



# 24

*Habitat requirements of the  
white rhinoceros*  
J. C. du Toit



## CHAPTER 24

## Habitat requirements of the white rhinoceros - J.G. du Toit

### Nutritional requirements

During the rainy season, short grasses are the most important feed source, provided that they remain green. Examples of such grasses are *Panicum* species, *Urochloa* species, *Digitaria* species and *Sporobolus* species. Shade loving grasses are utilized at the start of the dry season, as long as they are still green. During the dry season, rhinoceroses exclusively utilize medium to tall grass veld, of which rooigras *Themeda triandra* is the most important.

Rhinoceroses avoid turpentine grass (*Cymbopogon* spp.) as it is an aromatic grass smelling of turpentine, as well as three-awn grasses (steekgras, *Aristida* species) due to their low nutritional value. Tall grass veld at the foot and lower slopes of hills and ridges is utilized first and rhinoceroses tend to graze on plateaux as the dry season advances. The animals have a strong preference for grass veld on doleritic soils and, given the choice, will avoid sandy soils.

### Water requirements

During the rainy season, when there is an abundance of freely available water, the rhinoceros will drink twice a day. During the dry winter season, rhinoceroses will drink every second day (on average) and may even go four days without water. The animals enjoy taking a mud-bath during the hottest time of the day and will often wallow in the mud for hours on end. During these rest periods, terrapins may pick engorged ticks from the sleeping rhinoceros. A rhinoceros should take in about three percent of their body mass in water daily. In the heat of day rhinoceroses usually lie in the shade of leafy trees.



Veld pans fulfil a thermoregulatory function for animals such as the elephant, rhinoceros and buffalo, which enjoy rolling in mud. Mud pans that form as a result of such wallowing activities may increase in size with time and serve as temporary waterholes in the rainy season, easing the grazing pressure around the permanent waterholes.

### In summary

The white rhinoceros prefer open savanna and avoid areas with low, dense shrubs. Sufficient shade and permanent open water is important; the rhinoceros originally occurred naturally in areas where rainfall exceeds 450 mm per annum. Two activity peaks occur in the wet



season, i.e. early morning and late afternoon, when the animals graze. During the hottest part of the day they rest in high lying areas, seeking a breeze. During the dry season more activity is devoted to moving between watering points.

### Practical implications for the rhinoceros rancher

- To avoid erosion, artificial watering points should be provided in natural water courses.
- Where old grass tends to accumulate during the winter months, a sound veld-burning programme should be followed.
- Prevent competition with other grazers, e.g. buffalo and zebra.

