Black Rhinoceros
Diceros bicornis

Did you know the average Black Rhinoceros weighs more than a family sized car?

The Rhinoceros is the World's second largest land animal after the Elephant. The Black Rhinoceros is a little smaller than some of the others but still has a total body length of around 3.5 metres and an average weight of 1400 kilograms. There are five species of these majestic animals. Two species, the Black Rhinoceros and the White Rhinoceros both live in Africa. They differ little in colour and both have two horns. They can be identified by the shape of their faces. The Black Rhinoceros has a long pointed upper lip and the White Rhinoceros has a wide muzzle. The other three species – the Greater One-horned Rhinoceros, the Sumatran and the Javan Rhinoceros – live in Asia.

Positioned along the middle of the snout are the horns of the Black Rhinoceros. They are different from the horns of sheep, cattle or antelope as they do not have a bony centre. The horns are not firmly attached to the skull. They grow from the skin and are made of the same substance as hair, fingernails, toenails and claws, called keratin. They are hard and solid and made of many fibres. The length of the front horn can grow 1.4 metres. African Rhinoceros attack with their horns and will use them for defence.

The Black Rhinoceros has poor vision and will rely mostly on its sense of smell to explore surroundings. A motionless person can stand undetected from a distance of 30 metres. The rhinoceros has good hearing and will pick up sounds with its tubular ear flaps. Most Black Rhinoceros prefer to live alone although several rhinoceros may be found around a good feeding site. The rhinoceros is very protective of its territory. To scent its territory a rhinoceros will stamp in its faeces and then deposit the odour with each fragrant footstep. This lets other animals know by smell that they are within a rhinoceros' home range.

Breeding and Lifecycle
Female rhinoceros are able to breed from the age of five but will only have a calf every two or three years. After a 15 month pregnancy the mother will find a quiet spot in which to give birth. A baby rhinoceros may weigh around 40 kilograms, be on its feet in less than half an hour and suckling milk within three hours. It will suckle for around a year and will stay with its mother for two or three years until her next calf is born. The life expectancy of a Black Rhinoceros is 35 to 50 years.

Habitat and Distribution
The Black Rhinoceros once roamed the lower half of Africa in hundreds of thousands. Today it survives in pockets primarily in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Kenya, Namibia and Tanzania. The rhinoceros will never fully enter forest areas but will seek shade on the forest edge. It will bathe in muddy water, covering itself with a thick protective coating of mud which helps it to keep cool and acts as protection against biting flies.

Diet
The Black Rhinoceros is an herbivore browsing on leaves, twigs and branches from a wide variety of trees and shrubs. Examples of the plants that are eaten by the rhinoceros include the Acacia, Euphorbias and the Mtomboti tree. The rhinoceros has a slow digestive system and requires large amounts of fibre. As a result it must eat copious quantities of plant material daily.

Threats to Survival
Some 40 million years ago, rhinoceros of various kinds were abundant in most warm regions throughout the world. Now these animals are in danger of extinction. Between 1970 and 1995, the numbers of Black Rhinoceros drastically declined from 65 000 to less than 2000. This number has risen marginally to approximately 2800 at the present time. The cause of this dramatic drop has been due to poaching by humans. The Black Rhinoceros is hunted for its horn which is sold in powdered form for medicinal purposes in

Asia. The horn is also used to make handles for daggers which are status symbols in some Middle Eastern countries. Habitat destruction is also a problem for the Black Rhinoceros as it reduces living space and its food supply.

Zoo Action

In an effort to save the species, The Zoological Parks Board of New South Wales joined with the Government of the Republic of Zimbabwe and several United States conservation institutions to form 'The International Black Rhinoceros Foundation', which later became known as the 'International Rhino Foundation' (IRF). This foundation aims to establish conservation programs for all five rhinoceros species in captivity and in nature, including the eradication of poaching.

In 1991, breeding facilities for the Black Rhinoceros were established at Western Plains Zoo. It is the largest species conservation project in Australia's history. During 1992/3 breeding animals were brought from Zimbabwe to the Cocos Islands where they underwent a 60 day quarantine period. They arrived at Western Plains Zoo on 4th February, 1993. The state of the art facilities are being used to breed sufficient Black Rhinoceros so that viable populations may eventually be released back into protected reserves in Zimbabwe.