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Your Own Pet Rhinoceros?

With South African National Parks selling 100 white rhinos from Kruger National Park, anyone undaunted by the hefty price tag could buy one—even you?
Text by Josh Fulmer Illustration by Miguel Jiron

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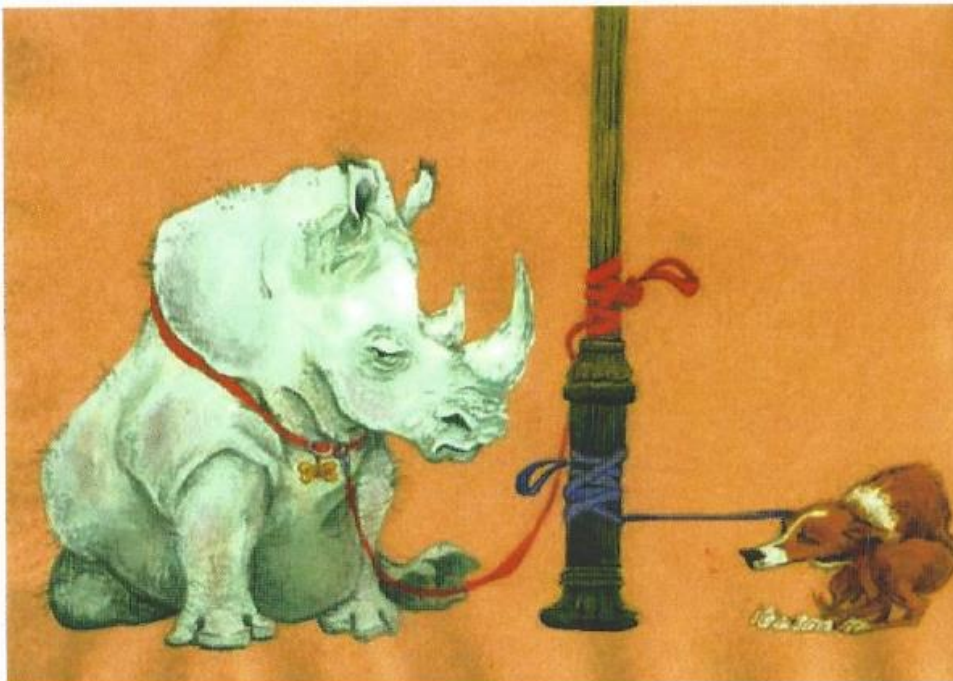
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Friday, March 23, 2007

South African National Parks (SANParks; www.sanparks.org) is selling as many as 100 white rhinoceroses from Kruger National Park to the general public. The rhinos will cost from \$9,000 to \$37,000 each, depending on sex. Females are most expensive and are sold with their young so as not to separate mother and calf.

"We have been selling animals for a number of years to raise money for conservation projects. We have also used animals in exchange to obtain other species," said Raymond Travers, a SANParks spokesman, in an email.

There are an estimated 13,000 white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum*) in South Africa, where they are endemic. Kruger is home to as many as 7,000 of the endangered herbivores, accounting for roughly half of the worldwide population. Sales of various

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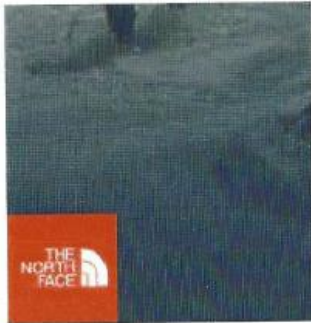
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animal species, including elephants, antelope, and buffalo, generated about \$1 million for SANParks last year.

Assuming a potential buyer has sufficient backing, what does it take to care for a rhinoceros? And furthermore, could a white rhino make a good pet?

Kind of.

"Rhinos actually very readily become ... I would't say 'affectionate' ... but they certainly become very accustomed to being around humans," said Randy Rieches, who manages a herd of white rhinos as Curator of Mammals at the San Diego Zoo.

"If you spent enough time with them," Rieches continued, "it is highly possible that you could cue them [to come when you call]. We do a lot of that here to bring them on and off exhibit; they are trainable ... quite intelligent and figure out things quickly."

Then there is the problem of size: adults reach six feet (1.8 meters) at the shoulder and can stretch ten feet (3 meters) from their sharp horn to the tip of their tail. The stocky animals are usually three-and-a-half feet (1 meter) wide and can weigh upwards of 4,000 pounds (1,800 kilograms).

White rhinos eat a lot, too—around 120 pounds (54 kilograms) of grass, hay, or alfalfa pellets every day (this is what Rieches feeds them, not what they get in the African bush). It gets worse when you consider the cleanup.

"They're not very efficient feeders, so if they eat 100 pounds [45 kilograms] you're going to have at least 80 pounds [36 kilograms] of stool," Rieches said.

But before pulling out a checkbook, know that SANParks officials screen potential buyers. "No animal leaves our parks without the proper permits in place," said Travers.

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