

# Can We Save The Rhino?

by

**SuwilANJI Nachula**



White Rhinos in Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park, August 2019 (*A Newton*)

The two White Rhinoceroses on the first page of this project are pictured in Zambia's Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park. The photograph was taken on 30 August 2018. Both are now dead, killed almost exactly a year ago when they were hit by a speeding truck on the Livingstone to Sesheke road.

Not long after the photo was taken — and despite the round-the-clock protection afforded to the Rhinos by the scouts of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife (DNPW) — another was killed by poachers.

As is all too often the case with poaching and Rhinos, history was repeating itself. As recently as 2007, poachers shot what were then the Park's only two remaining White Rhinos, killing one and wounding the other.

The wounded animal made a recovery. It was joined by four more of its species, brought in by African Wildlife Foundation (AWF) in late 2009. A year later two of the recently introduced Rhinos produced young, bringing the Park's total population to seven.

Over the next couple of years this small but important population grew further, peaking at eleven before the tragedies of the poaching and the road accident. Thus, the Park is now home to just eight of these magnificent giants. And their future is by no means assured.

## The Big Picture

We shall return to Zambia's Rhinos in due course. But let's first take a couple of steps back and consider the plight of the Rhino globally.

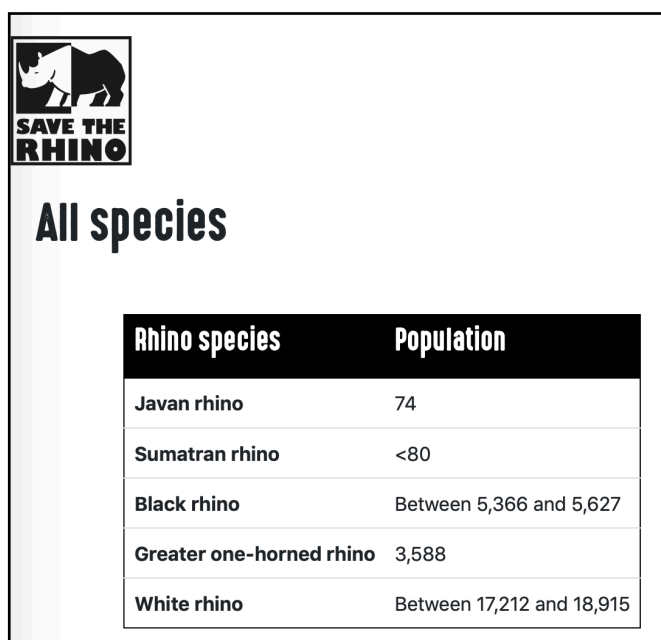


Figure 1: Global Rhino Population (Source: IUCN)

According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) the world's population of our six remaining Rhino species is almost certainly no greater than 25,000 (see Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> In Asia, both the Javan and the Sumatran Rhino are highly endangered. In India and Nepal the Greater One-Horned (or Indian) Rhino is better placed at around 3,500, having been fewer than 200 in number at the start of the 20th century, but it is still listed as "*Vulnerable*" on the IUCN Red List of endangered species.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the IUCN has treated as one species the Northern and Southern White Rhino. Consistent with the most recent scientific research I am treating them as two separate species. Similarly, I am considering the Eastern and now extinct Western Black Rhino as separate species.

In Africa the White Rhino wandered across the grasslands of Southern Africa in tens of thousands until the start of the 19th century. During the course of the next 100 years the population was reduced to (again) around 200 individuals, largely at the hands of the so called ‘Great White Hunters’. All things considered — especially the alarming threat posed by poaching, including in the species’ stronghold of South Africa (see Figure 2) — we are very fortunate still to have around 20,000 White Rhinos in the wild today. But this still leaves it as “*Near Threatened*” on the Red List.

