

RHINO NOTE

The Rhino Resource Center

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One day, still in my early teens, I walked into an old and extensive zoological library in my hometown of Amsterdam. The shelves were filled with serious tomes on the biology of all types of animals, written in multiple languages, some plain text and others superbly illustrated. The visitors book of the Artis Library, if it still exists, will attest to the frequency of my visits, trying to understand some of the wealth of the available information. It took me a while to get my bearings, but after that, with the turning of each page there was a sense of excitement, sometimes a discovery or a hint to solve a puzzle, a new fact, a way into a new territory of investigation and knowledge. In short, the authors of the books unwittingly taught me how to learn about the natural world. Not everybody has a chance to browse the books in a library, and in fact nowadays most of us are probably led by citations on the Internet.

We are all aware that we need to have knowledge of the existing literature when we work on our research projects or when we write policy documents. In many cases this means that we spend time browsing the Internet on our computer. Hence we limit our reading to works written in English and published after 1990. This is cost-effective, because most of us cannot afford to spend a month in a large metropolis to visit libraries hoping to enhance fieldwork. We know that we will produce work that might have benefited from more extensive background information, but naturally we only use the resources immediately available to us. If only we could easily assemble everything written about our subject of enquiry, it would be so much easier.

The Rhino Resource Center (RRC) was established to provide all available information in a wide range of subject areas, all to do with the five living species of rhinoceros. The aim is to improve research, fieldwork, surveys, conservation goals and

policies, management and husbandry techniques, anywhere in the world. The RRC now lists well over 13,000 references to chapters or passages in books and articles. All known written documents are included, intentionally with as few restrictions as possible, to allow further investigations in every aspect of rhinoceros biology and conservation. The RRC provides all existing written knowledge about the rhinoceros in a single place, accessible worldwide through the Internet, without prejudice or subjectivity. Every word that was worth writing is also worth preserving and useful to people working with rhinos.

The RRC is actively maintained. I add an average of ten new entries per week, or two per day, sometimes older pieces that were overlooked but mostly current ones. Just under half of all the works are available in a full text format, and it is hoped to achieve a far greater coverage in the next few years. There are also thousands of photographs and it would be great to have a picture of every rhino known to us, in zoos as well as in the wild. The references include many dissertations and reports which in most cases are only available by logging on to the RRC website.

There will soon be more than 14,000 entries on the RRC. That is both strength and a weakness. It would take at least a year to read through this mass of data. All references are indexed according to taxonomic unit, locality and subject matter, but in reality a search produces too large a subset to be immediately helpful without further assistance. It is clear that the information needs to be abstracted and condensed to allow a quick review of existing facts or knowledge about a certain area or specific query. It would require a substantial increase in sponsorship to achieve this, but the benefits would be immense.

The RRC receives an average of 400 virtual visitors per day on the website, or a minimum of 10,000 per month. Each of these people, spread right across the globe and increasingly situated in range States, leaves the site with a bit more information about the rhinoceros. If we can harness the data on the endangered rhinos, then we might just have the edge to manage the populations in the field and to preserve them for future generations.

The RRC is supported by the International Rhino Foundation, SOS Rhino, Rhino Car Hire and Save the Rhino International.

I would encourage all rhino workers to check <http://rhinoresourcecenter.com> regularly.