

## RAD Rhinos : Mike Connolly – Tulsa Zoo & Living Museum

Those of us who have the opportunity to work with rhinos on a daily basis know just what incredibly magnificent animals they are. We also know of the “wow” factor they have as a charismatic mega-vertebrate. At the Tulsa Zoo & Living Museum we capitalize on this by holding an annual dedicated day to rhinos that we call “Rhino Awareness Day” or “RAD” for short. This annual event started several years ago and originated from dedicated pachyderm staff.

Initially the event was intended to help generate interest and publicize our annual “Bowling for Rhinos” fundraising event. However, over the years it has grown into much more. The primary objective of “RAD” nowadays is to help create a greater deal of rhino awareness by highlighting the uniqueness and importance of rhinos worldwide. We also attempt to correct any misconceptions about the species and to recognize them for their importance in the animal kingdom. Granted we do still plug our “Bowling for Rhinos” (BFR), fundraising event as well and with both events planned relatively close together a significant amount of positive public relations occurs solely for rhinos.

At the Tulsa Zoo & Living Museum, we house two white rhinos. Our female rhino, Jeannie, is 31 and our male rhino, Buzbie, is 30 and both have resided in Tulsa most of their life. We are fortunate that both rhinos are relatively laid back and comfortable with guest interaction. Our management team supports “RAD” and during the event we allow guests to make that emotional connection with our rhinos by providing them with an up close and personal experience (rhino permitting). We feel lucky to have a dedicated group of volunteers who assist with the event as well. Assistance takes many forms and the volunteers are always willing to help in any way possible. We often have a craft activity set up that in some way, shape, or form focuses on rhinos. This year we had a life size rhino footprint that guests traced out to compare to their own foot size that they could take home with them. We also provided a coloring activity with all five species of rhinos. Our marketing department has assisted in creating brochures for distribution the day of the event. The event also includes buttons for sale with images of rhinos and we also have pamphlets/brochures available highlighting the International Rhino Foundation as well as information related to our annual BFR event. Various rhino bio facts that include horn and hair are also provided by our education department. Our exhibits department has also provided various signage and banners for the event. Most popular, of course, is the opportunity to touch a real rhino. As you can imagine, the comments vary. “I had no idea they were so soft”, “Wow they sure like the mud”, “What is their horn made from?”, “I thought all rhinos were mean”, include just a few of the comments. What intrigues me the most about the event is watching guests light up with huge smiles on their faces and watching parent and child bond not only with one another but our rhinos and making memories together!



The event has become so popular that our marketing department has put the event on their annual calendar and made it a stand alone day on their “Mammoth May” promotions. This past year, I lost count as to how many radio, newspaper, and local television affiliates were present for the media day leading up to the event. On many occasions we have had guests plan trips to the zoo specifically because they heard about the event. This past year resulted in record attendance. Thus far we have always held the event in May and been fortunate to have had good (although sometimes hot) weather. Hours for the event have varied but usually average 3-4 hours in duration as our rhinos definitely have an attention span.



We are lucky to have permission to place a donation container out at the event. Even though we do not charge for the rhino “meet and greet”, guests often feel compelled to donate to conservation efforts. These donations allow us to support the International Rhino Keepers Association (IRKA) as an institutional supporter and provide funds for our BFR campaign as well. We have discovered that after making that direct connection, visitors are often more than willing to make a donation. Many feel lucky for the experience and appreciative of our efforts.

As you can see, we can make a difference. Combining dedication with creativity we can accomplish many great things. We all know rhinos need our help and with grassroots efforts such as RAD we are in a better place to assist them. For whatever reason, a vast majority of the public remains unaware of the challenges rhinos and other wildlife face. It is up to us to help drive the message home through effective educational awareness in hopes that more people will become advocates for rhino conservation. As both a flagship and keystone species, rhinos need our help and I hope you will join us in continued efforts aimed at their conservation and preservation. After all, rhinos are RAD! Who better than us realize that and can do something about it?



~Those who say it can't be done should not interfere with those who are doing it~