

White rhinoceros *Ceratotherium simum*

The white rhinoceros is a relict from an earlier era when very big mammals, or 'mega-herbivores', flourished throughout the world. The species was common and widely distributed throughout much of southern and East Africa in prehistoric times, and the reduction in its range in past and recent times is ascribed largely to human hunters (latterly those in quest of rhino horn). It is a relatively easy animal to hunt as it is short-sighted, readily encountered at waterpoints and easily approached from downwind.

The white rhino makes up about half the total biomass of large herbivores in KwaZulu-Natal's Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Park. It favours short grass, but its large size allows it to subsist on taller dry grass during the dry season. Feeding occupies about half the white rhino's time, and continues through both the day and night. In the heat of midday, animals lie up at shady sites on ridge crests. The grazing pressure the white rhino exerts can convert extensive areas of medium-tall grasslands into short grasslands. It usually drinks at dusk or shortly after nightfall. If forced to travel long distances to find water in the dry season, it drinks only every three to four days.

Dominant males occupy mutually exclusive territories, but share their territories with one or more subordinate males. Only the dominant male scent marks the territory, spraying his urine along boundaries and paths, and scattering his dung after defaecating at middens. Subordinate males bellow and shriek loudly when challenged. Large dung heaps mark territory boundaries. Generally only the dominant male consorts and mates with females.

A consorting male attempts to confine females within his territory boundaries, a process accompanied by loud bellows and snorts from the female and shrill squeals from the male. Copulation lasts 20 minutes or longer.

Outside its home territory a dominant male behaves like a subordinate. It travels to and from water without spray-urinating until regaining its own territory. Serious fights may develop when a male, returning from drinking, has its passage blocked by a neighbouring bull. Fights also occur over territory ownership, the defeated male sometimes remaining in the territory if it assumes subordinate status. Females with young move independently, but individuals with overlapping home ranges seem to know one another. Playful horn jousting develops when the animals meet, and may lead to vigorous chases which involve adult females as well as calves and subadults.

The saving of the white rhino from extinction is one of the great success stories of conservation: the few score individuals surviving in the Umfolozi Reserve at the turn of the century increased under protection to reach 2 000 animals by 1970, and perceived overgrazing led to the launch of a programme to translocate surplus animals. White rhinos have been successfully re-established in the Kruger and Pilanesberg national parks, in smaller reserves and on private land. Though the total population has increased to more than 6 000, the species remains threatened by poachers catering for the continuing illegal trade in rhino horns.

