

AT THE ZOO

By David L. Robinson

Wildlife Conservation

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Rhino Program Breeds Success

... at San Diego's
Wild Animal Park

THE RHINO CALF SETTLED COMFORTABLY INTO THE WALLOW AS its mother prepared for her own mud bath. Farther up the valley, adult rhinos relaxed in a pond, ignoring the gaur and blackbuck antelope nearby. Meanwhile, the Bush Line carried curious visitors through the heart of Africa and Asia.

Just another day at the San Diego Wild Animal Park—which, outside Africa, is the site of the world's most successful captive rhinoceros breeding program. The Wild Animal Park's first rhino was born in October 1972, soon after the facility opened. In the ensuing years, there have been 119 births: 83 southern white rhinos, 27 Indian, and nine black. There are several reasons for the program's success. Most notable is the wide-open space at the 2,200-acre park, situated in a verdant valley 30 miles north of downtown San Diego, California. The current population of 27 rhinos—ten Indian, eight southern white, five black, and four northern white—has ample room to roam and socialize.

"The initial concept of the park was to have large enclosures and lots of space, to provide areas for large mammals to reproduce, and thus to provide zoos and parks throughout the United States and the world with animals," says Lance Aubrey, a lead keeper in charge of two rhino herds.

Unlike most zoos, which have limited space, the wild animal park can group up to ten rhinos of one species in separate exhibit areas that range in size from 30 to 80 acres. In the wild, female southern white rhinos stick together, and in captivity, they tend to reproduce better when there are several living in the same herd. In addition, all the rhinos enjoy varied habitats, which include wallows, grassy hillsides, shade trees, and barriers that afford the requisite privacy for mating. This is in keeping with the park's overall design, intended to meet the ecological needs and encourage the natural behaviors of its 121 mammal and 285 bird species.

Southern California's mild weather is another critical factor in the success of the park's rhino breeding program. Many zoos must bring their animals inside during harsh winters—thus altering their normal routine. San Diego's rhinos are not inconvenienced by such interruptions to their mating activity.

Of course, the 24 rhino keepers play a key role in the program. The care and feeding of these two-and-a-half-ton mammals is no small task. The keepers are keen observers of rhino behavior and make necessary adjustments to ensure rapport. "You have to know the rhino, be aware of its normal activity, and be able to spot any abnormalities, such as illness," says Aubrey. Sometimes a male isn't compatible with a particular female, so another pairing must be made."

A prime keeper responsibility is monitoring the rhinos' breeding activity, which can be quite aggressive, particularly in the Indian species. The rhinoceros gestation period ranges between 16 and 17 months, depending on the species. Once a pregnancy has been confirmed through fecal analysis to measure hormone levels, the keepers determine the approximate deliv-

ery date, and about three weeks prior to the expected birth, they isolate the female. In most cases, keepers monitor the female's progress 24 hours a day, and veterinarians are on call to assist if necessary. There have been a few difficult cases, including an Indian rhino that nearly required a cesarean. Fortunately she was able to deliver her calf naturally. During the last ten years there has been an average of four births per year at the park.

Fertility drugs have been used in a few animals, primarily with the rare northern white rhinos. So far, they have not reproduced, although the park staff hasn't given up. The staff works closely with that of the San Diego Zoological Park, their sister institution, to develop new reproductive techniques for this and other species.

When the rhino calves reach two to three years of age—and after their mothers have given birth again—they are ready to be relocated. Since the breeding program was initiated, 103 rhinos have been sent to sites throughout the United States and 15 other countries, including China, Germany, New Zealand, and Australia. Destination is based primarily on the recommendations of the American Zoo and Aquarium Association's Species Survival

Plan, which evaluates each rhino's breeding potential and the specific needs at various zoos.

No captive-born rhino has yet been returned to the wild, although that remains a goal of conservation specialists worldwide. The threat of poaching, primarily for the animals' horns, is a grave concern. Meanwhile, the San Diego Wild Animal Park concentrates on providing the best possible captive habitat for rhino mating and reproduction. "We continue to perfect our techniques in trying to have all the species and to ensure that rhinos are around for future generations, in the wild and in captivity," says Aubrey.

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Freelance writer David Robinson lives in San Diego.



Details, Details

SAN DIEGO WILD ANIMAL PARK

15500 San Pasqual Valley Road
Escondido, CA 92027-9614
760-747-8702

Hours: Daily 9:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M., September through May;
9:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. (Thursday to Sunday, until 8:00 P.M.),
June through August.

Admission: Adults \$19.95, children \$12.95 (3-11), youngsters 2 and under free. Discounts available for seniors and large groups.

RHINO RELATIONS: The San Diego Wild Animal Park has bred 119 rhinos since 1972. Pictured here are calves of two African species (southern white, opposite; black, above).