

Debunked: the name of the White rhinoceros

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Urban myth. Factoid. How often do we not hear or read nowadays, almost always when the white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium simum*) is seen or mentioned, that the name ‘white’ is a corruption of the Afrikaans name ‘wijd’. I was struck that this myth was repeated in a popular work by editors of the highly-regarded Dutch dictionary publishers Van Dale, carelessly copying some report found on the internet without any further research or consideration—even using it in the title of their book (Aalbrecht and Wagenaar 2015). Even Wikipedia at this time (2018) indicates some hesitation that the story is correct.

And correct it is not. This has been amply argued and substantiated by Rookmaaker (2003) and Feely (2007, 2017). Today in Dutch the animal may be called ‘breedlip-rhinoceros’ (where *breed* translates to *wide*), in Afrikaans ‘breëlip-renoster’, and how one would corrupt ‘breed’ or ‘breë’ to white is the real mystery.

However, the persistence of the myth is understandable, because nobody has ever come up with a really believable alternative. It may help to place this in a wider historical perspective. The first foreign naturalist to encounter the animal now called White Rhinoceros was William John Burchell, on 16 October 1812 at Chué Springs (now in South Africa’s North West Province), well beyond the borders of colonial influence (Rookmaaker 2008). Although Burchell named it *Rhinoceros simus* in 1817, he never provided a vernacular name. At that time, the Black Rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*) had disappeared from the vicinity of Cape Town, but it was definitely well known in the Eastern and Northern Cape. On the other hand, the White Rhinoceros lived in then remote and inaccessible areas, and it is unlikely that more than a few colonists in the

Cape area had ever seen one. In these circumstances, it is probably surprising that the animal had been given a name at all.

Apparently in the late 1830’s, some 25 years after discovery, the names ‘white’ and ‘black’ had become commonplace. Both Andrew Smith (1837) and Harris (1838) credited the usage to “Cape colonists”, but failed to provide any further explanation.

I suggest that these colonists decided to call the animal ‘white’ because they did not know better, having never seen even a picture of it. I further suggest that they borrowed the name from Barrow (1801), who in his easily accessible *Account of Travels* mentions that the ‘white rhinoceros’ was hunted beyond the colonial borders, on the authority of a chief who he met at Kamiesberg. If a corruption occurred, it may have been in his discussions with this man. Probably we will never know what this chief actually referred to and if his ‘white rhinoceros’ is the same species as in our usage. However, it will have been enough for the people at the Cape to equate the rhinoceros found beyond the borders with Barrow’s ‘white rhinoceros’. And black naturally is the opposite colour.

It may seem a roundabout way of naming an animal. However, how do you describe an animal that you have never examined? The name ‘white rhinoceros’ was plucked out of the air, or rather taken from one of the few authorities writing about the rhinoceros in distant lands, and it stuck.

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