

OPINION

Why the name of the white rhinoceros is not appropriate

Kees Rookmaaker

Rhino Resource Center, c/o IUCN Species Survival Programme, 219c Huntingdon Road, Cambridge CB3 0DL, UK; email: rhino@rookmaaker.freereserve.co.uk

Abstract

John Barrow referred to a white rhinoceros in South Africa in 1801, followed by Petrus Borchers in 1802 and Andrew Bain in 1826. The term came into general use after the publication of books by J.E. Alexander and W. Cornwallis Harris in 1838. Ten different theories are listed to explain the name 'white rhinoceros' for an animal that is grey, not white. The popular explanation that 'white' is derived from the Afrikaans word 'wyd' is examined and found to be unsubstantiated and historically incorrect.

Résumé

John Barrow fait référence à un rhinocéros blanc en Afrique du Sud en 1801, suivi par Petrus Borchers en 1802 et par Andrew Bain en 1826. L'appellation est devenue usuelle après la publication des livres de J.E. Alexander et W. Cornwallis en 1833. On connaît dix théories différentes pour expliquer le nom de « rhinocéros blanc » pour un animal qui est gris et pas blanc. On a examiné l'explication populaire qui veut que le « white » (blanc en anglais) dérive du mot afrikaans « wyd » (large en afrikaans) et on a trouvé qu'elle était sans fondement et, historiquement, incorrecte.

Introduction

Some call it square-lipped or square-mouthed rhinoceros when they want to be anatomically correct, others call it grass rhinoceros in reference to its ecological niche (Kingdon 1997) or Burchell's rhinoceros after the first describer. Taxonomists call it *Ceratotherium simum* (Burchell, 1817), but in daily life we all use the name white rhinoceros. At the same time, everybody knows that the colour of this animal is a shade of grey, largely similar in colour to the skin of the black rhinoceros, *Diceros bicornis* (Linnaeus, 1758). It needs to be explained why an animal that isn't white in any sense of the word is called 'white', or conversely, why its relative is called 'black'. It is often taken for granted that the 'white' in white

rhinoceros is a corruption of the word 'wyd' ('wide') used by the Boers in 19th-century South Africa, for instance in the popular and authoritative works by Penny (1987:36), Cumming et al. (1990:3), Booth (1992:34), Fouraker and Wagener (1996:4) and Toon and Toon (2002:9). A similarly significant corpus of authors, however, dismiss this derivation from Afrikaans in favour of other explanations; these authors include Guggisberg (1966:87), Player (1972:30), Owen-Smith (1973:14–15), Balfour and Balfour (1991:38), Pitman (1991:38) and Zecchini (1998:25). In this paper, I review the earliest references to a 'white' rhinoceros in southern Africa to establish when the name came into general use, then I survey the various theories of the origin of the name and discuss the linguistic argument.



The 'flat-nosed rhinoceros' as portrayed in a 19th century engraving (private collection of Lucy Vigne).

Early references to a white rhinoceros

William John Burchell (1781–1863) first came across a new kind of rhinoceros on 16 October 1812 near Chué Spring (26°18' S 23°10' E), north of Kuruman in South Africa. He shot two and made a number of sketches on the spot (Cave 1947). After his return to England, Burchell named the animal *Rhinoceros simus* in a letter published in a French journal in 1817, but only alluded to its existence in the account of his travels, because his narrative abruptly stops with events of 3 August 1812 (Burchell 1817, 1824:75). Although he never used an English name for this animal, it became known as Burchell's rhinoceros (Lesson 1827) or as the flat-nosed rhinoceros (Jardine 1836). Clearly, the colloquial name 'white rhinoceros' was introduced elsewhere.

The identity of the animals in two earlier instances involving a 'white rhinoceros', in quotation marks, needs further discussion. The first example is found

in the account of travels by John Barrow (1764–1848), who stayed at the Cape of Good Hope from 1797 to 1803 as private secretary to the governor. In 1798, Barrow met a local chief at Kamiesberg in the Northern Cape Province who used to hunt beyond the Hantam Mountains and boasted to have killed in one excursion seven giraffes and three rhinoceroses, said to be large in size and endowed with a thin skin. The chief called them 'white', and this is confirmed on the map in Barrow's book, where he stated for the country of the Bosjesman (east of Kamiesberg) that 'the white rhinoceros [is] plentiful in this part of the country, also springboks, hartebeest, and eland' (Barrow 1801:395 and map). Because the thinness of the skin is insufficient for proper identification, we may never know what exactly was hunted by the chief of Kamiesberg.

