

Success Story of Africa's WHITE RHINO

By Peter Johnson

Thanks to enlightened wildlife management, its numbers have risen a hundredfold this century

Nearly two hundred years ago, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the grass curtain hiding Africa's wildlife treasures began to part. The world's greatest natural history extravaganza was revealed, and amongst the many wonders came the discovery of the white rhinoceros.

While James Bruce was wrestling with the first observations and measurements of the black rhinoceros in East Africa, William Burchell was collecting the first specimen of the white rhino at a tiny dot on the face of southern Africa's great Karroo sub-desert. That dot was Kuruman, and it is still very much on today's map as an asbestos mining town.

By 1817 the specimen collected by Burchell had been described and catalogued, and become a dusty exhibit in the South African Museum in Cape Town.

Of course 'white', as in white rhinoceros, bears little relation to the animal's colour, for the term derives from the Cape Dutch (Afrikaans) word *wyd*, which means wide. Where the white rhino is wide-mouthed the black rhino is snouted or pointed, these differences being adaptations to their respective feeding habits. The white (also known as square-lipped) rhino crops very short savannah grassland with the pulling action of a blunt-bladed lawn-mower, while the black rhino browses on leaves, twigs, and thorn-bushes.

It has always fascinated me how incredibly observant were the early pioneers of Africa, and how, in the fledgling days of the science of animal behaviour, they often named an animal after its most significant physical feature - which in turn helped to place similar animals into their correct scientific groups. The early note of the white rhino's wide, square-lipped mouth is a good example of this ability to record what was significant and reject the rest.



Leonard Lee Rue III/Bruce Coleman

The next milestone in the scientific history of the white rhinoceros came about a century later, when a second, and northern, form of the species was discovered. It was found in central Africa, and was geographically totally separate.

In true colonial style, the newcomer was named Cotton's white rhinoceros. One can picture Major Cotton sitting in his London club, perhaps sipping a whisky, under the glaring, glassy eyes of his very own animals mounted on the wall, while he regaled his friends with a description of the beast's thundering canter into history. Too true - into history - for it is Cotton's animal that now faces extinction, as surely as its ancestors must have faced the man who first collected them.

In 1961, in an attempt to stave off what even then seemed inevitable, some members of this northern race were caught and moved to the sanctity of what was then known as Murchison Falls National Park, in Uganda.



Lynn M. Brown/Bruce Coleman

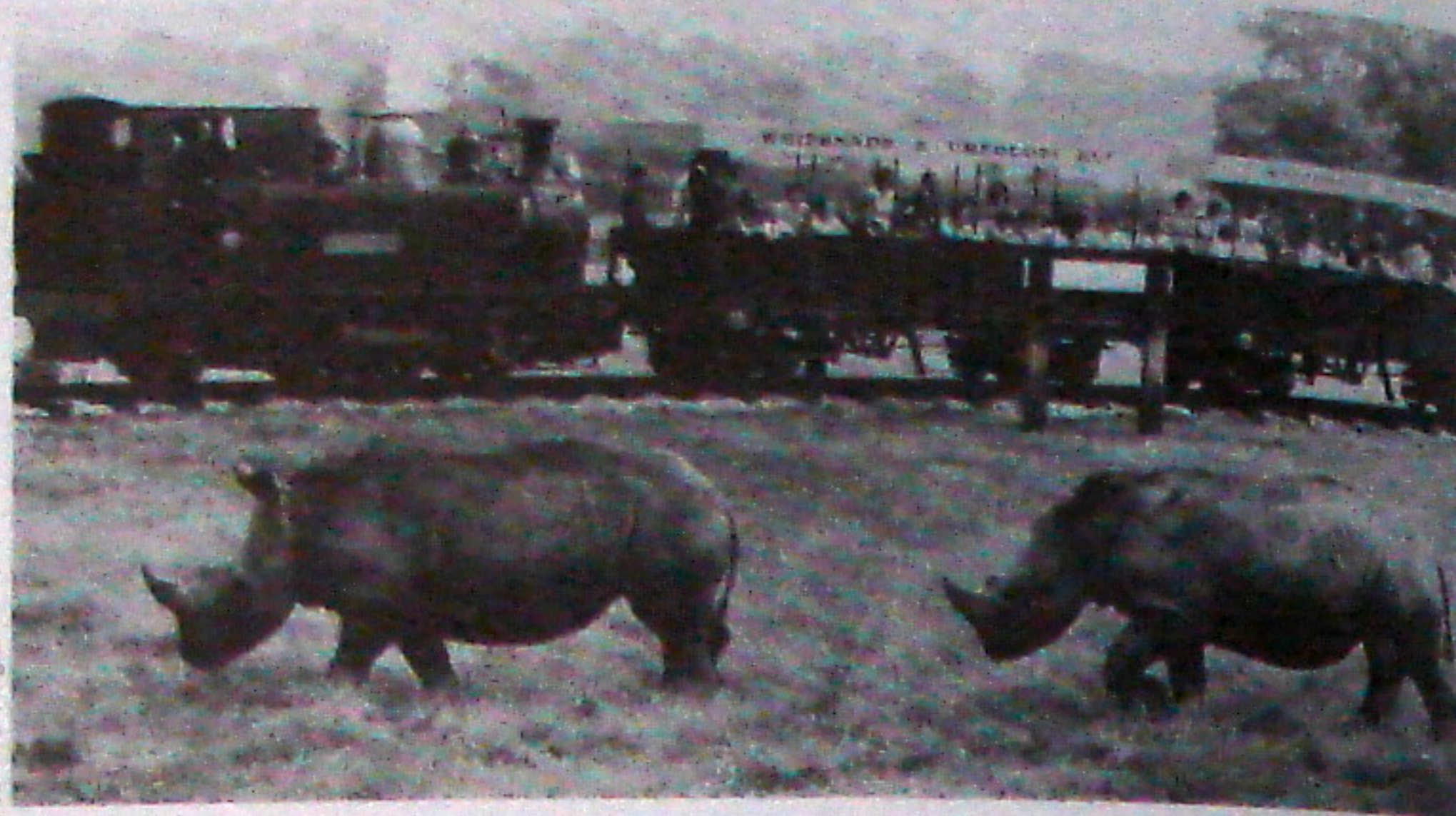
Grass-eater supreme, the white rhinoceros (above, cow and calf) has a hump on the shoulders to support the muscles of the long head with its lawn-mower-like lips. Left: Being practically hairless is sometimes not enough in the hot sun and a cooling mud bath also deters insects

