



Conservator Lauren working on one of our rhinos in Mammal Hall

Blog

Giving our rhinos a glow up

By Lauren Burleson

First published 16 February 2026



168

We have three rhinos on display in the Mammals Hall that are all at least a hundred years old.

Find out about their specialist care and the importance of conserving our collection from conservation specialist Lauren Burleson.

I have been a conservator at the Museum for the last four years. Conservators are scientific professionals who specialise in the care and long-term preservation of specimens, guided by a professional ethical code.



Without conservation, specimens will deteriorate over time due to environmental and lighting conditions, pest damage and breakage from handling. This results in the loss of scientific information and history. We step in to prevent further damage and protect the collection for the future.

Rejuvenating rhinos



Lauren working on the rhinos alongside colleagues Efstratia Verveniotou and Claire Kelly.

A project that I'm currently working on with two of my colleagues is the treatment of three open display rhino specimens in the Mammals Hall. These taxidermy specimens have been on display at the Museum for many decades and are over a century old.

They have a fabricated internal structure, with the preserved skin of a rhino covering it, arranged in a pose that imitates life. The skin, hair and toenails all came from a real rhino, while the horns and eyes are replicas made especially for display.

The way we think about wild rhinos now is very different from when they were acquired for the museum. Of the five rhino species, three are now endangered.



mission by maintaining our precious collections, as we cannot replace them or the information they contain.

Taxidermy incorporates organic materials from animals, including skin, hair, and sometimes bones. This makes taxidermy specimens especially prone to damage from ageing.

Different materials respond differently to changes in temperature, humidity and light, all of which can fluctuate over time, especially when the environment cannot be fully controlled.

The combination of materials and the construction methods can sometimes exacerbate the effects of damage. This damage can be seen on these specimens as cracking, flaking skin, shrinkage tears in the skin and weakening or detachment of fragile areas. If left untreated, the specimen will continue to deteriorate.

Our black rhino was particularly in need of TLC from the conservation team. At some point in the past, several repair attempts had been made to a large tear in the skin near the shoulder, which had begun to fail. There was no recorded information about this fill, so we don't know when it was made, or if the added materials might have caused further damage.





After removing the fill, a large tear in the skin was revealed. Without this fill, the condition of the original skin underneath improved.

The previous fill had covered a significant portion of the original skin and had failed unevenly, resulting in material strain, especially to the damaged edges of the tear where the skin was already weak.

After stabilising the area underneath, I am currently working on an aesthetically incorporated fill that will replicate the rhino's skin pattern using conservation-grade materials that have been thoroughly tested to avoid further damage.

This fill and its materials are fully documented and recorded so that researchers and future conservators can understand when and which materials were added to the original specimen, as well as how to remove them if needed.



Example of replicated rhino skin that will be used for an aesthetically integrated fill.

Bison barbers



Aesthetic faux fur fill on the bison for Fixing Our Broken Planet gallery, before and after.

Conservators are very intentional about the materials we introduce to specimens during treatment.

All materials are carefully selected with conservation parameters in mind and put through extensive testing to ensure they are appropriate for the treatment and will not further damage the specimen.

A recent example of this work in action was our treatment of the European bison that is on display in the Fixing Our Broken Planet gallery. The bison had historic damage to the head and horns, resulting in a weak internal structure and loose horns.

After stabilising, I created a toupee to aesthetically integrate the area that had been exposed by damage. The previous damage was visually distracting and would have detracted from the specimen's purpose in the exhibition. This fill can be removed without damage if the specimen is returned to the collection so that it won't interfere with future research.

Natural history specimens hold important scientific and historical information. Conserving them helps ensure they remain safe and available for future research and display.



From stabilising century-old rhino hides to crafting removable, conservation-grade fills for our bison, every decision is guided by scientific rigour and respect for the specimen's history.

Through thoughtful, responsible conservation, our conservators ensure that these specimens continue to educate, inspire and support research for generations to come. Their meticulous work not only restores the appearance of these remarkable animals but also safeguards the stories they carry, preserving a vital part of our natural heritage.

Follow us on social media

To hear more about this project and our science work, **[follow @nhm_science on Instagram.](#)**

If you enjoyed this blog, let us know on social media.



Explore our collections

Our 80 million objects span 4.5 billion years, from the formation of the solar system to the present day.



Research themes

This project is part of our Collections and Culture research theme, which brings different perspectives to our world-leading collections and helps address the planetary emergency.



168

Your feedback

How would you rate this blog? - *Optional*

- 5 - Great
- 4
- 3
- 2
- 1 - Poor

Do you have any feedback? - *Optional*



Related posts



Blog

45 years in Conservation

Lorraine Cornish recently retired as Head of Conservation. This blog looks back at her amazing career.

22 May 2025



Blog

Voyaging through Library and Archives digitisation

This blog traces the journey of our unique Library and Archives collection from manuscript to digital form.

28 November 2025



Blog

Week in the life of a curator

Principal Curator in charge of Invertebrate and Plant Palaeobiology, Giles Miller shares his diary entries over the course of his week

13 March 2025



Blog

Re-examining Britain's role in whaling

Dr Sophia Nicolov explores what the Museum's whale, dolphin and porpoise collection can tell us about Britain's role in whaling.



The Natural History Museum, London

Open daily 10:00-17:50
Closed 24-26 December
Cromwell Road
London SW7 5BD

The Natural History Museum at Tring

Open Tuesday-Sunday and bank holidays
10:00-17:00 (last entry 16:00)
Closed 24-26 December
Akeman Street
Tring
Hertfordshire HP23 6AP

Visit

Discover

For schools

Careers

Join and support

Take part



[Online shop](#)

[Our science](#)

[Business services](#)

[Legal](#)

© The Trustees of The Natural History Museum, London

