

BY JEFF HOLLAND,

RHINOS AND THE LOS ANGELES ZOO

When I first started working at the Los Angeles Zoo as a part-time keeper in 1985, the Zoo had two groups of black rhinos—one consisting of the eastern black rhino subspecies and one of the southern black rhino subspecies—and a trio of greater one-horned or Indian rhinos. At that time, the world's wild rhinos were under tremendous pressure from hunting for their horns and habitat destruction. The black rhino populations in Africa were taking the brunt of the poaching pressure as the sale of their horns to the Asian and Middle Eastern markets had increased tremendously.

Twenty-eight years later, we are once again seeing widespread massacre of rhino populations. This time there are even fewer rhinos to begin with, and this onslaught could very easily spell the final end to some of the planet's most ancient species.

Sadly, since I first started as a keeper, the western black rhino population has gone extinct, and the northern white rhino population is also considered extinct. Most disturbing is that a second population of Javan rhinos was discovered in 2002 in Vietnam—and in ten years' time was wiped out completely by poachers, leaving only one known population of Javan rhinos on Earth.

The Sumatran rhinoceros population has dropped to fewer than 100 individuals with the species now extinct on the Malay peninsula and probably fewer than five individuals remaining on the island of Borneo. The majority of the Sumatran rhinos are now found in isolated parks on Sumatra.

The Zoo's role in conserving and protecting these magnificent animals began back in the days of the old Griffith Park Zoo.

White Rhinoceros

In 1965, before the Zoo opened at its current location, a pair of southern white rhinos was purchased for the Zoo. They were the first of many rhinos to reside here. Unfortunately the pair never produced any offspring during their many years here. Research revealed that this particular rhino species is gregarious by nature. When housed in large herds, they thrive and breed. So in 1982, when the Zoo committed to the rescue operation of several southern black rhinos, we chose to transfer the white rhino pair to the Fort Worth Zoo. This decision not only freed up space in L.A. for the southern black rhinos, but allowed the white rhinos to be in a herd situation in Fort Worth.

Six months after arriving at the Fort Worth Zoo, the pair was again transferred, this time to a private facility in Texas called Sandstone Mountain Ranch. There they joined an even larger herd and produced their first offspring, a male calf currently residing at African Lion Safari in Rockton, Ontario, Canada. From Sandstone, our pair was transferred one last time, to Fossil Rim Wildlife Center in Glen Rose, Texas, where they produced a female calf in 1992. In 2000, that female calf produced her own calf, also a female. The original pair lived out their lives at Fossil Rim while their female calf and her offspring were moved to the Birmingham Zoo to form a new herd.

So while the Los Angeles Zoo currently does not house any white rhinos, we own the three descendants of our original pair, and hopefully they will continue to produce calves for the preservation of the species.

Eastern Black Rhinoceros, Southern Black Rhinoceros

The Zoo received its first black rhino in October 1966, a female from Kenya representing the eastern subspecies. Two years later, a male arrived from Kenya. This pair produced four calves between 1970 and 1977, becoming the first rhinos to reproduce at the Zoo. After the death of the original male in 1979, the Zoo acquired another male and female. The new male sired two calves, one with each female, in 1985 and 1986. Unfortunately, this was the end of our breeding success with black rhinos. It is possible that age finally caught up with them as they were 20 years or older by this time.

The Zoo's first involvement with the direct conservation of a rhino species took place in 1982, when a pair of southern black rhinos arrived from Zimbabwe. The importation of this pair was part of an attempt to save the species from extinction, as Zimbabwe's black rhino population was under constant threat. The strategy at the time was to capture as many black rhinos as possible from what were considered unsecured areas and transfer them to Intensive Management Zones. As part of this operation, several black rhinos were brought to the U.S. and Australia as insurance against the total annihilation of the species.

Four months after the pair's arrival, the Zoo had a pleasant surprise. Unbeknownst to Zoo staff, the female was pregnant when she arrived. She gave birth to the only southern black rhino ever born at the Zoo. For the next 12 years, Zoo staff did everything they could to encourage further breeding of this rare subspecies, but unfortunately it was not to be. The female was transferred to Fossil Rim in November 1993 in hopes that pairing her with a different male would result in a calf. The L.A. Zoo's male unfortunately died two months later, leaving just the female that had been born 12 years earlier.



