

BOOK REVIEWS

The Rhinoceros of South Asia

LC (Kees) Rookmaaker, with contributions by Joachim K Bautze and Kelly Enright

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Eloquently written with a wealth of absorbing detail about Asian rhinos (*Rhinoceros unicornis*, *Rhinoceros sondaicus* and *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*), and outstanding illustrations, this is a magnificent encyclopedic publication. The book describes the three rhinoceros species that existed in South Asia and their historical distribution. Most chapters cover *R. unicornis* (the author uses the Latin names), which had by far the most extensive range in South Asia. Kees Rookmaaker, a retired historian of zoology, has specialized in finding and compiling rhino records throughout his career. This book is the culmination of Rookmaaker's study of more than 40 years, collating archaeology, Indology, art history, palaeontology, geology, conservation and zoological research. It provides an incredible synthesis of data.

The publication is available open access (free to the public) on the Internet, which will help researchers immensely for further study and those interested in rhinos around the world. The hard copy, a collector's item, can be obtained from the publisher's [Brill](https://www.brill.com) (details at end). The

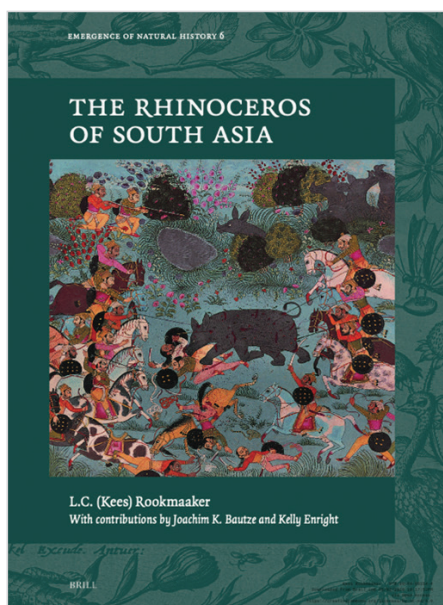


Figure 1. Front cover

text is supported by over 700 illustrations that show the importance of rhinos in the scientific and cultural fabric of South Asia, and beyond. There are 38 rhino distribution maps for the different parts of South Asia where they were found. All locality records are researched up to the map coordinates.

There are 82 datasets—with dates and locations—that include records of rhinos encountered and information about those people who recorded them, some hitherto unknown, with their life dates. There are 75 tables, some with important estimates of the status of rhinos. The first and last

rhino recordings are given where they occurred across South Asia, the first time these have been compiled. The book is divided into 47 'Rhino Regions' with chapters moving from west to east. At the end is a detailed bibliography of 3,081 items and a comprehensive index.

The abundant illustrations with informative captions are fascinating and occasionally gruesome—these are part of history, and the author does not shy away from their inclusion. Instead, Rookmaaker comments that accurate records of a dead rhino provide a means of learning and 'for it to have some significance through some form of utilization'. A specimen can be examined

and measured scientifically and can provide an accurate locality and date. Some past observers confused the three species, and thus whether they were sympatric or allopatric in certain areas. Identification was easier when rhinos were killed or captured, but even then, the description of the species was often not clearly recorded. The author has been careful to note the occasional erroneous historical records or if there were inadequate data and the need for continuous investigation where possible.

Rookmaaker has scrutinized the literature on Asia's rhinos since his first academic paper was published in 1973 when he was just finishing secondary school, unravelling the story of Clara the Dutch rhinoceros (*R. unicornis*), who came to Holland and toured the European continent between 1741 and 1758. Since then, he has been intrigued by rhinos in the historical literature. This book is a labour of love, and combines academic precision with a clear writing style, presenting many absorbing anecdotes and stories.

British citizens living in South Asia described encounters with rhinos, sometimes hunts with Maharajas, and meeting rural people who told them of their experiences with rhinos. Many local hunters used pit traps and spears to kill rhinos for their meat and other body parts, mainly their skin and, of course, their horns, which were in demand for export to China. In some moving accounts by British colonials, involving the rescue or capture of rhinos, a common finding was how quickly these wild creatures habituated to captive life, often being ridden upon and following their keepers meekly. People who described rhinos in art or literature generally either captured them for private menageries and public zoos or killed them as trophies and for museums. They were perceived as dangerous beasts to hunt (Fig. 2).

