

On the cutting edge of conservation

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Story: Terry Sellards Photography: The Wilds

| research |

*A rhinoceros dormitory
for 40 is being built in Ohio.
That's right. Ohio.*

Endangered Species, 1 (1) Hubart, Tasmania
Summer 1999



Housing primarily white rhinos on loan from zoos, the new facility is only one of the latest projects for The Wilds, a 10,000 acre (405 hectare), cutting edge research and teaching facility dedicated to increased practical knowledge about and conservation techniques for endangered species.

The "cutting edge" cliché is used advisedly, since a primary focus of The Wilds is managing species in the wild. Many experts in the field now acknowledge that conservation in the wild is the only sure way to save not only the so-called charismatic megavertebrates, like rhinos and tigers, but also the habitats from which they come.

An idea previously in vogue – that endangered species can be conserved by captive breeding in zoos followed by introduction to the wild – has too often proved unworkable, according to Robert W. Reece, executive director of The Wilds. "It isn't that zoos don't have contributions to make," Reece asserts. "They do, particularly in education. But if we are going to save endangered species, it ultimately will be done in the wild." Moving a limited number of large animals from zoo to zoo worldwide to achieve genetic diversity is slow, logically difficult, costly, and the results have not been all that impressive,



Robert W. Reece, executive director of The Wilds

he concludes.

Experts agree that conservation in the wild is a most difficult task. It involves protecting environments that are constantly diminished by human encroachments for housing, agriculture and industry, and by illegal poaching for exotic items such as rhino horns and tiger claws. The work is made all the more difficult as many of the habitats involved are in countries where survival is a primary problem for people, where resources are limited and where there is a need for more sophisticated veterinary and conservation expertise. Often, local politics are most complex, as in the case of elephants.

"Elephants are a great example of what I'm talking about," Reece says. "There are about 600,000 of them left

in Africa. [Ten years ago there were 1.5 million.] But the area of suitable habitat is constantly being reduced. You can't hope to save elephants by captive breeding in zoos. It's just not practical. They have to be conserved in the wild. And to do that you must preserve the environment that supports them. If you do that, then you preserve all the other species in the habitat.

"If things continue as they are, in 10 to 15 years there will be no room left for the elephants. The herds will get smaller and smaller. Their migration routes will continue to be cut off and they will become an endangered species." Solving this problem often requires the cooperation of countries that have many other, more pressing priorities.

Reece was quick to reinforce the importance of zoos in the conservation spectrum, and to the work of The Wilds. Certainly, there are some species that are preserved only in captivity and in the hope that, one day, it may be possible to introduce them to the wild. Also, The Wilds depends heavily on zoos for its research and training programs. Animals are on loan from zoos for physiological research, including reproductive physiology, and the development of new drugs. And the



body of veterinary science knowledge existing among zoo professionals is critical to developing the kind of comprehensive scientific information base that The Wilds seeks to compile and disseminate.

Rhinos and Bactrian camels are good examples of conservation efforts at the Ohio facility. In both cases, scientists are engaged in physiological and pharmaceutical research.

In the case of rhinos, however, an effort is also being made to enhance breeding. With about 40 on site, the likelihood of successful breeding should be greater. It seems that rhinos, too, like to shop around before selecting a mate.

Work with Bactrian camels is part of a coordinated international effort to conserve them in Mongolia. In partnership with the Mongolian Academy of Sciences and the Mongolian Institute of Biology, The Wilds is pursuing a project to develop a Wildlife Veterinary Unit in Mongolia to support current and future wildlife conservation and research programs. "Our people have been working with professionals in Mongolia and Mongolian veterinarians are being given additional training here," Reece says.

Among the many other projects at The Wilds are:

- Anaesthesia and pharmacology research in collaboration with the Ohio State University College of Veterinary Medicine, Wildlife Pharmaceuticals and the Smithsonian Institution on the efficacy of a new anaesthetic combination for non-domestic hoofstock.
- Development of assisted reproduction techniques, specifically artificial insemination, in scimitar-horned oryx. Other reproductive programs are under way involving southern white and Indian rhinos, eland, fringe-eared oryx and sable antelope.
- Using several lakes and ponds at The Wilds, research is being conducted on endangered mussels in collaboration with the Ohio State University Museum of Biological Diversity, the Ohio Division of Wildlife and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

That the challenge of conserving endangered species is monumental and global seems clear. In meeting this challenge, Reece believes that zoos have an important strategic role to play. "Zoos have tremendous community support. They are in the best position to educate the public and to facilitate

public financial support for conservation in the wild. Zoo-supported conservation efforts in the wild already are making a difference, and more could be done."

Reece cites the New York Zoological Society and the affiliated Bronx Zoo as an outstanding example of zoo conservation leadership. "They have provided millions of dollars in support of work in the field. But you don't have to be a big zoo to do your part. Any zoo can help."

Given the nature of the endangered species crisis and the many obstructions to attempts to alleviate that crisis, one must wonder what are the long-term prospects for success. When asked about this, Reece says, "We need to take a long look at our [American] society. We have the attention span of a gnat. Entertainment is a priority. We are increasingly narcissistic. None of this bodes well.

"Do I have hope? All I can say is that I have spasms of optimism."

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