▲ Randa is a great ambassador for Indian rhinos as well as the other rhinoceros species.

► Indian rhinoceros Radha with her calf, Chandra, in 1985.

CURATOR OF MAMMALS

The Zoo has a long and storied history of working with these majestic mammals—and an equally enduring commitment to their conservation.



TAD MOTOYAMA

▲ ► Gus and Mabel, the Zoo's first southern black rhinos, arrived from Zimbabwe in 1982 as part of an international rescue operation.

► The wide, square upper lip of the white rhinoceros is adapted for feeding on grasses.



TAD MOTOYAMA



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Progress in the form of a new orangutan exhibit brought an end to the Zoo's black rhino program in 1999, as construction of the Red Ape Rain Forest began on the site of the former black rhino enclosures. By 2004, the last of the Zoo's black rhinos had been transferred to other facilities. But we still have family ties at other institutions: Descendants from our eastern black rhino group currently reside at Zoo Miami and Atlanta Zoo, where our female produced her first calf a few months ago.

Indian Rhinoceros

The Zoo's first Indian rhino was a male from Assam, India. Herman arrived in February 1966 and was housed at the old Griffith Park Zoo until he was moved to the current site prior to opening. Within two years, he was joined by two females—Nepali from the Hamburg Zoo in Germany, and Radha from India. Thus began the Zoo's breeding program for this highly endangered species.

Although breeding any rhino species is difficult at best due to the aggressiveness of the mating ritual, the Indian rhino is particularly notorious. The male often chases the female relentlessly until she submits, and he will not hesitate to use his razor-sharp canines, which can inflict serious wounds. In 1971, this was the case with the Zoo's first attempts to breed Herman and Nepali, who, unfortunately, died from her



NEAL JOHNSTON



injuries. Despite this setback, the Zoo understood that captive breeding of the species was necessary to ensure its continued survival, and in November of 1974 another female, Randa, was acquired from the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville, Texas.

From 1976 to 1981, numerous attempts were made at uniting the male and the females at the right moment. Success finally occurred in February 1982 when the Zoo's first Indian rhino calf was born to Radha. This long-awaited birth was met with much fanfare. Radha had another calf, a male named Chandra, in August 1985. (Randa meanwhile had three calves between 1982 and 1986, but unfortunately all were stillborn.)

The Zoo's Indian rhinos did not produce any more calves. Radha died in November 1988, and although efforts to breed Herman with both Randa and another female, Terai, who arrived in 1990, continued, there was to be no repeat of our earlier success.

Terai was transferred to San Diego, and in 2001 Herman died after a long illness. Chandra had been transferred to the Oklahoma City Zoo in 1990, leaving the Zoo with just one rhino, Randa, who had been determined to be non-reproductive at this point.

At 44 years of age, Randa is the Zoo's sole rhino representative. She has become a great ambassador for Indian rhinos as well as the other rhino species. In the wild, females lead a largely solitary existence, unless they are caring for a calf, so Randa's living arrangement suits her just fine. Due to her mild manner, she now greets guests on the weekends, allowing visitors to get close to one of the most unique species in the world and learn from her dedicated keepers about her life and the tragic demise of these great icons.

It should be noted that Chandra has sired his own calves, thus keeping alive the genetic line of his mother and father. One of these calves, a female, was transferred to the Buffalo Zoo, where she produced another female calf who currently resides at the Toronto Zoo.

Sumatran Rhinoceros

In 1984 the Los Angeles Zoo along with the Bronx Zoo, Cincinnati Zoo, and San Diego Zoo formed the Sumatran Rhino Trust (SRT) with the Indonesian government in an international effort to save the last remaining Sumatran rhinos. At that time it was estimated that no more than 800 Sumatran rhinos survived on Sumatra, Borneo, and in peninsular Malaysia. The SRT was tasked with rescuing rhinos from areas where they could not be protected. This effort brought three members of the most primitive rhino species on Earth to the Los Angeles Zoo in hopes of saving the species from extinction.

The first two Sumatran rhinos to arrive were temporary guests laying over in sunny California before continuing on to colder climates, a transition meant to help these tropical animals adjust to their new homes. Mehatu, ultimately destined for the Cincinnati Zoo, arrived here in November 1988 and remained until June 1989. Another female, Rapunzel, lived here from November 1989 to May 1990 before completing her journey to the Bronx Zoo.