In Rookmaaker's clear introduction, he laments that the history of natural science is not a well-studied field, despite the need to combine the humanities with science for effective conservation. Chapter 2 written by historian Kelly Enright 'Reading Rhinos through the Lens of Human-Animal Studies' prepares the reader for the text to come. She explains that the value of history is immense in helping guide our current actions and future plans, based on understanding varied cultural perspectives. She remarks that more



Figure 2. Artistic rendering of a rhinoceros attacking an elephant bearing Victor Reginald Brooke (1873–1914) on 12 February 1909 in the Manas jungle, Assam (Rookmaaker, *The Rhinoceros of South Asia*, Fig. 40.3).

people in India and Nepal today are aware of the allure of rhinos and respect them as treasures that must be guarded with as much care as museum artworks—albeit as living animals.

While the focus of the book is mostly on *R. unicornis* there is something new on every page, depending on what people find interesting. Part 1 (chapters 3–45) is about *R. unicornis* (the greater-one horned or Indian rhino). This rhino species is the only one endemic to South Asia that occurred in India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, but disappeared from much of its range before the 19th century. With successful conservation approaches and anti-poaching measures *R. unicornis* has been recovering well in protected areas in northern and north-east India and southern Nepal. The species flourishes in the rich grassy floodplains of the Himalayan rivers, mainly in India's states of Assam and West Bengal, and in the southern provinces of Nepal.

Chapters 3–14 cover *R. unicornis* taxonomy and nomenclature; captivity, especially in Oudh (Lucknow

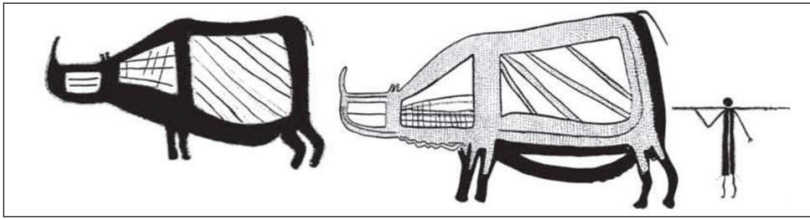


Figure 3. Erwin Neumayer surveyed prehistoric drawings (from the Mesolithic period 12,000-4000 years ago) in shelters and caves in the central part of India, providing for the book those depicting rhinos (tracing by Neumayer; Rookmaaker, *The Rhinoceros of South Asia*, Fig. 9.3).



Figure 4. All Mughal emperors from Babur to Humayan, Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb hunted or kept rhinos in the 16th and 17th centuries. This painting by Willem Schellinks shows a hunting scene with Shah Jahan, circa 1665, with a rhino-elephant fight faintly in the background (Museum of Orientalists, Doha, Qatar; Rookmaaker, *The Rhinoceros of South Asia*, Fig 11.13).



Figure 5. Mahout and hunter on an elephant are surprised by a rhinoceros. A mural within the Badal Mahal, Palace of Bundi, Rajasthan. This is one example of a long series of depictions of rhinos on the walls of the palaces in Rajasthan, here for the first time made public; height: 56 cm (photographed by Joachim Bautze; Rookmaaker, *The Rhinoceros of South Asia*, Fig. 15.2).



Figure 6. King Tribhuvan of Nepal posing with a rhino after a hunt. Taken by Kiran Man Chitrakar, 1920s or 1930s. This is one of a series of photographs that have never been published before (private collection, reprint not allowed; Rookmaaker, *The Rhinoceros of South Asia*, Fig. 24.19).



Figure 7. Elephants hauling a dead *R. unicornis* in hill country. Watercolour by Sita Ram. The rhino was shot by the party of Hastings at Maharajpur in the Rajmahal Hills, Bihar, on 14 December 1820 (British Library; Rookmaaker, *The Rhinoceros of South Asia*, Fig. 29.1).



Figure 8. The Maharaja of Cooch Behar invited high-ranking officials and friends to take part in his annual shoots in West Bengal and Assam from 1871 to 1907, including women. Here in 1896, the Maharaja, in the bow tie and his son Rajev, are seen with Daisy of Pless next to her husband, the Prince of Pless. (This photo is from a private collection; Rookmaaker, *The Rhinoceros of South Asia*, Fig. 32.22).

