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Species fact sheet: African Rhinos

Once common on the African plains,
today there are very few rhinos
outside protected areas



Black rhino, Zimbabwe. © WWF-Canon / Martin Harvey

Just 150 years ago, Africa's savannahs teemed with over a million black and white rhinos. However, relentless hunting by European settlers saw rhino numbers and distribution quickly decline. The southern white rhino particularly suffered from this colonization, and in the late 19th century was actually thought to be extinct.

Poaching escalated during the 1970s and 1980s as demand grew for rhino horn — a prized ingredient in traditional Asian medicines and valued for dagger handles in the Middle East. As a result, black rhino numbers declined by a staggering 96 per cent between 1970 and 1992, and the northern white rhino population decreased from around 2,000 in 1960 to just 15 or so in 1984.

Thanks to vigorous conservation and anti-poaching efforts, some African rhino populations are now stable or increasing. However, poaching still occurs, and some populations remain very small and threatened. Very few African rhinos now survive outside of protected areas and sanctuaries.

There are two species of African rhino:

1. Also called the 'hook-lipped' rhino, the **black rhino** has a prehensile upper lip, which is used to browse and feed on twigs of woody plants and legumes. Black rhinos were once found throughout sub-Saharan Africa, with the exception of the Congo Basin. They are now limited to 3,725 individuals in a patchy distribution from Cameroon in the west to Kenya in the east, and south to South Africa.

There are four black rhino sub-species, three of which are classified as Critically Endangered.

The most numerous sub-species, the southern-central black rhino (*D. b. minor*) inhabited a historic range from central Tanzania down through Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique to northern and eastern South Africa. Its current stronghold is in South Africa and the population is increasing.

The south-western black rhino (*D. b. bicornis*) is more adapted to the arid and semi-arid savannahs of Namibia, southern Angola, western Botswana, and western South Africa. The vast majority of individuals are now found in Namibia, where numbers are increasing at 5% per year.

The East African black rhino (*D. b. michaeli*), was historically distributed from south Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, down through Kenya into north-central Tanzania. It maintains its current stronghold in Kenya and numbers are increasing.

The West African black rhino (*D. b. longipes*) is classified as Probably Extinct. It once occurred across most of the savannahs of West Africa, but by the beginning of this century was reduced to only a few individuals in northern Cameroon which now may no longer exist.

At a glance:

Species:	Black rhino (or rhinoceros; <i>Diceros bicornis</i>), white rhino (<i>Ceratotherium simum</i>)
Habitat:	Tropical and subtropical grasslands; savannahs and shrublands; deserts and xeric shrublands
Location:	Eastern, Central, Western, and Southern Africa
Population:	18,236
Status:	Near Threatened to Probably Extinct (IUCN-The World Conservation Union)

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◀ to only a few individuals in northern Cameroon which now may no longer exist.

2. Also known as the 'square-lipped' rhinoceros, **white rhinos** have a squared (not pointed) upper lip. They are larger than the black rhino and have almost no hair.

There are two white rhino sub-species. The northern white rhino (*C. s. cottoni*) once occurred in southern Chad, eastern Central African Republic, southwestern Sudan, northern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and north-western Uganda. This Critically Endangered sub-species now only survives in Garamba National Park, DRC. The population continues to decrease, with only four individuals remaining.

The southern white rhino (*C. s. simum*) is one of conservation's greatest success stories. Thought to be extinct in the late 19th century, in 1895 a small population of less than 100 was discovered in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa. After more than a century of protection and management, southern white rhinos are now the only non-endangered rhinos. Classified as Near Threatened, they currently number about 14,538, confined to protected areas and private game reserves. South Africa remains the stronghold for these rhinos, with smaller populations having been re-introduced to Botswana, Namibia, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe. Southern white rhinos have also been introduced to Kenya, Zambia, and Cote d'Ivoire.

What are the problems facing African rhinos?