Finally, in 1991, the Zoo received a third Sumatran rhino, but this female named Embam was to call Los Angeles home. For four years, "Emi" delighted and inspired visitors, however, her stay would also be cut short.

The SRT program was not faring well. Breeding the Sumatran rhino was proving to be more difficult than hoped. By 1995, a single male, Ipuh, remained in the U.S., at the Cincinnati Zoo. The only two females in the U.S. were housed at the Los Angeles Zoo and Bronx Zoo. The Bronx Zoo's female, Rapunzel, had been determined to be non-reproductive, which left Emi as the only possible mate for Ipuh. Recognizing that this was a last ditch effort to propagate the species, the Zoo agreed to send Emi to Cincinnati.



TAD MOTOYAMA

► Sumatran rhinoceros Emi at the L.A. Zoo in 1995.

▼ This eastern black rhinoceros calf was born at Zoo Atlanta in August. His mother, Andazi, is on loan from the L.A. Zoo.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ZOO ATLANTA

▼ Emi (below) gave birth to three three offspring at the Cincinnati Zoo: Andalas, Suci, and Harapan.



TAD MOTOYAMA

◀ Andalas was the first of his species to be born in captivity in 112 years.



ELIJAH HUNTER

The research team at the Cincinnati Zoo, led by Dr. Terri Roth, worked for six years studying the reproductive cycle of female Sumatran rhinos. On September 13, 2001, all the hard work paid off with the birth of Andalus, the first Sumatran rhino to be born in captivity in more than 100 years. His birth gave hope that the species could be saved through captive propagation, like many species had before.

In June 2003, Andalus was transferred to the Los Angeles Zoo in order to make room in Cincinnati for Emi's second calf, a female named Suci.

Like his mother, Andalus charmed staff and visitors alike in Los Angeles. But in 2007, the Zoo once again made a sacrifice for the betterment of the species—transferring Andalus to his ancestral home in Sumatra where he could potentially breed with two females housed at the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary in Way Kambas National Park. With the wild population declining dramatically to less than 200 animals, it was imperative that the captive reproduction of the species be successful, and this could only happen if we gave Andalus the opportunity to sire his own calves.

In April 2007, Emi gave birth to her last calf, a male named Harapan. Two years later, Emi succumbed to an untreatable illness, thus ending the successful breeding of Sumatran rhinos in the United States.

Meanwhile in Way Kambas, Andalus proved to be a good breeder, and on June 22, 2012, his first calf was born, a male named Andatu. The first captive-born Sumatran rhino in Indonesia, Andatu renewed hope that the species could indeed be saved.



SUSIE ELIUS/IRF

▲ Andatu (shown with mother Ratu) was born at the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary in Indonesia's Way Kambas National Park.

Unfortunately, Andalus's father, Ipuh, who had resided at the Cincinnati Zoo for 22 years, died of an age-related illness. This left Suci and Harapan as the only Sumatran rhinos in the United States. Suci remained in Cincinnati, while Harapan made his way to the Los Angeles Zoo in November 2011.

Although he remained off exhibit during his 18-month stay, he quickly became a staff favorite. Hopes to exhibit him—and ultimately import a mate—never materialized. Once again, a change in plans was dictated by the dire circumstance of the species.

In April 2013, a Sumatran Rhino Crisis Meeting was convened in Singapore to discuss the immediate actions that were needed to save the species from extinction. At this meeting it was revealed that the Sumatran rhino numbered no more than 100 individuals—and in reality the number was probably closer to 50. Recommendations were made to further the captive breeding success in the U.S. by transferring an unrelated male and female for breeding with Suci and Harapan, but it became apparent that the governments of Indonesia and Malaysia did not have the will to do so. We were left with very little choice but to send Harapan back to Cincinnati in a last ditch effort to breed him with Suci in hopes of producing a calf. With as few as 50 Sumatran rhinos remaining, and political red tape interfering with efforts to save the species, our options are limited until there is a more cooperative climate.

It is our hope that we can keep the Sumatran rhino alive for future generations, and that once again the Los Angeles Zoo can help ensure the survival of one of the world's most critically endangered mammals. □