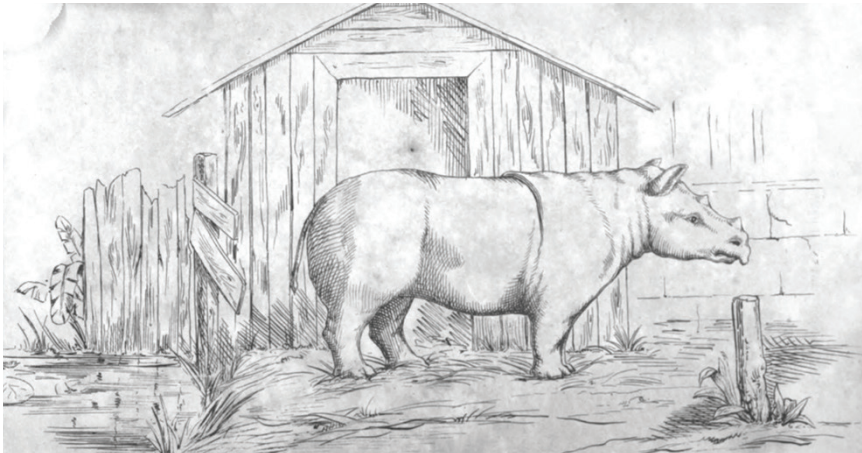


Figure 9. Begum was a famous two-horned hairy rhinoceros captured in Chittagong (Eastern part of Bangladesh) in 1867 by Captain Frederick Henry Hood, who made this drawing in his compound. This female rhino, *D. sumatrensis lasiotis*, lived in the London Zoo until 1900, setting a captive longevity record (Rookmaaker, *The Rhinoceros of South Asia*, Fig. 54.12).

and Baroda); fossil records; rock art in central India (Fig. 3); rhino records in Harappan settlements (an Indus Valley civilization that flourished from 2600 to 1900 BC in southern Pakistan); rhinos recorded in the Mughal period (from the start of the 16th century for two centuries) (Fig. 4); rhinos and their products exported from India east and west; historical records of rhinos in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Punjab and Gujarat.

Chapter 15 entitled ‘A Pictorial survey of rhinos in the art of Rajasthan’ was researched and written by Joachim Bautze. There are over 70 illustrations in this chapter alone, most showing rhinos encountering people, elephants, tigers and other rhinos. Many are photographed from wall paintings in some of Rajasthan’s old palaces showing intricate, artistic details. These give clear evidence that their range once extended into Rajasthan (Fig. 5). Chapters 16–19 continue with historical records eastwards into Uttar Pradesh, including Dudhwa National Park (NP), where rhinos are nowadays protected.

Nepal follows (chapters 20–27), again with historical records of rhinos and those who encountered them (Fig. 6), including a chapter on members of the British royal family visiting Nepal. Rookmaaker also writes about the successful protection of rhinos in Shuklaphanta NP, Bardia NP, and Chitwan NP.

The following seven chapters return to India, from the state of Bihar (Fig. 7) to Cooch Behar

(Fig. 8) in the state of West Bengal today and describe the growing numbers of rhinos in Gorumara NP and Jaldapara NP. Bhutan’s rhino records (chapter 35) and then 10 chapters on the rhinos recorded in north-east India, including Fitzwilliam Thomas Pollok and his writings in the 19th century, are thoroughly described. The state of Assam is famous for its rhinos, nowadays well protected from poaching in Manas NP, Orang NP, Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary and Kaziranga NP, which Rookmaaker covers in depth.

Part 2 (chapters 46–52) is about *R. sondaicus* (the lesser one-horned or Javan rhino). This species was found in South Asia’s Bangladesh (Sunderbans) and India (West Bengal). Chapters cover taxonomy and nomenclature; captivity; historical records in Odisha (Orissa), the Sundarbans, North Bengal and Assam. The book describes their gradual local extinction in these regions. Today extremely few exist in the world, in merely one protected area in Java, Indonesia.

Part 3 (chapters 53–64) is about *D. sumatrensis* (the hairy or Sumatran rhino). This species was also found in South Asia’s Bangladesh (Chittagong) and the north-east states of India (from Mizoram to Nagaland) and in West Bengal/Assam. Chapters cover taxonomy and nomenclature; captivity; and historical records in Chittagong and areas further north-east towards the Myanmar border. As for *R. sondaicus*, the book records the gradual local extinction of *D. sumatrensis* in South Asia, which remarkably had to be pieced together from just 26 reports from 1862 onwards. Today extremely few *D. sumatrensis* are known to survive in the world,



Figure 10. This is a previously unknown photograph of a young *R. sondaicus inermis* captured in the Sundarbans and kept in the premises of a well-known animal dealer, William Rutledge in Calcutta. Photo taken by Captain William George Stretton on 1 December 1875 (private collection; Rookmaaker, *The Rhinoceros of South Asia*, Fig. 48.9).



Figure 11. In 1876, Philip L. Sclater published one of the best illustrated papers about the rhinos exhibited at London Zoo highlighting their unique rhino collection. This Javan rhino is the subspecies *R. sondaicus sondaicus*. The plates were engraved after watercolours by the animal artist Joseph Wolf (Zoological Society of London; Rookmaaker, *The Rhinoceros of South Asia*, Fig. 46.1, and also *R. unicornis*: Fig. 3.1, and *D. sumatrensis*: Figs. 53.1, 53.2).

and are restricted to Sumatra, Indonesia.