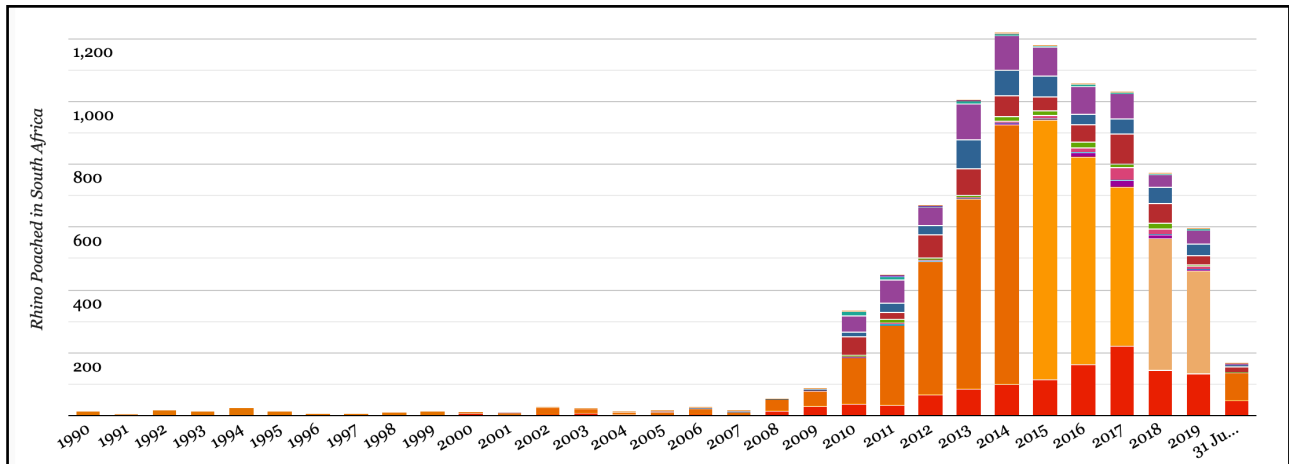


Figure 2: Rhino Poaching In South Africa (Sources: TRAFFIC/International Rhino Foundation)

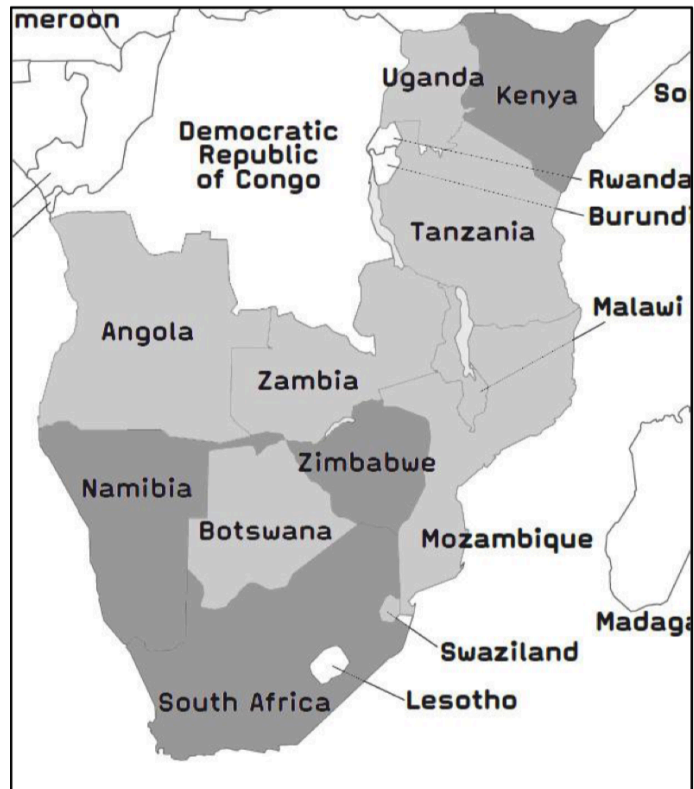
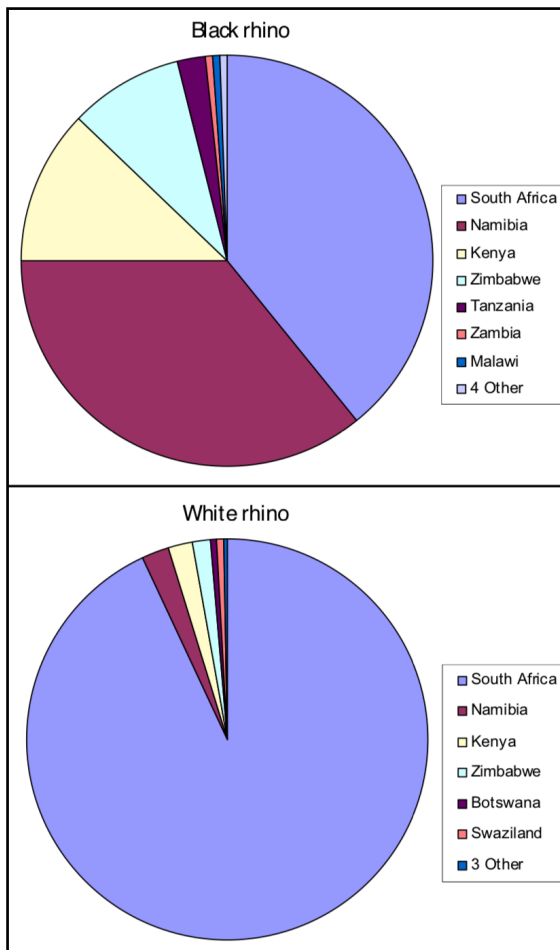
In fact, White Rhinos are split into two species, ie the Southern White Rhino which is native to South Africa and its neighbours (see the lower pie chart in Figure 3), and the Northern White Rhino, a native of Central Africa, which is now reduced to just two females who are heavily guarded in Ol Pejeta conservation area in Kenya. The two were brought by to Africa from Prague Zoo in 2009 with the one remaining male, Sudan, father to one of the females and grandfather to the other; tragically, he had to be put down in 2018 as old age overtook him. Barring a near-miraculous intervention by science, the Northern White Rhino is therefore effectively extinct.

