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Save the Rhino

At the current rate of poaching, rhinos will be extinct by 2026

Gail Braznell

The opportunity arose for me to attend a conservation talk at West Midland Safari Park (WMSP) from Save the Rhino International (SRI). The fascinating talk highlighted the plight of the wild rhino and the behind the scenes work the charity does to try and save these fascinating animals.

Rhinos are poached for their horns; relentless hunting by poachers who have slaughtered these proud, magnificent beasts as they dwindle close to extinction, which has escalated in recent years. Rhino horn is used in traditional Chinese medicine for a variety of ailments including fever, anxiety and food poisoning but it also appears to be used as a demonstration of wealth and high social status, with Vietnam being the main perpetrator. It is estimated that weight-for-weight rhino horn is currently worth more than gold. This high value has resulted in rhino poachers developing highly sophisticated and well

organised international crime syndicates with access to improved weaponry and equipment such as helicopters. Although much of the global rhino population decline is due to poaching, habitat loss has also been a key factor. As human populations have grown, more land is required for settlements and farming, and this means less land is available for wildlife, similar to forests around the world, which are being logged to supply the world's demand for timber, affecting all species that live in those forests.

Meanwhile at West Midland Safari Park...

It may have taken ten years for the birth of the latest white rhino calf at WMSP, but boy was it worth the wait. After 16 months of pregnancy, first-time mum, six-year-old Ailsa, gave birth to the new arrival on Good Friday, 25th March, making him the first baby rhino to be born at the Safari Park since his father,

Barney, who was born in 2005. Angela Potter (Head of Wildlife Operations) talks me through the huge inspirational effort that it has taken to breed white rhino at West Midland Safari Park:

“West Midland Safari Park has previously bred 3 white rhino calves but our last one was born in September 2005. This one was Barney and he is actually the sire of our latest calf. By 2011, our herd consisted of Mtuba, Tootsie (Barney's dam), Barney, Trixie and her daughter Lucy. Mtuba and Trixie both had reproductive tract issues and were not breeding. We, therefore, worked closely with the European Endangered Species Programme Coordinator to get us and our animals back into a breeding situation. (The European Endangered Species Programme (EEP) is the most intensive type of population management for a species kept in European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA) zoos.) It was decided to move Tootsie

to Whipsnade Zoo so she would have access to a breeding bull, keep Mtuba & Trixie within our herd and for Barney to become our breeding male.

From our point of view, it was good to keep Barney. He was becoming mature, was used to our safari park setting, being out in the drive through and mixing with our many African species. We needed to get some young females in to become the nucleus of our new breeding herd. The first young female to come in was Keyah, from Cerza Zoo in France. She was born in October 2007 and arrived at WMSP in November 2011. She is an important female in the European Population as her dam had arrived at Cerza from South Africa already pregnant so in fact, Keyah had a wild sire.

Next step was to move Lucy (as she was related to Barney), to Blair Drummond Safari Park as they had an established breeding male and to move his daughter Ailsa, down to WMSP. Ailsa was younger than Keyah, born in December 2009. Ailsa arrived here in May 2009. Keyah & Ailsa soon settled into safari life well. Lucy did not do so well at Blair Drummond. She was not compatible with the bull so was then moved to Coulange in France where she soon became pregnant. This just shows the importance of the EEP and how they are working hard to ensure that every female gets the best chance to reproduce.

It took Barney a while to get the hang of mating. Keyah began to come into oestrus and was very patient as Barney practiced month after month. To give them the best opportunity we would leave them outside in the reserves overnight, with a keeper in a vehicle in attendance to keep an eye on them. By the time that Ailsa came into season Barney had perfected his technique and after her second season, she did not have another. We suspected she may be pregnant so collected faecal samples and after a few months, we sent these off to a laboratory in Vienna and on the 22nd May 2015 we got the news that she was confirmed pregnant. We knew then with a gestation of 490 days plus or minus 14 we had an expected birth date of the 19th March 2016 and it was quite often the case that a first-time pregnancy would be later rather than earlier.

The keeper team and vet nurse then started training Ailsa for blood draws so we could establish a baseline progesterone level as we knew this would be important nearer the time when it would drop from 110 plus to near 0. By December, we started to prepare for the birth. CCTV was fitted into the rhino house which could be viewed in the wildlife office, veterinary products and equipment were purchased, the birthing pen and outside paddock were made calf proof and a comfy bed was prepared in the birthing pen. A rota was prepared for keepers to stay overnight when the time was right. By the end of February we were collecting blood, every other day and the progesterone levels were steadily dropping. These were sent to the veterinary lab but results took a couple of days to get back to us, so we also looked at other signs which would help us. We took weekly photos of the udder to look for changes; we started to manipulate the udder so we could collect fluid when it first appeared. We reviewed the footage from overnight CCTV so we could monitor any behavior changes. I could view this from my home on site on an iPad and found this became compulsive viewing, waking up throughout the night to check for any changes!