Rookmaaker's earlier findings on the number and details of Asian rhinos in captivity historically, especially the most numerous, *R. unicornis*, but also *D. sumatrensis* (Fig. 9) and *R. sondaicus* (Figs. 10 and 11) are greatly augmented. For *R.*

sondaicus Rookmaaker has revised his 1998 figure of 22 specimens in captivity to 39 clear identifications, still a very small number, and gives interesting information about them, with 19 recorded in captivity in India and Bangladesh, the last one in 1905.

An epilogue (chapters 65–67) summarizes

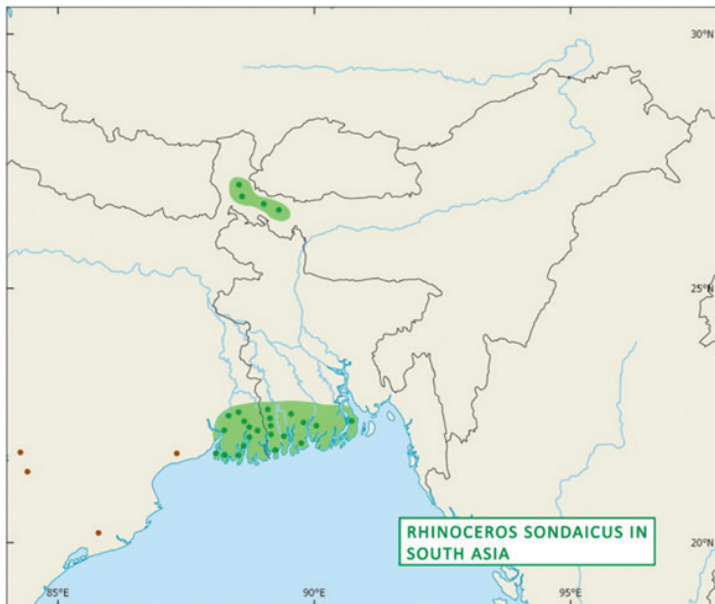


Figure 12. This map shows the historical distribution of *Rhinoceros sondaicus inermis* in South Asia. (Map design by Ajay Karthick and Richard Kees, © Kees Rookmaaker (Rookmaaker, *The Rhinoceros of South Asia*, Fig. 66.37).

Rookmaaker's main findings, with his updated historical distribution maps (Fig. 12) for each of the three species in South Asia. A map also shows the proto-historical distribution of *R. unicornis* from 11,700 years ago. Many factors led to the massive decline in rhinos in most of South Asia, including the spread of human settlement, hunting, and cultivation. The book provides the data to explore the processes leading to the local extinction of two of the three species, even in areas where human interference might not have been the most significant factor.

Rookmaaker comments near the end of his tome that he 'spent many happy hours chasing rhinos on the pages of the great books of the past and present in many shapes and forms'. His publication is indeed another great book, packed with nuggets of information. He points out that in retirement it was an enquiry he could 'pursue more vigorously', combining the many records from fossil remains, rock paintings, drawings, photographs, trophies and writings. These can inspire further study and data compilation about rhinos historically, as is the author's hope.

Kees Rookmaaker's masterly book, *The Rhinoceros of South Asia*, is the culmination of a life's work reconstructing the historical

distribution of *R. unicornis*, *D. sumatrensis* and *R. sondaicus* resulting in new maps showing the extent of their occurrences. Thousands of sources were used to study the interactions between humans and the three rhinoceros species that were found in South Asia. While most of the material focuses on *R. unicornis*, there is important new information included for *D. sumatrensis* and *R. sondaicus*. I cannot recommend Rookmaaker's new book highly enough, for rhino researchers, those interested in art and history, and of course conservation, in South Asia, and indeed all enthusiasts wishing to increase their knowledge about the three ancient rhino species of Asia.

Rookmaaker, Kees (LC) 2024. *The Rhinoceros of South Asia*. Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands.

Published in digital e-book version on 30 April 2024: <https://brill.com/display/title/64767>, available Open Access to view or download.

Hardback published on 12 June 2024, order from Brill: <https://brill.com/display/title/64767>. Price (2024) €295 / about \$325

Emergence of Natural History, Vol.6, pp. i–liv, 1–835 (size 22 x 29.5 x 4 cm).

ISBN 978-90-04-54488-8 (hardback)

ISBN 978-90-04-69154-4 (e-book)

<https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004691544>