

Is nowhere safe for rhinos?

What next after Thoiry?

The poaching of rhino for horn is, sadly, nothing new for conservationists working in range states. While the possibility that poachers would try their luck at a zoo had been a concern for some time, the realisation of that fear in March 2017 came as a profound shock to zoos and people worldwide.

David Williams-Mitchell | Communications and Membership Manager, EAZA



MIRKO MARSELLI

David Williams-Mitchell,
Communications
and Membership
Manager, EAZA

EAZA is the membership organisation of the most progressive zoos and aquariums in Europe and the Middle East. With more than 350 institutional members in 44 countries, EAZA is responsible for 401 *ex-situ* species conservation breeding programmes, including three species of rhinoceros.



DYLAN KIRKALONE ZOO

I arrived in my office in Amsterdam early on 7 March 2017, and almost immediately had a call from Colomba de la Panouse, the Zoological Director of Thoiry Zoological Park and Chair of EAZA's Communications Committee. Colomba informed me that, just a couple of hours previously, keepers had discovered that one of their white rhinos, Vince, had been shot dead and mutilated with a chainsaw. The news had not yet leaked to the press, but with an area of the Zoo closed to the public and police on site, it was inevitable that the media would pick up on the story within the next hour or two. Its public relations agency, Urban Nomad, was already working on a response to the media, and Colomba asked me to liaise with them for an internationally focused response that would reflect the undoubted interest of the world's media.

Crisis communications forms an important part of the communications portfolio of EAZA; zoos and aquariums are coming under increasing media scrutiny, with demands to communicate their working practices and respond quickly to enquiries from journalists. The Association has worked to design a range of measures to ensure a united and coherent response from all of our members. The first order of business then, was to inform EAZA members of the attack at Thoiry, and put them on alert for both media inquiries and further possible attacks.

Zoos across Europe responded immediately, and the sense of shock at the attack was palpable. While security across the membership of the EAZA has been high since the beginning of the rhino poaching crisis, no amount of

preparation could detract from the sense of violation, the sense that finally, nowhere was safe.

As the media interest started to grow it also became apparent that the sensationalist aspect of the story was going to make accuracy of reporting extremely challenging. Thoiry and Urban Nomad were aware of Save the Rhino's guidance not to discuss the estimated black market cost of rhino horn but initial reports coming out in the French press (and being picked up on social media internationally) were not only concentrating on the price, but inflating it to ridiculous levels.

As a result, Thoiry decided to include a more realistic estimate of that price in its initial statement to the media. While it's a tragedy that the media was more interested in the economics of rhino horn trafficking rather than its gruesome cost, it was vital for the European zoo community to ensure that the incident didn't spark a wave of attacks, and EAZA supported Thoiry's position.

During the following days, with no let-up in the flow of journalists through Thoiry's gates and the number of calls from the world's media to the EAZA office and our



member zoos, pressure began to mount on European zoos to 'do something' to protect animals in our care, with a range of possible measures, from the sensible to the outright ridiculous, being pushed by everyone from members of the public to legislators. (My favourite? A demand to dehorn all rhinos in zoos and paint their noses orange – we never did find out why orange was the chosen colour or why orange noses would be a deterrent!).

Pressure also mounted on the community to make a blanket recommendation for action, and so the EAZA Taxon Advisory Group (TAG) for rhino provided a set of guidelines, created with the assistance of the IUCN African Rhino Specialist Group and Save the Rhino. The measures listed reflect the learnings of anti-poaching measures employed in range states, and are aimed at ensuring that enactment of certain measures does not encourage criminals to target neighbour institutions instead.

The media, of course, wanted to know what these measures were, but here we drew a line: for security reasons, the guidelines remain confidential to rhino-holders in EAZA institutions, although field conservationists will find them familiar. Hysteria continued to build, however, with calls for the use of lethal force against intruders and other equally impractical measures.

While these proposed measures were often illegal or completely impossible to enact, it was heartening to see the level of public concern for rhino species.



On the flip side, it is unfortunate that it took a poaching incident in a European zoo to cause such a worldwide media focus.

Two of our members have since decided to dehorn their rhino. Both institutions have relatively large herds in their care, and the decision was not taken lightly in either case. Will dehorning become routine in European zoos as it is in many wildlife reserves, like the Zimbabwean Black rhino pictured left? This will probably depend on whether or not the attack on Thoiry is evidence of a new trend or merely an isolated incident. With police on high alert, and rhino-holding zoos now more focused than ever to the threat, EAZA is hopeful that armed criminals will realise that the risks outweigh the possible gains.

Despite the tragic loss of the rhino at Thoiry, we can at least be grateful that the wholesale slaughter of these magnificent animals is, for the moment, still high in the public consciousness across Europe and beyond. With an armed attack on a supposedly safe sanctuary thousands of miles from range states, people can no longer retreat into the comfort zone of thinking of rhino poaching as being a faraway problem of Africa and Asia alone; and the vulnerable resourcing of police and ranger forces engaged in the fight against wildlife crime is, perhaps, a little safer as a result.

EAZA members will continue to work with SRI and other rhino conservationists to maintain this high level of awareness, and where appropriate, to raise funds for the protection of animals in their own habitats. With luck and hard work, Vince will not have died in vain.

Far left: On 19 September 2017, more than 33kg of rhino horn was burned in the Dvůr Králové Zoo. This is the second time the Czech zoo has organised such an event after 50kg was destroyed in 2014 as part of the "Burn Horns Save Rhinos" campaign.

Below: Vince, a four-year-old white rhinoceros, killed by poachers in his enclosure at Parc zoologique de Thoiry.