Hunting and poaching

Hunting by European settlers was the main cause of the decline in African rhino populations in the 19th and early

20th century. Accounts of five or six rhinos being killed by a single hunter in one day, to be eaten or simply for amusement, were common. By the 1890s, the number of southern white rhinos had plummeted to no more than 100 and by the 1960s, black rhino numbers had fallen to fewer than 70,000 individuals and northern white rhinos to around 2,000 individuals.

Poaching for their horn was by far the greatest threat to African rhinos in the second half of the 20th century, and decimated remaining populations in the 1970s and 1980s. Rhino horn is highly prized in traditional Asian medicine, where it is ground into a fine powder or manufactured into tablets as a treatment for a variety of illnesses including nosebleeds, strokes, convulsions, and fevers. Although there is no scientific proof that such treatments are effective, and despite increased surveillance and prosecution, poachers continue to kill the animals specifically for the horn.

Additionally, through the 1970s and 1980s, demand grew in the Middle East for rhino horn dagger handles, worn as status symbols. This, combined with a 20-fold rise in the price of rhino horn, had a devastating effect on rhino populations. Though the demand for rhino horn dagger handles started to shrink in the mid-1980s, the trade is still thought to exist.

Habitat loss

Habitat loss due to war and political instability remains a secondary threat to rhinos today. For example, in southern Zimbabwe, privately owned rhino conservancies have been recently invaded by landless people, reducing safe habitat for two large black rhino populations and increasing the risk of poaching and snaring.



Black rhino, Lake Nakuru National Park, Kenya. © WWF-Canon / Martin Harvey



White rhino calf, East Africa. © WWF-Canon / Martin Harvey



Placing a transmitter on a white rhino, Zimbabwe.
© WWF-Canon / Michel Gunther



Black rhino breeding project, Imire Game Farm, Zimbabwe.
© WWF-Canon / Martin Harvey

What is WWF doing to reduce threats to African rhinos in the wild?

Rhinos are ‘flagship’ species for their habitats — that is, charismatic representatives of the biodiversity within the complex ecosystems they inhabit. Because these large animals need a lot of space to survive, their conservation will help maintain biological diversity and ecological integrity over extensive areas and so help many other species.

WWF has been working to conserve rhinos for over 40 years. The current African Rhino Programme, launched in 1997, provides technical and financial support to 12 rhino conservation projects across Africa and operates in partnerships with key African rhino range states. The programme recognizes that the long-term future of African rhinos can only be ensured if local communities and the private sector are involved in the conservation effort in a meaningful way, and if they benefit from these resources without detriment to the growth of the rhino populations. It aims to improve the conservation and management of African rhinos in a holistic manner through:

- improving biological monitoring and population performance capacity building and sharing of expertise
- proactive anti-poaching measures, and management of rhino horn stockpiles, to halt illegal trade in rhino horn and its derivatives
- updating policy frameworks, legislation and law-enforcement measures.

Examples of current work to conserve African rhinos include:

1. In Zimbabwe, WWF has supported wildlife conservancies since 1991. These promote rhino conservation on private land in the context of “wildlife utilization as an appropriate form of land use” and work to achieve this in an economically and socially sustainable manner. Rhinos are translocated to the conservancy after former cattle ranchers de-stock their properties of domestic livestock, and remove the fences between their properties to provide an adequately large, ecologically sustainable area. The two largest conservancies, Save (3,200km²) and Bubiana (1,200 km²), hold around 50 per cent of Zimbabwe’s black rhino population, and focus on conserving this species.

White rhinos in Save are the basis of an innovative community investment scheme. Under this plan local communities ‘rear’ white rhinos (for which WWF is also providing ‘seed rhino stock’) on the conservancy, and sell the young to the conservancy. The proceeds support community owned and

operated projects around the conservancies. In return, the community provides a ‘security screen’ against rhino poaching, thereby protecting the rhinos — and the community’s investment — and reducing the amount of money the conservancy spends on security. This arrangement not only involves the local community in rhino conservation, but provides a positive financial incentive to protect the rhinos and stop poaching.

