

NASTY OR NICE? THE REAL RHINO

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Crocodile, lion and buffalo – killer species
Bottom Left: A 5 month old calf meets a 4 year old sub-adult for the first time.

Give a dog a bad name' or 'mud sticks' – these expressions can aptly be applied to the much maligned rhino. While many people believe it is wrong to kill the animal for its horn and give generously to rhino conservation, far more consider the rhino to be a 'nasty' animal not worthy of their support. Stand by a rhino paddock at any zoo and you will hear parents warning their children that the rhino they are looking at is aggressive and dangerous so, from an early age, a negative image is established. At

a time when rhinos are being killed indiscriminately with over 900 poached so far this year, the public image of the rhino needs to be put right if they are to be saved from extinction.

So is the rhino an inherently nasty, aggressive and dangerous beast? Nothing could be further from the truth! For a start, there is little evidence that rhinos have killed humans unlike hippos, crocodiles, elephants, buffalo and lions.

The hippo is a territorial, violent-tempered, unpredictable animal and is considered the most dangerous beast in Africa because of how hostile it is towards humans. One report suggests that they cause over 200 deaths per year upsetting boats, often without provocation, and biting the occupants with their huge canine teeth and sharp incisors. Most deaths occur when a victim gets between the hippo and deep water or between a mother and her calf. A Chinese tourist was killed in Kenya in 2013 when she tried to take a close up photo of a baby hippo and was mauled by its mother.

Crocodiles are very dangerous especially since most victims do not realise that their life is being threatened before the crocodile attacks them or that crocodiles can run after their prey. Over

2,000 deaths worldwide are reportedly caused by crocodiles. A crocodile named 'Gustave' has been credited with killing hundreds of people at the Rusizi River in Burundi.

While the elephant is the largest land mammal on earth, they do not seem scary to most people. They can be bad tempered and get very angry very quickly often trampling their victims (reportedly 600 worldwide every year) to death. Elephants have been known to attack villages and are especially aggressive in areas where poaching is rife. In Zimbabwe, an elephant was reported to have trampled to death a poacher who was attempting to kill it!

The Cape buffalo is known within Africa as 'the Black Death' or 'Widowmaker' and reportedly gores and tramples to death over 200 humans a year. Often a lone male hidden by a





A black and a white rhino greeting each other.

Below: White rhinos are sociable and often found in large groups.

bush is disturbed and acts violently. Even lions are very scared of meeting a buffalo in this way.

Lions are unlikely to hunt humans and will normally run off rather than be confrontational. However, if they are suddenly disturbed, they will not hesitate to protect themselves especially a female with new cubs. Once a lion has tasted human flesh and blood they will become “man-eaters” – the most famous being the Tsavo Man-Eaters of 1898 who killed numerous construction workers building the Kenya-Uganda railway. Lions are thought responsible for over 250 deaths worldwide each year.

Public perception rarely distinguishes between furry cuteness and killer instinct. Many of the animal kingdom’s cutest species are among its most prolific killers – lions, tigers, polar

bears to name but three - whereas you would be hard pressed to find a report of a rhino killing a human or another animal. In most cases, a rhino will detect the presence of a human using its excellent senses of smell and/or hearing and will run off. If taken by surprise or if one gets too close, a rhino will try to “push the offender away” with their size, weight, agility and acceleration causing not-necessarily-intended injury. If it does charge, it will usually run off when the intrusion is no longer detected.

Africa’s Black and White rhinos behave differently due to their social inclinations. Although larger and heavier, the white rhino is a social animal often found on open plains in small groups. Approached with care, the White rhino is accepting of human presence. In fact, it is an inquisitive animal and will stand and stare within a

few metres of a vehicle or run alongside it if it is moving. The Black rhino on the other hand will run off if it detects a human presence but will (mock) charge a vehicle or person that gets too close. It is this one, rare, behavior that has cast all rhinos as “dangerous”.

It is often reported that black and white rhinos do not get on with each other, sometimes fighting or simply avoiding contact. Black and white rhinos have inhabited Solio Game Reserve for over 30 years. The individuals there today were most likely born and have lived together in the reserve at a uniquely high density. Their behavior is believed to be more like it was in years gone by when there were thousands of rhinos sharing the same space so they had to get on with each other. Solio rhinos can be seen greeting each other when they meet and sleeping





Top: Rhino mothers form strong bonds with their calves.
Middle: A rhino calf seeks reassurance by rubbing against its mother.
Bottom: A rhino female stands patiently as its calf suckles

side by side. Black rhinos are more nervous than Whites and will respond energetically to any wrong sound or smell. The presence of an undisturbed white rhino or two has a calming effect on the nervy black.

What should epitomise the rhino? What should define its image? Take away the reaction to an invasion of its privacy by humans and how do rhinos behave?

Rhinos form close bonds and associations throughout their 30 to 40 year life. Bonding starts with the mother and its calf, who live together for the first two to three years of the life of the new calf. A tonne-and-a-half female towers over its forty kilo calf and will defend it to the death. The calf continually seeks reassurance by rubbing up against the mother and uttering a high pitched squeak. When sleeping, the mother and calf will always be touching. The calf will issue a different squeak when it requires to suckle which it does on a 'little and often' basis. The mother will always make herself available standing quite still for the two to four minutes



Top Left: A white rhino social group of female, calf and male.

Middle: Black rhinos sleeping together.

Top Right: A rhino calf. Cute or what?

Bottom: A black rhino using buffalo for security.



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the calf spends while the calf treats the mother equally as gently by not butting the udder as is the case with cattle.

It is the role of the mother to teach the calf how to fend for itself. This is done by playing with the calf and by the calf copying its mother. Sometimes the previous calf of the mother, or the independent calf of another mother, joins the pair and takes on some of the teaching role. Play fighting, with the pair going head-to-head as in a real fight, is not an uncommon sight.

The calf has to learn what and how to eat. It starts by mimicking the mother while actually relying on suckling. As the mouth hardens and stomach develops, the calf gradually starts to eat some herbage being guided, in the case of the Black rhino, as to the bushes and plants to choose.

During this time the father, or more accurately the male in whose territory the female resides, plays no part in the upbringing of the calf but may be seen together as a family taking on a guardianship role and keeping other males at bay.

When the female is ready to have a new calf, a few hours or days before the birth, it turns on its current calf and chases it away. Having been used to intimacy with, and the protection of, its mother and while still being quite small, the calf invariably teams up with an older rhino and will stay with it for many years.

Black rhinos mix together at night as has often been observed many times on moonlight censuses. An unfortunate consequence of these gatherings is that poachers find it easier to locate and kill rhinos during their night-time intrusions. Rhinos may be found with other animals usually as a form of self-defence. Buffalo herds and oxpeckers both offer a great early warning system,

running or flying off at the first sign of danger.

Far from being aggressive, the rhino should be viewed as essentially a peaceful, sociable, passive vegetarian with strong motherhood instincts and a desire to be left alone to carry on the life it has known for 10 million years. Perhaps then there would be a greater groundswell of support for the costly efforts to stop the current slaughter and the rhinos' potential descent into extinction.

Anyway, how much cuter can you get than a baby rhino? ●

