natal in 1897 when the valley of the Umfolozi River was declared a reserve. In 1930 there were thought to be 30. Dr Ian Player came to their rescue with Operation Rhino and they have increased to the point where they can be hunted legally in some areas.

The Pilanesberg Game Reserve, near Sun City, is one of the few hunting grounds where trophy seekers can shoot a white rhino. A fee of $30 000, plus being lucky enough to get to the top of the waiting list, includes a 14-day safari package.

As in most trophy hunting, the animals selected for culling are usually older specimens who have already spread their superior genes and are nearing the end of their lifespan. Pilanesberg issues five or six licences for rhino trophies each year, but the animals do not die in vain — just as their carcasses return to fertilise the earth, so the bounty on their heads is ploughed back into conservation.

The white rhinos of the Pilanesberg derive from an original stock which were translocated from Natal between 1980 and 1982. They were bought at bargain prices, partly because at the time Natal was in the grip of a devastating drought, and have been breeding steadily since then.

Our next challenge is to breed black rhino to the point where they, too, can be harvested each year. That way, black rhinos will start earning their expensive keep and helping to preserve other endangered species.

One by one, the rhinos of Africa are disappearing. Thombi departed the continent in style, leaving behind nothing more than a few acacia twigs and painful memories. Yet, as the jumbo eased its precious burden off the runway, I couldn't help feeling a twinge of bitterness. Why should this rare and, despite her reputation, friendly animal be forced into exile?

Why should ruthless poachers compel her custodians to export her to a safer gene bank than our own country, far from the African bush of her birth? Will she, like other emigrating South Africans, grow homesick for the rugged bushveld of central Natal? All we can hope is that Thombi and her kind will not, like her mythical brother the unicorn, disappear into the mists of legend. ❑

HOW TO DO YOUR BIT

You can become a "Friend of the Rhino" by writing out a cheque with multiple zeros or merely by adding to the "A Rand for the Rhino" fund. You can buy a T-shirt or scarf (R20) or a poster showing Damaraland rhino for R10. You can even adopt a rhino without having to buy a very large kennel: for a fee of R2 000 (corporate) R1 000 (individual) or R500 (schools and service clubs) you will receive information about your particular animal, plus a certificate, a lapel badge, a car sticker, and an autographed photograph of your very own personal rhino. Well, not autographed.

Contact: Rozanne Savory, Project Rhino, Rhino and Elephant Foundation, PO Box 381, Bedfordview, 2008.
Tel: (011) 53-8412. Fax: (011) 53-8442. ❑

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