2. As their numbers grow, white rhinos are moving from protected areas to private properties. **In South Africa,** WWF set up a project with the African Rhino Owners Association (a group of private game ranchers with significant rhinos on their properties) to improve the security and biological management of rhino populations. As part of the work, WWF undertakes comprehensive surveys of rhino populations on private land throughout South Africa. The data is used to formulate and implement more effective security and biological management strategies. These long-term surveys, conducted every two years, have remained the South African government’s main source of reliable data regarding rhino numbers on private property.

In addition, in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, WWF works with the Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife Black Rhino Range Expansion Project (see *Focus Project box*).

3. In Kenya, WWF supports the Kenyan Wildlife Service’s (KWS) sanctuary-based conservation programme, in which rhinos are managed in small, often fenced, well-protected areas. The different populations are treated as one group, with animals moved between sanctuaries to ensure genetic diversity and maintain maximum population growth. WWF has provided steady funding and law-enforcement assistance to Kenya’s rhino sanctuary programmes since 1984, and the KWS programme is now showing important success in building black rhino populations.

4. In Namibia, WWF supports monitoring of rhino numbers as well as translocations in Etosha National Park and Kunene Communal Land.

5. WWF works on preventing over-exploitation of African rhinos for international trade through TRAFFIC — the international wildlife trade monitoring network organized and operated as a joint programme by and between WWF and IUCN – The World Conservation Union — as well as through associated field and policy interventions. For example, TRAFFIC helps African states with law enforcement and with the management of their stockpiles of rhino horn collected from the field, to reduce the risk of these horns entering the illegal market. WWF is also involved in rhino anti-poaching efforts in many countries.

Focus Project: KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, the state conservation organization in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal, manages the reserves which are home to many of Africa's 3,725 black rhinos. The largest population, numbering around 300, lives in Hluhluwe-iMfolozi Park, a 1000km² protected area of predominantly thornbush savannah, or thornveld.

WWF has been supporting Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife since the mid-1990s. The first stage focused on enabling Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife to improve the conservation and management of their rhino populations through improved biological and security monitoring, and population management. The project was so successful that Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife is now running out of space on their existing reserves for the increased number of rhinos. As a result, WWF is now also involved in an innovative scheme where rhino populations are being established on new sanctuaries in partnerships between the state, local communities, and private interests. This will provide a greater area in which the species may rapidly grow in numbers, and will serve to reclaim and preserve natural rhino habitats.

In essence, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife is forming partnerships with landowners in areas which were historically home to black rhinos. Given that very few, if any, single landowners own pieces of land large enough to support a significant black rhino population, cooperative conservancies are being established

between adjacent landowners who are prepared to remove their internal fences. Approximately 20 animals will be translocated to each new reserve area. The first site, Munyawana Game Reserve in northern KwaZulu-Natal, is operating successfully with a founder population of 15 black rhinos.

WWF's support involves identifying suitable project sites and facilitating their preparation to receive significant black rhino populations. WWF also supports rhino monitoring activities in existing state-run parks, including ear-notching and providing necessary equipment, such as binoculars, global positioning systems, backpacks and sleeping bags for the security patrols, and rhino-monitoring kits. The project also provides assistance with educating local communities towards a culture of care for the rhinos and their habitats, and a recognition of their value to the local community and the area's heritage.

The project also aims to spread the benefits derived from conserving black rhinos to people living around project sites. For example, 30 people — all previously unemployed — are being temporarily employed through project funds to fence the eMakhosini Ophathe Heritage Park, which is earmarked as a future project site.

KwaZulu-Natal is within the Drakensberg Montane Shrublands and Woodlands Ecoregion — one of WWF's Global 200 Ecoregions, biologically outstanding habitats where WWF concentrates its efforts.



White rhinos, Hluhluwe Game Reserve, KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. © WWF-Canon / Martin Harvey

Find out more...

This fact sheet is designed to give a broad overview of some of the threats faced by African rhinos, and to give examples of WWF and TRAFFIC's work and solutions on the ground. For more detailed information on species, WWF, TRAFFIC, and the work we do, please visit www.panda.org/species and www.traffic.org

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