

Bill Rea ? Rhinos are worth the effort

There was a story in the news last week that I found rather amusing, while also being a bit depressing.

On the other hand, it just might be another case of reality as Nature makes her way through time.

It seems when it comes to the northern white rhinoceros, there are only three remaining. One is a male named Sudan, and the other two are females. And there are efforts to bring these critters together, let one thing lead to another, and maybe keep the species going. The efforts, from what I have read, include signing up Sudan with a dating app. What has anyone to lose?

I like to think I have a decent layman's grasp of science, thus it is certainly limited. But from what I do know, I have to wonder if these efforts to repopulate the species are going to amount to much. The DNA pool seems rather small. But then again, miracles have been known to happen.

Please bear in mind that we're referring to the northern white rhino, which is a subspecies of the white rhino. Although the rhinoceros population throughout the world is not too abundant, we're currently only thinking of this one small group. According to Wikipedia, this surviving trio belongs to the Dvůr Králové Zoo in the Czech Republic but live in the Ol Pejeta Conservancy in Kenya and are protected round-the-clock by armed guards.

I'm operating on the assumption that the assertion that there are only three of these critters left is accurate. While one must assume that it must be pretty hard to miss a rhino (I didn't see one in person until I was in my early 30s, but more about that later), one has to face reality that their numbers are very low. Poachers have certainly taken their toll, but I also have to wonder if we're seeing out the scenario that Nature has planned. Some species of animals simply disappear because they do. I don't think we can blame poachers, or humanity in general, for the fact that none of us have seen a brontosaurus recently.

But the fact that these beasts are on the brink of extinction is depressing, no matter who or what is responsible.

Like so many people, I have a certain love for animals. That is more on an emotional level, as I appreciate that they play a significant role in the beauty of this world. Intellectually, I am the first to admit that my scientific knowledge of animals amounts to very little.

I used to fish a lot when I was a kid, but I haven't done that in more than a quarter of a century, and I'm not likely to take up the activity again. As I got older, my conscience balked at the thought of making sport by forcing fellow creatures to fight for their lives. So the thought of a species being on the brink of extinction fills me with a certain amount of grief.

And the fact we're dealing with rhinos hits home with a bit too.

We're dealing with one beast that has always fascinated me.

I had been unaware that there was any such thing as a rhinoceros for the first couple of years of my life. I was in either Grade 1 or 2. An acquaintance of my mother had unloaded a bunch of books on her, and one of them was a picture book about zoo animals, and the rhino was prominent among the creatures featured. I will never be able to explain why I was so intrigued, but intrigued I was. Yet it was many years before I actually saw one.

I think it was in 1989 when a group of friends of mine were gathering together to visit what was then known as the Metro Toronto Zoo. I joined the group (a last-minute decision) and had a great time. There was a connection with one of the senior officials with the zoo. This fellow was able to get us in for free, got us onto one of the trains that toured the grounds, and by the end of the day, he arranged a behind-the-scenes tour of the zoo for the few of us who stuck out for the duration (not many ? it was a long day). We got to engage in many activities, like feeding carrots and apples to a huge hippopotamus. The delightful creature even spat up on my hand. The next time you shake hands with me, remember that hand you are so warmly grasping was once covered with hippo goo. How many men do you know can brag about something like that, or want to?

But the day also memorable because I got to see a rhino for the first time. The group of us were leaning against the rails of the rhino pen, gazing at these magnificent beasts. I recalled my younger days, and let myself be filled with awe.

And then I dropped my sunglasses into the pen.

I briefly toyed with the idea of hopping the fence into the pen and retrieving the glasses, then scrambling out. I was much younger (and much more agile) in those days, and I am confident that I could have accomplished that task. But I also remembered I was guest of the zoo administration, and what I was contemplating would probably not have gone over well. Proper channels are in place for a reason, and my common sense told me to respect them in that instance.

I told one of the keepers of my problem, and he said he would take care of it. A couple of minutes later, I watched as he strolled, rather casually, through the rhino pen as if he were walking through a playground. The rhinos took no notice. I got my glasses back. I'm not too optimistic that these efforts to introduce Sudan to parenthood are going to succeed, but it's worth a shot. These creatures are too impressive to give up on.