Therein lies a warning about the fragility of small populations. The 1980s saw a major push to save the Northern White Rhino, based in the remote Garamba National Park in what was then Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo). From single figures (but still the majority of a remaining total population in the wild of just 15), the project had managed by the mid-1990s to grow the Garamba population into the 20s. Then the Rwandan/Ugandan invasion of Zaire intervened in 1996, destabilising most of the country, and this population had disappeared entirely by 2008.

The Black Rhino population numbers only around 5,500. It is therefore classified as “*Critically Endangered*”. Again, the population has been reduced from what must have been tens of thousands 200 years ago. Indeed, in West Africa the Black Rhino (now considered to be a separate species) was completely wiped out during the 20th century.

## About Africa’s Rhinos

Of Africa’s two species, the White, or Square-lipped, Rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*) is much larger than its Black, or Hook-lipped, cousin (*Diceros bicornis*) and the second largest land mammal (after the Elephant) in existence today. Its natural skin colour is grey, not white; but this is often influenced by the colour of the mud and dust in which it rolls. Given that it is actually grey we need to consider how the White Rhino got its more common name. For many years it was believed that this was probably a mis-translation of the Dutch/Afrikaans for “*wide*”, ie *wijd*, referring to this species’ lips. However, linguistic experts have failed to find any evidence to support this theory. So, the derivation remains a mystery.



(Dark shading shows the four countries which are home to 98.8% of White and 96.1% of Black Rhinos)

Figure 3: Distribution of Black and White Rhinos — subspecies merged  
(Sources: IUCN/SSC/AfRSG)

White Rhinos are grazers, ie they feed on grass for which the shape of their mouth is perfectly adapted. This is in contrast to the Black Rhino whose lip is adapted for plucking and eating leaves, ie browsing. So well suited are their lips to their diet that neither species has front teeth.

A bull White Rhino can weigh up to 2,000-2,300kg; and a cow can weigh up to 1,400-1,600kg.

The majority (98.8%) of the Southern White Rhinos occur in just four countries, ie South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Kenya.

In the late 19th century Southern White Rhinos were believed to be extinct until, in 1895, a population of fewer than one hundred was discovered in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa. Today's total population of between 19,600 and 21,000, thanks to heavy protection of the species, therefore ranks as a major conservation success story. Nevertheless, even though it is the only one of the five rhino species not listed as '*Endangered*', it is still considered to be '*Near Threatened*'.

White rhinos have a complex social structure. Sometimes groups of up to fourteen can form, usually females with calves. Adult males defend territories of roughly two square kilometres, which they mark with middens. Adult females' territories are up to seven times bigger.

Males regularly engage in conflict over females, which can cause serious wounds before one or other prevails. The successful male will then prevent the target female(s) from leaving his territory, as well as continuing to defend it from other males.



White Rhinos, Mosi-oa-Tunya NP, August 2021  
(S Nachula)

As recently as 1900 there are believed to have been a total of around one million Black Rhinos scattered across most of sub-Saharan Africa. However, thanks mainly to poaching by 1970 this had been reduced to 70,000; and by the end of the 20th century the total population was a mere 2,500, restricted to East and Southern Africa.



Since then intense protection of small groups restricted to relatively small, and often remote, areas has allowed the population to double to around 5,000. A very good example of such a conservation programme is to be found in Zambia's North Luangwa National Park (NLNP) which is believed to have a population of over 50 now. But the Black Rhino remains '*Endangered*', as is underlined by the fact that NLNP is its last remaining foothold in Zambia despite its ability to thrive in very varied landscapes and vegetation.