A few years later, in 1801, the government sent an expedition to the Briquas at Latakoo (near Kuruman), commanded by P.J. Truter and W. Somerville and accompanied by Samuel Daniell and Petrus

Borcherds. Members of the party shot a male rhinoceros on 27 December 1801 at Koussie Fountain (27°54' S 23°14' E) and a female on 30 December 1801 at Yzerberg Fountain (28°07' S 23°01' E). When the hunters returned to camp with news about slaying the second specimen, they claimed that it was different from the first animal as it was a 'white' rhinoceros. Borcherds was among those who rode out to inspect the new trophy, but as he admitted in a letter written in 1802 to his father Meent Borcherds in Stellenbosch, he was surprised: 'I expected this animal to be entirely white according to its name, but I found that she was paler ash-grey than the black, and will appear lighter at a distance, and put the derivation of its name down to that' (Borcherds 1802:219). The incident was mentioned in the official report of the journey by Truter and Somerville (1802:393), stating that this animal, compared with the first, had a flatter upper lip, horns much finer and bent more hindwards, and a body generally smaller. Unfortunately, the description does not allow conclusive specific identification, because it combines the flat upper lip of the white rhinoceros with the smaller size of the black rhinoceros. Samuel Daniell made 11 sketches of the rhinoceroses in the field and, although his notes of sizes are not completely consistent, he apparently depicted both specimens. There is no doubt that all his sketches show animals with a prehensile upper lip and with the other characteristics of the black rhinoceros, not the white species (Rookmaaker 1998).

It is very difficult to pinpoint exactly when the name white rhinoceros came into general use for *Ceratotherium simum*. At the start of the 19th century, only *Diceros bicornis* was known, generally denoted simply as the African rhinoceros. The two species were consistently referred to as black and white, comparable to modern usage, in the accounts of travels and hunting by Alexander (1838) for Namibia and by Harris (1838:376, 1839:371) for the Magaliesberg region. Neither author saw a need to clarify this choice of names, which suggests that they had heard them in Cape Town or that they were commonly used by their companions or by the local inhabitants. These people would have spoken Dutch, Afrikaans or one of the indigenous Bantu or Khoekhoe languages. When Andrew Bain on 5 August 1826 went to examine a rhinoceros shot between Honing Vlei and Konkay (ca. 26°13' S 23°22' E), he stated that the local Griquas called it 'white rhinoceros' and that it had a broad and flat nose (Bain 1949:29).

The theories

There have been at least 10 theories, previously reviewed by Renshaw (1904:131–134), why a rhinoceros with a greyish skin should be called white. I will list them here briefly only, initially without discussion or elaboration and with just a few references to their proposers or adherents.

1. *Colour*. It is possible that the white rhinoceros is in fact lighter than the black species, described respectively as 'pale broccoli-brown' and 'pale yellowish brown' by Andrew Smith (1838, pl. 2; 1839, pl. 19). As suggested by Shortridge (1934, vol. 1:435), the animal would have been called *white* in contradistinction to the darker-coloured *black* rhinoceros.
2. *Albinism*. Nicholson (1894) advanced that white originated 'from the comparative frequency of albinos among them'. A truly albino rhinoceros would be a real find but has never been seen as far as I am aware. Apparently, Nicholson meant animals that were lighter than usual, because he continues to say that he shot three specimens 'of a light yellow or cream colour', unfortunately without stating where he shot them or what happened to the trophies. He was correct, however, to state that cream-coloured rhinoceroses had been reported previously. Alexander (1838, vol. 2:150) saw one of this description on 23 May 1837 near the Chama or Soft River in central Namibia (23°18' S 16°24' E). According to Harris (1841:96), who had seen white rhinos in their hundreds near the Limpopo River, the animal 'often approaches to cream colour'. This may be interpreted to mean that some white rhinos are much lighter than others of the same species or than the black rhinoceros.
3. *Wallowing*. When a rhinoceros leaves a wallow or pool, the mud clings to its body and dries, which gives the animal the same colour as the soil on which it lives. As this is often lighter than the colour of the skin, the early settlers in South Africa referred to it as white rhinoceros. Owen-Smith (1973:15) suggested that this was the colour of the calcareous soil of its habitat.
4. *Sunlight*. When a rhinoceros is seen under certain light conditions in the African bush, it may appear much lighter from a distance than its skin actually is on close inspection (Roosevelt and Heller 1915:663). Kirby (1920:229) ensured that on the

open grass plains 'standing on a ridge exposed to the slanting rays of the morning sun they look absolutely white'.

