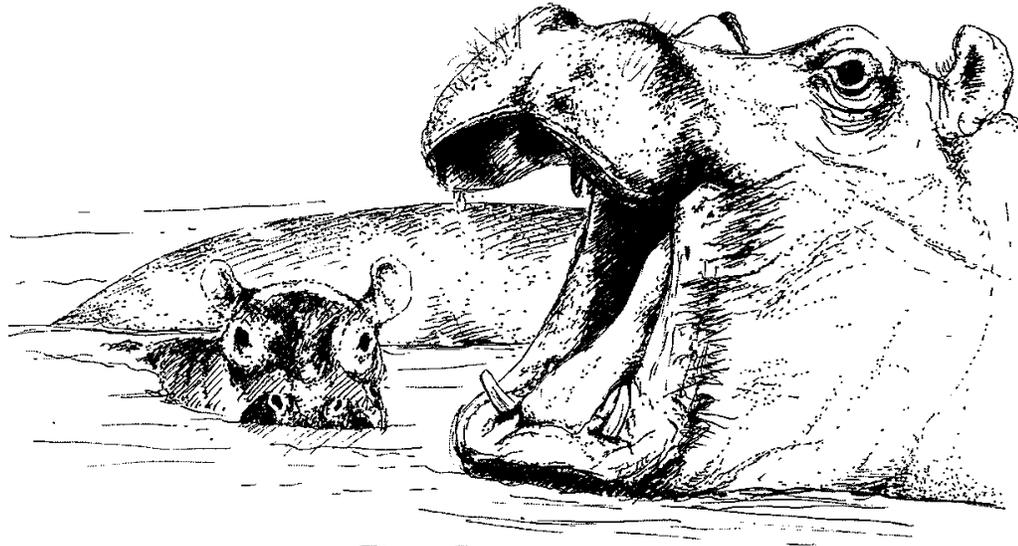


THE HIPPOPOTAMUS



notes

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Artiodactyla or even-toed ungulate is the name given to cloven-hoofed animals such as the giraffe, deer and hippopotamus. The Artiodactyla appeared approximately 50 million years ago as small herbivores (plant eaters). Fossil records indicate that there were once several species of hippos although only two species exist, the Common Hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*) and the Pygmy Hippopotamus (*Choeropsis liberiensis*). Although they once inhabited Asia and Europe, now the Common Hippo is restricted to the rivers and lakes of Africa, while the Pygmy Hippo is restricted to the western rainforests of the same continent. The name hippopotamus comes from the ancient Greek language and is translated as hippo (horse) and potomus (river).

It is extremely easy to recognise a Common Hippopotamus with its barrel-shaped body, short legs and a very large head. These animals have approximately 38-40 teeth and their lower canines grow into long tusks, which are used as weapons. Their weight ranges between 1400 and 3200 kilograms, which is approximately equal to the weight of one to three cars. When looking at a Common Hippo it is surprising to notice that they have extremely small eyes, however their vision is excellent. The ears are also small and have an

amazing ability to rotate at a 45-degree angle. The eyes, ears and nostrils are located high on the head which allows the animal's body to remain submerged while it can still breathe and keep watch for predators.

Hippos are more at home in the water than they are on the land. They are nocturnal, spending the majority of their day in the water, venturing onto the riverbanks at night to graze. At sunset, each individual will move along an established path marked with piles of dung. These have the function of serving as scent markers for orientation. Not only are Common Hippos found in rivers and lakes, they also inhabit mud wallows. It is important for the hippo to stay covered in water or mud during the day so their skin does not dry out. Unlike humans, the hippo does not have any sweat glands, so, how is their body temperature maintained? The answer lies with their special mucous glands. These glands secrete a red fluid that protects the animal from sunburn, water loss and infection, and dries like a lacquer.

In the wild, migration of these animals occurs during the rainy season when the hippos move upstream. During the dry seasons they migrate downstream

which allows them to find fresh pastures. The females or cows and young hippos live in social groups consisting of anywhere from 10 to 100 animals. The male or bull is a solitary animal and very territorial. Bulls have total control in their particular section of the river, and will allow other males into the area only if they behave submissively which is characterised by a lowering of the head. Fights between bulls do occur and often result in injuries. When threatened, a bull will show a variety of displays such as making honking noises, spraying dung, 'yawning' to show its large mouth and teeth and splashing water.

In the wild, mating tends to occur only in the dry season when the populations are the most concentrated. The reproductive cycle is determined by the climate, which does have its advantages. The young are born in the months of April to October when rainfall is at its highest. This level of rainfall means that there will be an abundance of grass and the cow will have a good supply of milk. The gestation period is approximately eight months. A cow can give birth either in shallow water or on the land and the calf is suckled underwater and it swims to the surface to take regular breaths. A female can begin conceiving anywhere between the ages of seven and fifteen and will have one young at two-yearly intervals.

As the Common Hippo spends the majority of its life in water environments it is providing a constant source of organic manure. This source actually stimulates plant growth and gives the fish a constant food source. The presence of the hippos in lakes and rivers can aid in deterring fishers from over-exploiting the fish because people want to avoid close contact with such large and potentially dangerous creatures. The sheer size of the animal keeps rivers from becoming clogged by the water lilies and reeds as the hippos break their way through them.

Common Hippos play host to a diversity of animals

such as Hammer-headed Storks and Cattle Egrets. Young crocodiles have also been known to lie on the back of a hippo. Many other animals such as the zebra, antelope, and rhino utilise the water holes occupied by the hippo, however the hippo usually feels unthreatened and pays little attention to these animals. The main predators are the leopard, lion and crocodile, although the jaws of the hippo are so powerful that they can easily snap a crocodile in half if it strays too close to a herd.

Pygmy Hippos are easily distinguished from the Common Hippo by the difference in size with Pygmy Hippos weighing approximately 230 kilograms and having a body length of 1.6 metres. This smaller hippo is not as adapted to aquatic life like the larger hippo and is restricted to mud wallows, swamps and moist forests. These animals can be found on the west coast of Africa in the countries of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and the Ivory Coast.

Adelaide Zoo currently has one male and one female Common Hippo. Their names are Susie and Brutus. The easiest way to tell the difference is to compare the size of their heads; his being clearly larger. There is also one Pygmy Hippo at Adelaide Zoo and her name is Janice. The Adelaide Zoo's Common Hippos each consume half a bale of oaten hay per day and every two or three days they are given a wheelbarrow load full of fresh leafy vegetables. The Pygmy Hippo's diet is more varied. They each eat half a biscuit of lucerne combined with five carrots and seven apples in the evening. They also receive two or three buckets of leafy vegetables a week.

Pygmy Hippos are a Threatened Species, but at present Adelaide Zoo, does not have plans to breed because of lack of space in Australian Zoos.