NORMAN OWEN-SMITH

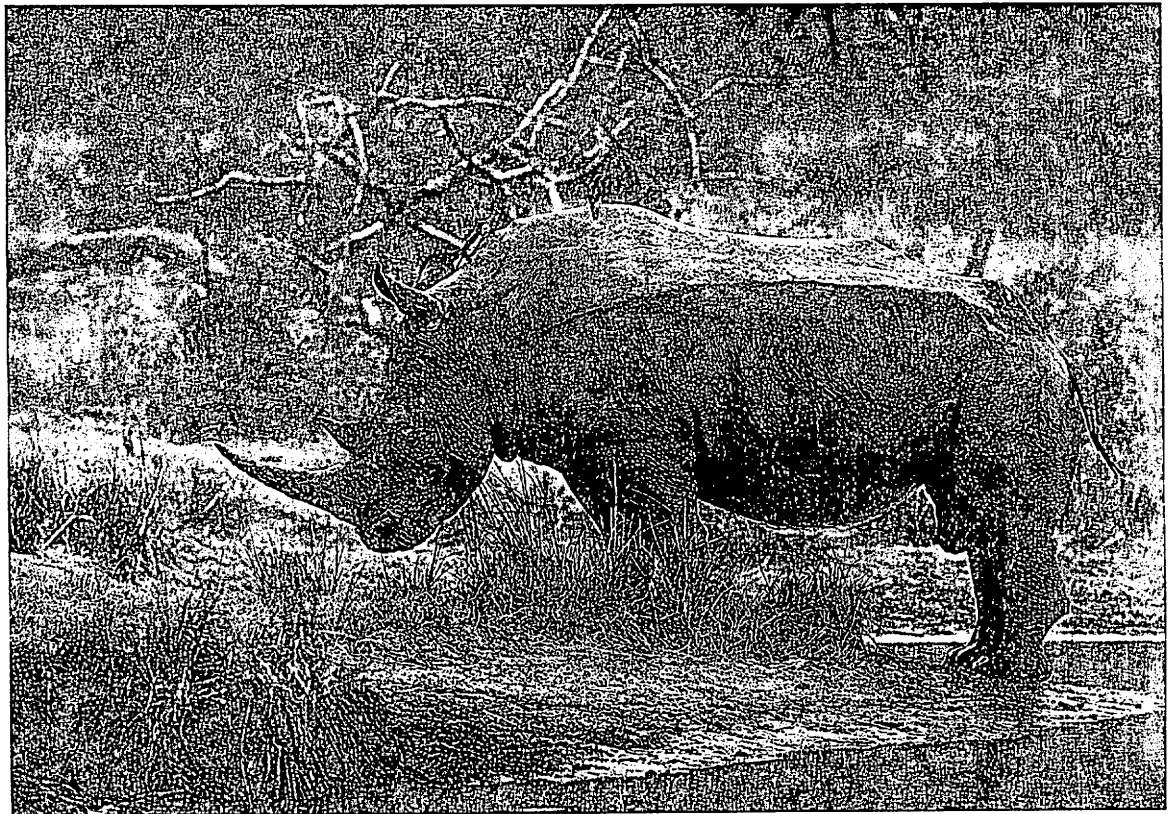


A white rhino female with exceptionally long hairs gently nuzzles her nearly year-old calf.



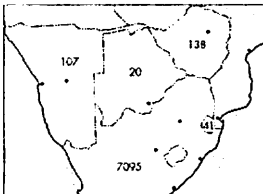
INSPER 1953:11

Two young white rhinos in the grass-covered rolling hills of northern KwaZulu-Natal. Unlike the black rhino, the white rhino is a grazer whose wide mouth facilitates maximal food intake.



INSPER 1953:11

The white rhino needs water both to wallow in and to drink. A creature of habit, it beats a regular path to its watering point and only leaves its territory when water is not available.



Owing to the vulnerability of the white rhino to poaching, exact localities of populations are confidential. Population figure estimates for each country are shown.

DISTRIBUTION AND STATUS

Formerly widely distributed through bushveld areas of South Africa into Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe; exterminated by human hunting in later 19th century, except in Kwa-Zulu-Natal's Umfolozi region. Reintroduced into parts of former range, but still suffers from poaching. Northern subspecies persists only as a remnant of perhaps 20 animals in Zaïre.

HABITAT

Savanna bushveld, from dry shrub savanna in Namibia and Botswana to areas of mesic savanna in parts of Zimbabwe. Absent from open grassland regions.

FIELD CHARACTERISTICS

The third largest land mammal: adult males weigh up to 2 000 kg, females 1 800 kg. Shoulder height 1.8 m. Skin almost hairless, grey in colour. Two horns (an amalgam of hair-like fibres), longer in females than in males, with a record length of 1.58 m. Mouth wide and square-shaped, hump on neck. Penis of male points backwards; testes abdominally situated.

SOUNDS

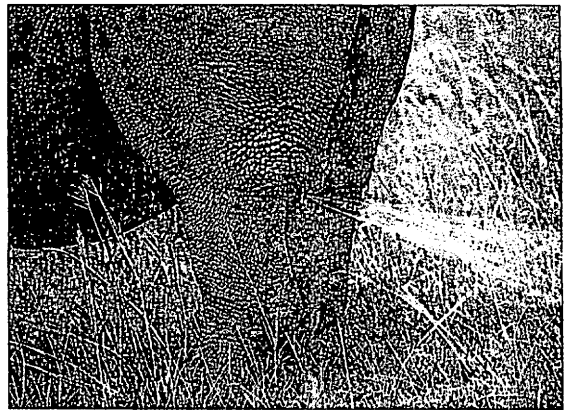
Sounds include deep bellows, shrill squeals and various panting and snorting noises. No alarm call.