5. *Geographic variation.* Beddard (1902:257) had heard that, in years past, the white rhinos living in the south-west of the Cape Colony were much paler and whiter than those in the north-east. As white rhinos never existed in the south-western part of South Africa, this might refer to the rumours about the animal in the book by John Barrow (1801).
6. *Egret droppings.* Lavauden (1934:426) assumed that settlers in South Africa saw rhinos covered with droppings of the cattle egrets, *Bubulcus ibis* (Linnaeus, 1758), which are often perched on their backs. The droppings being white in colour, the rhinoceros would look white when seen from a distance.
7. *Disposition.* According to Player (1972:30), the old Boer hunters likened the white rhinoceros to the white man said to be of timid disposition compared with the wild and fierce nature of the black rhinoceros, like the tribes of the interior.
8. *Age and sex.* Drummond (1875, 1876) suggested, without further clarification, that the difference in colour between individuals or species may be attributed to age or sex.
9. *Colour of horn.* MacGillewill (1894) stated that the horns of the white rhinoceros are white, while those of the black rhinoceros are black: 'The above is the explanation I got from a veteran hunter, old Hartley, in Mashonaland in 1867. The late Mr Thomas Bain was of the opinion that this explanation is correct. The old Boer hunters Viljoin and Swartz could give no other reason for the name 'witte rhinoster'.' He continued that knobkerries were generally light in colour and were of such length that they could only have been made from a white rhino's horn. He also made pipes out of rhino horn, choosing those of the black rhinoceros, because dark-coloured pipes were in fashion. It is strange, however, that in the hunting literature of the 19th century, the colour of the horns is never a point of discussion.
10. *Corruption of an Afrikaans word.* Pitman (1931a) apparently was the first to suggest that 'white' is a corruption of a Dutch word expressing 'bright' or 'shining' in the vernacular, referring to the smoother hide. By the time he published his book about his activities as game warden in Uganda, it had been pointed out to him that there was no

such word in Dutch resembling 'white', hence it was 'more likely to be a corruption of the Dutch word *widg* meaning *great*' (Pitman 1931b:1, my italics). When Shortridge (1934, vol. 1:435) sought to clarify the etymology of the term, it was, of course, very quickly discovered that *widg* does not exist in Dutch. Pitman's theory was soon buried—in fact I have been unable to find a reference to it in publications on the rhinoceros for almost 20 years; Roberts (1951), for instance, offered no explanation at all. It was tentatively revived by Bergh (1952:11), when Antwerp Zoo received their first examples of the northern white rhino. However, he transformed the words as somebody with knowledge of Dutch would do, suggesting that *white* derived from a confusion with the Dutch *wijde*, meaning *wide*. This theory was repeated by Owen (1956) and Astley Maberly (1963) and became the most common explanation from the 1960s onwards.

Discussion

The argument that *white* in *white rhinoceros* is a corruption of a Dutch or Afrikaans word needs careful analysis before it can be dismissed or accepted. Afrikaans, I am told, evolved into a language distinct from Dutch during the second half of the 18th century but would still have had many similarities in the first half of the next century. In current Dutch, there is a word *wijd*, which through the ages and dialects could possibly have been spelled *weit*, *weid*, *wyd*, *wyt*, without change of pronunciation or meaning. It can be translated into English as *wide*, *spacious*, *large*, or *broad*. Where English has the words *wide* and *broad* with partly overlapping meanings, so the Dutch has *wijd* and *breed*. A Dutch person today would use the word *breed* to denote the width of a small object or anatomical part, hence *square-lipped rhinoceros* becomes *breedlipneushoorn* in Dutch (Bruggen 1965) or *breëliprenoster* in Afrikaans (Bigalke 1963).

It is my contention that in order to corrupt the Dutch *wijd* into *wide* or *white*, there must have been such a word used in relation to the rhinoceros. Therefore, we would need to find a usage such as *wijd* or *wijdlip* or *wijdmond* or *wijdbek* together with *neushoorn/rhinoceros/renoster*. As etymology is slippery ground for a zoologist, I asked teachers of Afrikaans and old Dutch questions about this issue during a symposium held in 2002 at the University of Stellenbosch. In

short, the outcome was that there is no evidence of a combination of *wyd* and *rhinoceros* in written Dutch or Afrikaans. Hans den Besten (University of Amsterdam) checked all the relevant material, including Scholtz (1974) and Silva (1996) and found that *wydrenster*, *wydbek renoster* or similar combinations have never been recorded. It is, therefore, impossible that *white* in *white rhinoceros* is a corruption of *wijd* or any other Dutch or Afrikaans word of the early 19th century.

Among the 10 theories listed above about how the white rhinoceros got its name, none stands out as obviously correct, but few can be completely ruled out. The possibilities based on external characteristics fail to explain why they would apply to the white rhinoceros and not to the black, whose skin is similar in colour. The currently most widely accepted explanation that white is a corruption of a word used by the Boers of South Africa in times when the rhinoceros was still plentiful, discussed in the previous paragraph, proves to be ill founded. Unfortunately, a good alternative remains elusive. The earliest references to a white rhinoceros in the South African interior, by Barrow in 1801 and Borchers in 1802, may well hold the key to the truth, even if at the moment evidence is insufficient to know exactly in which direction to search. Alternatively, *white* could have emerged as an opposite to *black* rhinoceros, but I have not been able to find historical evidence to justify this possibility. Another option could be that the epithet *white* is a translation or derivation from one of the original languages spoken in the African interior. The chief interviewed by Barrow, the hunters reporting to Truter and Somerville, and the Griquas accompanying Bain probably used the word *white* for the rhinoceros in accordance with the usage in their own vernacular speech. Preliminary investigations, however, have not yielded any clues that would strengthen this argument. Nevertheless, I hope to have established that 'white' in 'white rhinoceros' cannot have evolved from a Dutch or Afrikaans word. This derivation should no longer be used in popular texts to explain the name of the rhinoceros called 'white'.

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