At that time there were reputed to be about 2,000 of these creatures left in all central Africa, primarily in the Sudan, Zaire, the Central African Republic, Rwanda, and Burundi. By 1970 the numbers were down to two or three hundred animals. And today? Almost certainly gone. Of course, there is always hope, until the last one is known for certain to have gone. But the ray of hope must now be very faint.

The status of the southern white rhino is a totally different story, one of dedicated conservation, protection, enlightened animal management, and no doubt luck as well. Once the rhino had been quite plentiful through all of southern Africa, from the Cape to the borders of what is now Zambia. But by the year 1900 it



Below: Over 5,700 miles from Umfolozi, a herd of white rhinos has settled down to life at Whipsnade Park in England



was extinct - except for about 50 in one tiny part of South Africa's Natal Province.

The explorer-hunter Frederick Courtnay Selous records it in the southern part of Rhodesia (Matabeleland) between 1872 and 1880. Rhodesia's last white rhino was shot by a Mr Eyre in 1895 at Mazoe, near Salisbury: it too found its way to the museum in Cape Town. In Botswana it disappeared in the 1880s.

The year 1906 is the date from which the animal's slow and heavy plod to survival can be traced, for in 1906 there were between 20 and 50 of them in the Umfolozi Game Reserve, in Zululand. And that was all, anywhere. (As it happens, they numbered fewer at that time than Cotton's rhinos in central Africa.)

Between 1906 and 1936, when the animal's numbers had increased to 226, the Natal Parks Board kept very quiet about the state of their white rhinos - and rightly, too, for they well knew what poaching for the valuable horn, and sport hunting, had done to the northern populations.

Conservation is never easy, but at least in the case of the white rhinoceros it was pretty obvious what had to be done. Total protection was the key, and that was precisely the course the Natal Parks Board followed. Apart from conservation staff, nobody was allowed near the white rhinos in Umfolozi; any animal that wandered out of the reserve was immediately herded back; constant surveillance was maintained; laws were introduced with drastic consequences for anyone caught interfering with the animals; and the authorities established a complete ban on any information about the animals' status.

Many of the rhinos' behavioural patterns assisted in this protection, for they are territorial to a considerable degree, they have quite particular habitat preferences, and they are gregarious.

In 1959, however, the Natal Parks Board lifted the news embargo to announce a population of 567 white rhinos in Umfolozi, with about 40 others wandering outside but within the immediate vicinity of the reserve. Though the species was considered to be off the critical list, it still gave cause for concern. Then, as

though in some strange and historic head-down charge, the white rhino population grew to about 1,600 by the early 1960s. Now well removed from the threat of extinction, there were enough animals to start rebuilding the wild populations.

Deliveries began slowly at first, with the gift of four rhinos to Meru National Park in Kenya. Then another four went to Chobe in Botswana. Ten went to Mlilwane Game Reserve in Swaziland, 60 to Rhodesia, 10 to Mozambique, 10 to Angola, 12 to private game reserves in Namibia (South West Africa), and many more to the Kruger National Park and other game reserves in South Africa itself, especially in Natal and the Orange Free State.

Private buyers for game farms in the Transvaal were also supplied, and then exports began to safari parks and zoos all over Britain, Europe, Japan, and the United States.

Today the white rhino is doing well in most of the conservation areas to which it has been reintroduced, though there must be doubts about the animals in countries like Angola, Mozambique, and Rhodesia. These ex-Umfolozi rhinos have been breeding, thus continuing to augment the overall numbers.

The white rhino story is very different now compared with 1906. The Umfolozi population is maintained at about 1,200, and excess animals are transferred to any organisation or even individual whose reasons for wanting one (or more) meet the exacting requirements of the Natal Parks Board.

Those who apply for white rhinos and are granted their request get their animals for nothing: they only have to pay for transport from Umfolozi. Since 1962 well over 2,000 animals have been exported in this way from the reserve.

Though there are no more than about 4,000 of these great creatures in existence, conservationists are delighted with the situation. Even if some calamity should befall the parks and reserves where they are conserved in southern Africa, there would still be the substantial captive stocks around the world. The future for the white rhino seems secure.

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