

# HIPPOS IN THE MODDER RIVER

IF hippos were suddenly found in the Modder River today it would definitely be headline news. A 120 years ago, however, such a statement wouldn't have raised an eyebrow.

Long before the arrival of the white man primitive peoples depicted hippopotami in rock paintings and engravings over practically all parts of our Province. Similarly the presence of fossils of both an extinct subspecies, as well as the still living species of *Hippopotamus amphibius* constitutes proof that these large animals frequented our rivers in prehistoric times.

Within the past few hundred years numerous references to their occurrence have been made in the writings of early travellers, hunters, and missionaries. Thus Henry Lichtenstein and the Reverend John Campbell saw hippos in the Orange River; Dr Andrew Smith and Cornwallis Harris found some in the Vaal River; Arbousset and Daumas make mention of "river horses" in the Orange River, the Noka (klein Olifants River) and the Enta (Vals River). The hippo shot in the Vaal River circa 1908 by Mr J.J. Hoffman of the farm Honigkrans in the Wolmaransstad district, was probably one of the last of these huge animals to frequent the waters of the central parts of the Republic.

In his *Reminiscences of early life and missionary labours* published in 1883, the Reverend John Edwards gives the following description of a hippo hunt:

*Going up the Modder River, we came to a place where there was deep water, in which was seen a sea-cow (hippopotamus). The excitement and rejoicing now became great, for it was just what the natives wished to see. "Hurrah! Span out!" was the word of command; "Let the oxen go." Guns were got ready, locks looked at, and new flints put in. About twenty crack shots were soon on the move down to the banks of the river, to sit and watch until the sea-cow should put out its nose to get breath. The men would talk among themselves. "Hush! hush! Still! still!" "Hij zal niet op kome" - It won't come up if you are not still. Again the water began to move. "There it is! there it is! There is the nose!" Bang! bang! go twenty guns, and down the sea-cow goes into deep water again. "Niet angeraakd" - not touched. The men, mortified and ashamed, begin to talk among themselves. Hush! hush! still! After waiting a little, the exclamation, "There he is! there he is!" is repeated. Bang! bang! as before, and again the sea-cow descends into deep water. The part I took was to sit on the bank of the river and laugh within myself at seeing their opinion of their shooting taken out of them; and I thought it a pity that so much powder should evaporate into smoke,*



Rock engraving of a hippo from Stowlands-on-Vaal in the Hertzogville district. It would be of great value to the Museum if persons who know of the existence of any rock engravings would forward particulars thereof for record purposes.



(J.O.P.)

Study of a hippo mother and child photographed on the bank of the Renoster Spruit, a tributary of the Modder River. These two fibreglass hippos, recently completed by artist Sep Roos and his helpers, were made from plaster casts taken of the carcasses of dead hippos, mounted in the required position during 1973. (See Newsletter No. 5).



Fossil skull of the extinct *Hippopotamus amphibius gorgops* from Uitzoek, Cornelia district.

(J.O.P.)

*and so much lead be shot into the water instead of into the sea-cow. After waiting some time without result, the men got tired, and said, "It is too much frightened; let it rest a little. We will go and get something to eat, and then come*

*again." While they were at their meal, and talking of their disappointment, a little insignificant Bushman Hottentot got hold of a gun, and went down and sat quietly on the bank of the river. Presently the animal came up, and after looking and seeing its adversaries were gone, showed itself more prominently. The little fellow, taking a quiet, deliberate aim, pulled the trigger. Bang! went the gun, and the sea-cow rolled over in the agonies of death. The men sprang to their feet, crying, "Wie heeft geschiet?" - Who has fired? The discovery caused much surprise and mortification that so insignificant a creature could accomplish that which twenty crack shots had in vain attempted. No doubt, while the little fellow felt proud of the feat, he thought it better to absent himself for the time than to stay and run the risk of a good thrashing, which vanity would most likely have secured for him.*

*The sea-cow having sunk and risen again, preparations were made to get it out of the river. The oxen were brought up, and as the bank of the river was very steep, fourteen of the strongest were selected. Swimmers then went in to fasten the trek-tou to the carcass. Then "Trek, trek," went a dozen voices, amid the cracking and slashing of many a whip. Out it comes, and its appearance on level ground is the signal for joyful acclamations. Knives are produced and made sharp, the hide is removed from the body and cut into strips, valuable for sjamboks (riding whips). The flesh is then cut into slices and salted, to be eaten with the game, which is often lean, while the sea-cow is generally very fat.*

(J.O.P.)