

Demise of the hippo

On 24 April 1652, just 18 days after arriving at the Cape, Van Riebeeck describes his men shooting a large hippo:

It was most violent and fierce and they had their hands full to subdue it in spite of its having been hit behind the ears by a few bullets which penetrated the head its skin being a good inch thick and so hard that at some places no musket-ball could penetrate it.¹¹¹

His men found the flesh to taste good, like that of a calf, and they killed another young hippo only a month later, on 29 May 1652. So began the demise of the hippo, hunted from the local wetlands as far away as the Berg River. Hippo meat, along with rhino, could be bought from the Company butcher at the Cape in 1665 for half the price of beef, veal, hartebeest, eland and wild boar (warthog), while mutton sold for three times, and pork for four times the price of hippo.¹¹² The prices reflect the costs of production – it is much less expensive to shoot a wild animal than to raise domesticated ones.

In addition to meat, hippo fat was prized both for eating and for medicinal purposes. Hippo ivory tusks were considered superior to elephant tusks, not turning yellow as quickly (Fig. 148). Among the false teeth of George Washington were some carved from hippo ivory. The tough hide, 3 to 4 cm thick, was preferred for making sjamboks (from the Malay word for whip, *samboq*), which were also made from rhino and elephant hides. Hippos were also considered then, as now, to be one of the most dangerous wild animals. Hippos kill more people than any other large wild animal – mostly by trampling as they venture out of the water to feed at night. For all these reasons, the number of hippos on the West Coast fell rapidly after Europeans arrived. Van Riebeeck wrote to the VOC in January 1653, ‘As a sample we send you forty-nine sea-cow [hippo] tusks and ten elephant ditto, perhaps marketable in Japan,’¹¹³ but by April of that same year he wrote: ‘We have this year obtained very little elephant and sea-cow tusks of which we sent a few specimen to Batavia.’¹¹⁴ Clearly the numbers of both animals were in rapid decline. However, hippos were still abundant along the Orange River, as Barrow reports in 1798:

In what part so ever we approached the river, hippopotami were snorting and playing in vast numbers. Of these animals our party killed four in one day. They were all very lean, a circumstance that was attributed to the locusts having devoured every green plant for a considerable distance from the banks of the river. A young one was taken out of the womb of a female, perfectly formed in every part except the teeth and tusks. Though now only seven inches long, the same animal, if not destroyed, would, in the course of time, most probably have attained the enormous weight of three or four thousand pounds.¹¹⁵



Figure 148. A hippo tusk and the Berg River near where the last hippo was shot.

South of the Orange River hippos were originally reported from coastal wetlands of Somerset West, wetlands that no longer exist, and in the coastal vleis of Muizenburg. Hippos were sighted in Verlorenvlei at Eland's Bay by Simon van der Stel's party in 1686 and by Johannes Starrenburg in 1705. There are surprisingly few, if any, valid reports of hippo in the Olifants River. Outside the Orange River, the largest number were reported from the Berg River, its extensive meandering flood plain ideally suited to hippo. But by 1798 Barrow mentions that only a few, shy hippos reside at the lower reaches of the Berg River, perhaps because 'The Dutch government, in order to preserve this animal in the colony, imposed a fine of a thousand guilders on any person that should put one of them to death.'¹¹⁶ The fine imposed by Rijk Tulbagh and successive governments prolonged but did not prevent the demise of the Berg River hippos.

The Berg River was home to around a dozen hippos in 1805, and in 1818 the French collector Anton Delalande was permitted to shoot one. The exception was perhaps made for science, as the skin and bones of this hippo likely serve as the type specimen of the subspecies currently stored in the National Museum of Natural History in Paris. By 1829 around 6 hippos remained, with the head of what was most probably the penultimate hippo, shot in 1856, hung in the South African Museum. The last Berg River hippo was shot on 13 February 1869, but not without a fight. In 1868 it killed a man bathing in the river by literally cutting him in two. As reported in the *Cape Argus* newspaper:

After the fatality in 1868 some attempts had been made to pot the brute and preserve its skin for the Cape Museum but old Behemoth never entered an appearance, and the worthy curator left with the hope that he might fall to the good fortune of our late visitor, the Duke of Edinburgh. [The Duke was in the country in 1867 doing a lot of hunting, most famously of elephants in Knysna.]¹¹⁷

In 1869, the same hippo seized and dragged a man under the water prompting the farm owner, Martin Melck, to shoot the hippo. Next day the dead hippo and his victim were found and a team of 16 oxen hauled the hippo out. The bull hippo had 23-cm tusks, was 3.4 m from snout to tail, and had a 3.2 m girth.¹¹⁸ It was 28 years old and weighed 1360 kg. Despite the wanton killing by the likes of Barrow, hippos fared better in the rugged and arid terrain of the lower reaches of the Orange River, where they survived until sometime between 1925 and 1930.¹¹⁹