

Keeper Professional Development Program:

My Safari Park Adventure : Jennifer Fedesna, Racine Zoo



My heart is pounding. I feel nervous, excited, eager to learn, and wanting to help in any way I can. I am standing in an enclosure with several other keepers and veterinarians as we all watch an Eastern Black Rhino, Lembe, chew some grass. One of the veterinarians has a good shot and takes it. The dart flies thru the air and gets Lembe in the neck. Bull's-eye! After several minutes that seem like a lifetime, the rhino lies down and falls asleep thanks to the medications. The medical procedures can begin. This was only one out of many experiences I was fortunate to have while I worked at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park this past December through the International Rhino Keeper Association Professional Development program. When I first learned about this program I became very excited and wanted to participate right away. I had to wait several months but the wait was worth it. I never expected to learn and see as much as I did.

I worked at the Safari Park for twelve days. My first day was quite an eye opener. I am a zookeeper at the Racine zoo in Racine, WI. This zoo is only 32 acres but we have a great variety of animals. Coming to the San Diego Zoo Safari Park (an extremely large zoo compared to mine) opened my eyes on how a large zoo runs compared to the little zoo I am from. I met so many amazing and nice people at the park. Everyone was helpful, informative, and kind to me during my entire stay. On my first day, I saw just how different working at the park can be from the typical zoo setting. I worked mostly with fellow keepers out in the field exhibits. Here the exhibits are up to 65 acres with several different species of animals all living together. Most of the animals in these exhibits I have never worked with in my short zookeeper career. Most days I would go with either one or two keepers, load up the truck with hay and grain, and then head out to the field. We would drive into the exhibits, count each species to make sure everyone was accounted for, and pass out food at multiple feeders. This took several hours depending on which routine I was on. Being able to observe the animals and interact with them in a more natural setting was amazing to me. It was very weird for me at first when I realized the only thing between a rhino and myself was a truck door instead of bolsters but I got use to it and comfortable with it.



Jenn scratching down 46 year old southern white rhino bull "Chuck."



Jenn with hand raised giraffe calves Lery and Congo.

There were multiple days when medical procedures had to take place out in the field. I was able to witness and help with several immobilizations of animals including a South African Kudu, Scimitar-Horned Oryx, Angolan Roan Antelope, Eastern White-Bearded Gnu, two African Lions, and an Eastern Black Rhino. All of these immobilizations were amazing to watch, help with, and learn from. Learning how to hold a sedated animal's head correctly while a veterinarian does what he or she needs to do to the animal was one of the most valuable lessons I learned from this experience. I held the head of the young male White-Bearded Gnu during his procedure until he was ready to stand up in the horse trailer. I was nervous of course all the way up until the end but I am very glad I did it. I now feel more confident in my abilities when it comes to immobilizing hoof stock.



Jenn helping Safari park staff and senior keeper Mike Veale, IRKA member, by holding the head during a gnu immobilization.

Continued Keeper Development....



Jenn feeding greater one-horned rhino calf "Chutti."

Baby animals in my opinion are adorable. I was very lucky to have the opportunity to bottle feed a baby giraffe and a Great One-Horned Rhino several times. Of course no one had to twist my arm when it came time to help babysit a three-month-old Sumatran Tiger either. At the Animal Care Center I learned how to make different kinds of formulas for hand raising animals such as rhinos and tigers.

Shipping out an animal at my zoo is not an every day occurrence, especially a rhino. During my days at the park I watched the transportation of a female Great One-Horned Rhino. The planning was extensive, involved many keepers working together as a team, and patience. Everyone wanted to get the rhino successfully into her crate on the first try. This happened with great success all because of great teamwork and cooperation from the rhino. She wasn't the happiest being in the crate but she calmed down. She was kept overnight in the crate in another part of the park so the transportation company could have easy access to her. The truck that came the next day to get her was extremely large. It took a telehandler forklift machine to be able to lift up the crate and place it into the truck. The entire loading process took over a couple of hours.

The San Diego Zoo Safari Park has begun a Rhino Rescue Center where research can be done on Southern White Rhinos in hope of saving rhinos from extinction. About a month before I came to work at the park six Southern White Rhinos were brought over from Africa. I was extremely lucky to spend a day with these rhinos and their keepers while they were still in quarantine. Since I have never been to Africa yet, seeing six wild female rhinos up close was marvelous. The two keepers I worked with said that little is known about the lives of these six girls before coming here to San Diego. If only the rhinos could talk. Four out of the six girls have already become somewhat comfortable with direct human contact. They are all getting along extremely well too. The keepers were working with name recognition with each rhino as well as shifting from yard to yard when asked. I was able to see these training sessions. The six girls have come so far in only a month's time.

This experience at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park was a once in a lifetime experience for me and something I will never forget. If I wrote about everything I learned from this experience, I could go on for several more pages. I would recommend this to any keeper interested in learning more about hoofstock species, especially rhinos. Thank you to every keeper at the Park who helped make my experience an amazing one.

Keeper Professional Development Program: Judy Stephens

Rhino Keeper Judy Stephens, from the Detroit Zoo has taken full advantage of special programs that the IRKA has to offer. She has attended every single one of the Rhino Keeper Workshops! Additionally, Judy decided to broaden her experience, specifically in foot care, by visiting the San Diego Zoo Safari Park on a Keeper Professional Development Program. She had the opportunity to shadow keepers, learn first hand how to perform foot and nail care techniques, and then apply them to the rhinos at the Detroit Zoo. That's the kind of keeper who is truly committed to her work, way to go Judy! To read Judy's presentation from the 2015 Rhino Keeper Workshop, please click on the link: http://media.wix.com/ugd/3e5e65_65e8ddaf98094c0b890646ebb6b479bf.pdf

To learn more about the Keeper Professional Development Program, please visit our website: <http://www.rhinokeeperassociation.org/#professional-development/c22qo> or contact Joe Hauser for details, jhauser@buffalozoo.org

