

# GRANITE AND RHINOS

By Jaco Badenhorst

The big white rhino bull was less than twenty meters away from us when we walked around the granite boulder. He heard our noisy approach and when he saw us at that short distance he knew exactly what kind of creatures we were and his small brain worked out that we were trespassing in his territory. He started his charge without hesitation and also without any indication of his motives. The only effect that my hasty warning shot and loud shouting had on his charge was to zoom him in on me. He wanted to flatten the source of his disturbance and irritation and then to get the hell out of there. If you are the world's second largest land mammal that can weigh up to two and a half tons of rock hard muscle and bone no man is going to stop you - not even two forward eight man packs of any international rugby team – three packs? Maybe.

We were lucky on this occasion as there were smaller loose boulders next to the big granite boulder and the group of trailists behind me reacted immediately on my command to move to safety behind them. A lot of people tend to think that white rhino are always docile and placid animals. Like all wild animals they would rather avoid confrontation and move away other than to come in contact with human beings. All animals have got an instinctive fear of man but will defend themselves (if you invade their personal space), their female friends before during or after the mating period, their young, their food and water supply if it becomes scarce and their territories when necessary or in certain circumstances. However, there are no rules. The only thing that makes wild animals predictable is the fact that they are totally unpredictable. White rhino bulls are in my opinion the most unpredictable creatures that I deal with – excluding my dear wife!

Geologically, high granite kopjes (some call them mountains) dominate the landscape in the southwestern corner of the Kruger National Park. These granites are hundreds of million years old. This area is very rugged and is characterised by deep, beautifully remote valleys with wilderness conditions hard to beat even though the outside, developed world is literally on the doorstep. A little further north granite still dominates but it is deeply weathered resulting in an undulating landscape with distinct uplands and bottomlands or brackish areas. Dolerite and gabbroic intrusions in this predominantly granite geology causes interesting diversity in fauna and flora. White rhinoceros flourish in this type of habitat.

People are generally ignorant of the fact that it all boils down to the geology of an area that will ultimately determine the game viewing potential of that area. A certain type of parent rock gives you a certain type of soil under certain climatic conditions. On a certain type of soil a certain type of vegetation will grow which will attract certain types and concentrations of herbivores, which in turn will determine the type and concentration of predators in that area. There are a lot more factors that will influence such a scenario as described above but it is a very simple way of explaining how things fit together. Without soil there can be no plants and without plants there can be no game. Soil conservation and environmental education are the most important facets of nature conservation in modern times.

Historically both rhinoceros species were well represented in what is today known as the Kruger National Park. However they have almost been shot out to near extinction in the previous century where indiscriminate hunting was the order of the day. Since the establishment of formal conservation bodies large natural areas were protected and that

ensured the survival of both the black and white rhino as well as other game and plant species and also historic cultural sites. Today Kruger National Park has got a large viable population of both black and white rhino thanks to the reintroduction of this species that naturally occurred in this area. Four fossil genera of early rhinoceros are known out of the early Miocene era dating back 23 – 19 million years ago. Our modern day rhinoceros evolved from these ancient predecessors.

Climbing to the top of one of these granite outcrops are always worth the effort. Mangake is such a climb and when you have reached the top you can see for miles. Mangake is the second highest solid granite rock in the Kruger National Park and it is massive. One only appreciates its size and splendour when you stand at the bottom of it and look up. It makes the surrounding hills look like small boulders and makes the climbers feel like kings. An English friend and I once saw 36 white rhinoceros from the top of Mangake and it was an experience of a lifetime. It was just the two of us with all the rhinos and outcrops of solid granite. No other people for miles. Who could ask for better company?

It is interesting to note that an unmistakable painting of a black rhino can be found on a granite outcrop in the south of the KNP near the old Afsaal picnic site. It is because of the hardness of granite that one can find a lot of ancient Bushman paintings on the granite outcrops in this part of the Lowveldt. In the KNP Bushmen used as a basis iron oxide in their paint as well as bird droppings and charcoal. Other paint ingredients that they used were egg white and yellow, animal fat, blood and the milky latex of Euphorbias. It is safe to say that some of these paintings are as old as 3000 years and the fact that they are still visible can be attributed to the resilience of granite. These sites are very special to me out of a personal point of view and I only visit them when I feel that the people with me are also in the right frame of mind and that they will appreciate this priceless cultural experience. Granite, rhinoceros and Bushman paintings have been around for a long time.

These prehistoric features capture the essence of the Wolhuter Wilderness Area in the south of the Kruger National Park. To walk amongst granite, rhinos and Bushman culture makes one feel small and insignificant and makes one feel part of an ancient time where true wilderness was still the order of the day. It also makes you realise what a privilege it is to experience all this and it lifts you spiritually up to where the eagles soar.