Black Rhino, Borana, Kenya, January 2014 (A Newton)

The Black Rhino is Africa's third largest land mammal, weighing between 700 and 1,300kg (with males and females being the same size). As the pointed shape of its top lip tells us, it is a browser, ie it eats mainly leaves. Unusually for a large mammal, it can survive without fresh water in areas where there are plentiful succulents. However, in areas where there is water they will drink heavily, given the opportunity, and even dig down to find the precious fluid.

### **On A Personal Note...**

Getting to see the Big Five in the wild can be a real challenge even for those of us who live in Africa. There is, of course, almost always an element of good fortune perhaps particularly with the illusive leopard. However, I was lucky enough to see my first Leopard on my very first safari — a day trip to Chobe National Park in Botswana — the day after my eighth birthday in August 2019. And Elephants are often to be seen in Livingstone itself without even venturing into our own Mosi-oa-Tunya National Park.

Since August 2019, I have seen Leopards on several occasions in Kafue National Park, as well as Lions and Cape Buffalos (both of which even pop up from time to time in Zambezi National Park just across the 'Mighty Zambezi' from our house 25km or so upstream from the Victoria Falls).

However (and thanks in part to covid-19 which had prevented a promised trip to Etosha National Park in Namibia), with my tenth birthday rapidly approaching this August I had still to see my first Rhinoceros. Nevertheless, I was not going to allow this to prevent me from entering Destination Livingstone's 'Paint a Rhino' competition, especially since I had what I thought was a very good idea for how to do something a little different.



I got the idea 'Rhinbow' from combining Rhino and the rainbow from the Victoria Falls which I had painted with top Zambian artist Quentin Allen when he was giving me art lessons earlier this year. I also decided to use modelling clay to make my Rhino three-dimensional in the hope that this would also make my work stand out on the eyes of the judges! I seem to have been successful in that I was awarded first prize in the children's section.

'Rhinbow' by Suwilanji Nachula (A Newton)

It was a great thrill a few days later to see my painting in the National Art Gallery together with those of the other winners and runners-up, and to be presented with my prize money by the Chair of Destination Livingstone, Peter Jones. And an even bigger thrill was quickly to follow when the DNPW Senior Warden Charles Simwawa kindly agreed to allow one of the other prize winners who had also never seen a Rhino, Erik Mwamba, and myself to visit the Mosi-oa-Tunya rhinos.



So, on 2 August Erick and I set off in the Bongwe Safaris/CATS game viewer with Senior Ranger i/c rhinos Philimon Kawala and CATS top guide Malambo through the National Park to fulfil my dream of seeing Rhinos. After a gentle drive enjoying the other plentiful wildlife we pulled up to set off on the final 100 metres or so on foot. And suddenly there just a few metres before us resting in the shade were six magnificent White Rhinos! I was so happy to see these magnificent creatures that my eyes blurred with tears!!

White Rhinos, Mosi-oa-Tunya NP, August 2021 (S Nachula)



With The Rhinos (A Newton)

As we walked back to the truck it struck me how very very lucky I am to have completed my personal Big Five just six days before my 10th birthday and in less than two years. AND all of them seen not only in Zambia but in or within just a few hours drive of our 'tourist capital' Livingstone.

Furthermore, you don't have to be a competition winner to see the Rhinos in Livingstone. Regular tours are available to all (including the Bongwe/CATS *Tipunzile* tours at just ZMW150 for Zambian citizens). Indeed, a combination of Kafue NP and Livingstone offers a very decent chance of seeing all the Big Five in a single vacation. So, if you have yet to see all the Big Five and yearn to do so, please check out Zambia and our fabulous wildlife. The Big Five, the Victoria Falls and so much more await you!

Of course, this all presupposes that the answer to the question in the title of my essay is that we can save our Rhinos. To this end the DNPW team in Livingstone, aided by a number of conservation organisations, is already doing a fantastic job. But there is much more we can and should be doing, not last ensuring that more of the economic benefits from the tourism industry filter down to the wider community. For it is clear from conservation programmes worldwide that protection alone will not succeed and that endangered fauna and flora will only survive when they bring clear benefits to the community as a whole.

The art competition has helped to raise the profile of the Rhinos in Livingstone and make more people aware of the contribution they make to our tourism sector. My hope now is that many more young Zambians will quickly follow in my footsteps, see our beautiful Rhinos for themselves and come to appreciate how truly special they are, as I have done.

Suwilanjji Nachula  
10 August 2021