FOOD AND FEEDING METHODS

Strictly a grazer, favouring short grass but consuming taller grass when short grass is unavailable. Grass plucked with the lips, the wide mouth enabling the animal to achieve an adequate intake.

BREEDING BIOLOGY

Non-seasonal breeder, but most calves are conceived in the wet season and born early in the dry season. Gestation 16 months. Single offspring



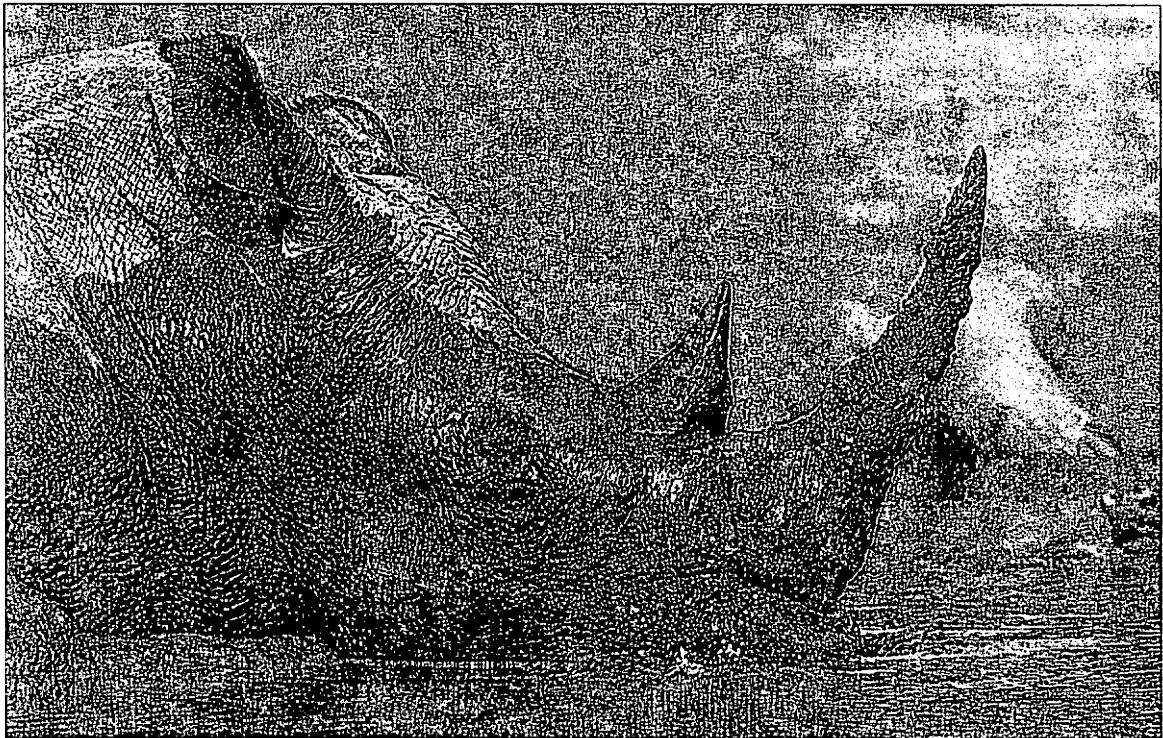
The male white rhinoceros is territorial. Bulls mark out their territories by defecating at latrines and by means of powerful backwards squirts of urine onto scrape marks made by the hindfeet.

stays with mother for 2-3 years, until next calf is born. Females first give birth at about 8 years, males reach maturity at 10-12 years.

males may share a territory. Females have overlapping home ranges, encompassing several male territories. Females usually single, accompanied by a calf, but may join subadults in groups numbering 3-10 animals. Territory holder joins a female for 5-10 days prior to mating, attempting to confine her to his territory.

SOCIAL SYSTEM

Males territorial, with dominant male occupying mutually exclusive area of 2-5 km², but one or more subordinate



Rhinoceroses, like other pachyderms, enjoy bathing in mud wallows, an activity which keeps them cool and protects them against external skin parasites.