We were liaising with Robert Hermes, a vet from (IZW) Institute of Zoology & Wildlife Research, Berlin and renowned rhino expert. He was on standby to fly over for the birth in case veterinary intervention was needed. The use of technology came into its own here as we set up a 'whatsapp' group which included Robert and we found this invaluable as we were able to ask questions send him udder photos, blood results and get an instant response.

On the 12th March, we first got some fluid in her udder so we knew we had around 2 weeks until the birth. Easter was fast approaching and it would take longer to get the blood results over the bank holiday weekend. On the night of March 24th /25th, Ailsa was a little more restless, had passed smaller faecal boluses and her udders were fuller but not swollen. She seemed fine in herself so we let her out into the reserves as normal for the day (Good Friday). At 3pm we had a call from the keeper to say she had a scuffle with the one of the others and she was gushing water, maybe her

waters had broken. We got her into the house and spoke to Robert who set about looking for flights. Ailsa was very calm, ate her tea and lay down for a sleep.

We then heard from Robert that he was not going to get a flight until later and likely would be in the air with no way of contacting us if he took that flight. We elected for him to stay in Germany and then we would still have contact with him by phone and WhatsApp if we needed it. The other rhinos came in and the animal team was viewing from the office.

At 18.43, she was restless and started to have contractions, by 18.50 the membrane was out and by 18.59 the calf was born. The other rhinos were all calm in the house. He was almost immediately trying to stand and Ailsa was being brilliant. We were in contact with Robert and our favorite quote from the night was - Us - "Calf is attempting to stand and Ailsa is licking it lots and with occasional pokes from her horn"; Robert - "Is OK, she may also try to lift it with her horn. This is also alright - Flying is not!!!"

Robert advised afterbirth should be expelled 2 - 4 hours after birth and suckling 1 - 6 hours after birth. The calf stood at 19.42 and was active and searching for the teat. At 21.18, he had a very small suckle just for a few seconds. Robert was reassured - 'Done. He will come back It may take some time but that is fine'. It then took a long time for the next suckle and I was not quite so reassured! At 01.13, he had a very good long suckle and then all was good. He had got the hang of it for sure and Ailsa too. We had a keeper watching from the wildlife office overnight but all was well and he never looked back. We received the progesterone results for the birth date a few days after the Easter period and on the morning of the birth day they had actually dropped to 1.8.

On day 3 we separated him for a few minutes to vaccinate, weigh and microchip. He weighed in at a hefty 67.5kg. Luckily, we had a very strong person in, Noel, to pick him up and hold him on the scales!

The keepers chose the name Ekozu, which means white rhino in the Namibian Herero language. We feel this is apt as we have strong links with

Namibia through our support for the Ongava Research Centre.

We wanted to get him integrated with the herd and in the reserve as soon as we could, although the weather was quite appalling for the time of year. Within a few days, we had Ailsa and the calf out in the paddock; this was followed by an introduction to mums' best friend, Keyah, although to Keyah's dismay, Ailsa was not the same friendly girl! Next step was into the reserves and this also went really well. He met the other species and they were all quite interested. He chased a lot of them and was pleased to see them all run away without him realising that it was because Mum was right behind him! He is now very comfortable in the reserve and our other rhinos Mtuba and Trixie have been introduced too. Our final step will be to introduce the male rhino, Barney, to him and then we will be set for Ailsa to come back into season and get pregnant again.

So to get where we are today it has taken 6 years and a massive team effort between the European Endangered Species Programme, animal managers, the keepers and the veterinary team.

After meeting Ekozu for myself, courtesy of Bob Lawrence, Head of Wildlife Development at the Safari Park, I can vouch that he is absolutely gorgeous, with a fine temperament and a cheeky, mischievous character. His birth is not only fantastic news for the park, but also for the white rhino conservation. This adorable newcomer will help highlight the very real danger the species still faces today.

What I would also like to recognise is the commitment from West Midland Safari Park that they have to all their animals, including endangered species. Over 23 million people visit British zoos and safari parks each year, the safari park sees this as an opportunity to educate this vast audience with a variety of talks, tours and projects, as well as contributing to research by allowing researchers access to study animal behavior, supply biological samples and animal records to approved projects.

I now see West Midland Safari Park from a completely different perspective and I'm proud to have such a place right on my doorstep.

Visitors can see the rhinos and other attractions during the four-mile self-drive safari.

A huge special thanks to Angela Potter (Head of Wildlife Operations) who not only shared this delightful story but has changed the way I see the conservation of these magnificent creatures.

For more information on Save The Rhino International or West Midland Safari Park please visit:

www.savetherhino.org or
www.wmsp.co.uk





