

Deepening Understanding

YR4 Non-fiction Text

White Rhinos by Laura Curtis



The White Rhinoceros

The white rhinoceros is one of the most magnificent creatures to walk the face of the earth. Despite having been around for over 50 million years, poachers have targeted these gentle giants for their horns and, a few years ago, they were brought back from the very brink of extinction. Sadly, in recent years, the numbers being killed have once again skyrocketed and urgent efforts are now being made to stop this senseless and illegal trade.

There are actually two types of white rhino: southern white rhinos and northern white rhinos. Whilst the numbers of southern white rhinos have successfully increased, there are only two female northern white rhinos left in the entire world. The last male northern white rhino, Sudan, sadly died on the 20th March 2018, from natural causes, at the age of 45.



Habitat

The majority of the white rhinos left in the world live in only four countries in Africa (South Africa, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Kenya) and spend their time roaming around the savannah and grassy woodlands. Out of all the five rhino species, the white rhinos are the only grazers. They feed almost exclusively on short grasses. This means that they are herbivores.

During the heat of the midday sun, they like to rest in the shade. When the temperatures are very high, they stay cool and remove little parasites (which invade their folds of skin) by bathing in shallow mud pools. When the mud dries, it also protects the rhino's skin from sunburn. The white rhinos are active at dawn or dusk when the temperatures are much cooler.

Physical Description

Did you know that the white rhino is the second largest land mammal in the world? Only African elephants are bigger in size. Adult males can grow to a height of 1.85 metres and can weigh an astonishing 3.5 tonnes (3500kg). Females are much smaller but can still weigh a massive 1.7 tonnes.

White rhinos have special physical characteristics that differ from other rhino species. Compared to black rhinos, white rhinos have a longer skull, a larger shoulder hump and a less pointed forehead. They also have square-lipped mouths and this is from where they get their name. 'White' comes from the Afrikaans word 'weit' meaning wide.

Current Threats and the Future

Sadly, hundreds of white rhinos have been poached annually in recent years. Some people in Asia (especially in Vietnam) still believe powdered rhino horn has medicinal benefits even though modern medicine has disproved this belief. Other people demand the purchase of rhino horns as they are seen as a symbol of status and wealth. Poachers can earn vast sums of money for the horns they seize from rhinos.



Because they live in herds and are generally unaggressive, the white rhinos are easy targets for poachers. Fearing that these wonderful giants would face extinction, as there are only around 20,000 left in the world, poaching was made illegal. However, in January 2018, it was reported that the killing of rhinos was still at crisis levels with over 1,000 killed in 2017.

Fortunately, there are many organisations who are trying to save the white rhinos. The Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) and 'Save the Rhino International' are campaigning to raise the profile of the white rhino and are urging governments around the world to help by stopping the illegal sale of rhino horns. They have created special conservation areas, where the rhinos can roam safely without the threat of poachers, and are raising money through wildlife tourism. With human protection, let us hope that these amazing animals continue to live for many years to come.

Amazing Facts

- The name rhinoceros means 'nose horn' and it comes from the Greek words *rhino* (nose) and *ceras* (horn).
- Did you know that white rhinos can live up to 40 years old?
- Out of all the different species of rhino, it is believed that the white rhinos have the most complex social relationships. Groups of around 14 rhinos can all live together in herds, including mothers with calves and males.
- The adult males mark their territory (ranging from 1-3 square kilometres) by leaving large dung piles.
- Millions of years ago, other ancient types of rhino roamed the earth. The closest living relative of the woolly rhinoceros that lived in the Ice Age is the Sumatran rhino.
- Despite their huge size and weight, rhinos are speed machines! They can run fast reaching speeds of 50km an hour!
- Rhinos have very poor eyesight but have extremely good hearing and sense of smell.
- Rhino horns are made from the same substance (keratin) that our fingernails and hair are made from.

