

"With the exception of man, they have no enemies but lions and leopards, which prowl about seeking their young." --Herbert Lang

The White Rhinoceros *Ceratotherium simum*

Gordy Slack

There are two subspecies of white rhinoceros in Africa: the northern rhino (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*) and the southern one (*Ceratotherium simum simum*). By the end of the nineteenth century, the once robust southern population had been reduced to only 50 or so animals and its extinction was considered inevitable. The discovery of a northern population of white rhinos in the Uele district of the Congo Basin in 1900 was met with relief and enthusiasm by biologists like Herbert Lang who wanted to ensure a future for the ancient herbivores. Although the northern and southern populations are distinct subspecies, discovery of the northern population boosted the chances that the animal's 60-million-year-long lineage might have some future.

When Lang and Chapin set sail for Africa in 1909, the population of northern white rhinoceros was by no means large. "Judging from observations made by others and ourselves," wrote Lang five years after his return, "from 2,000 to 3,000 white rhinoceroses may still be alive in the entire northern range." Indeed, it was the rhino's rarity, in addition to its other-worldliness and the surprise of its discovery in 1900, which gave it, along with the okapi, a central role in the American Museum's Congo Expedition.

"Just how rapidly their numbers will decrease," Lang observed, "depends upon the protection afforded them." As it turns out, the protection granted the northern white rhinos was not much. In the past ninety years, the northern and southern groups reversed their circumstances. The southern population has been nursed back to a relatively secure population of about 10,400 individuals. Meanwhile, according to the World Wildlife Fund, the northern white rhino has become one of the rarest mammal species on Earth. There are only about 30 left in the wild. Most of these are in the Congo's Garamba National Park, which was established in 1938 and designated a World Heritage Site in 1980. Although they are legally protected at Garamba, desperate poachers continue to hunt them for their meat and valuable horns.

The white rhinoceros, also known as the square-lipped rhinoceros, actually has a dark, slate-gray hide. It was named "white" because it sometimes wallows in white mud, which, upon drying, covers the whole animal in a white, crusty armor. "White" was also adopted to distinguish this species from Africa's other kind of rhinoceros, the African black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*). The black rhino holds its head up as it walks, unlike the white rhino, which is always watching and sniffing the ground as it goes. Another difference between the two African species is the black rhino's prehensile lower lip, which is used like a finger to pick and select leaves and twigs.

The three white rhinos still on display in the American Museum's Carl Akeley Hall of African Mammals were brought back from the Congo by Lang and Chapin in 1915.



Image # 221605

The white rhinoceros eats grass and does most of its foraging at night. During the day, the rhino's main task is to stay cool and rest. Wallowing holes such as this one are made and maintained by generations of rhinos who cool off in them and coat themselves in a protective layer of mud. Sometimes that mud is white, hence the name "white rhinoceros." Their skin is actually dark gray.



Image # 108

White rhinoceros diorama, Akeley Hall of African Mammals.



Image # 221439

An unidentified African man standing next to a rhino killed near Faradje. Note the distinctive notch in the posterior horn. This animal was taken to New York, where it was prepared for display in the Akeley Hall of African Mammals. It remains on display today.