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Nan Schaffer, veterinarian who helped unlock the science of rhino reproduction, has died, aged 72

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- *Nan Schaffer, a veterinarian who pioneered the study of rhinoceros reproduction, devoted her career to understanding and overcoming the biological barriers that kept captive rhinos from breeding as wild populations declined.*
- *Working across zoos and research programs, she developed techniques to manage pregnancies, collect and preserve genetic material, and build the scientific foundation that underpins modern rhino conservation efforts.*
- *Beyond her scientific work, she was a prominent supporter of LGBTQ+ causes in Chicago, a philanthropist, and a civic figure recognized with induction into the Chicago LGBTQ+ Hall of Fame.*
- *Guided by a belief that the loss of species would diminish human understanding of the natural world, she argued that extinction was not only a biological crisis but a cultural and moral one, with consequences that extend beyond conservation itself.*

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“One of the great tragedies of the 21st century,” Nan Schaffer once said, “will be humanity’s homogeneity.” The remark was less a warning than a diagnosis. In a world where landscapes were being simplified and species reduced to remnants, she concerned herself with what would be lost when difference itself began to disappear.

For species like rhinoceroses, that erosion of difference was already under way. In the controlled stillness of a zoo enclosure, where a four-ton animal may refuse to breed or carry a pregnancy to term, extinction can feel procedural. It is a matter of missed

signals, incompatible pairs, and time lost in small increments. For the rhinoceros—ancient, solitary, and increasingly isolated—survival has often depended not on the drama of the wild but on the patience of those willing to study its most intimate biology.

Schaffer spent much of her life in that patient, technical struggle. She believed that if rhinos were to persist, it would be because people learned how to help them reproduce when shrinking, fragmented populations could no longer sustain breeding on their own.

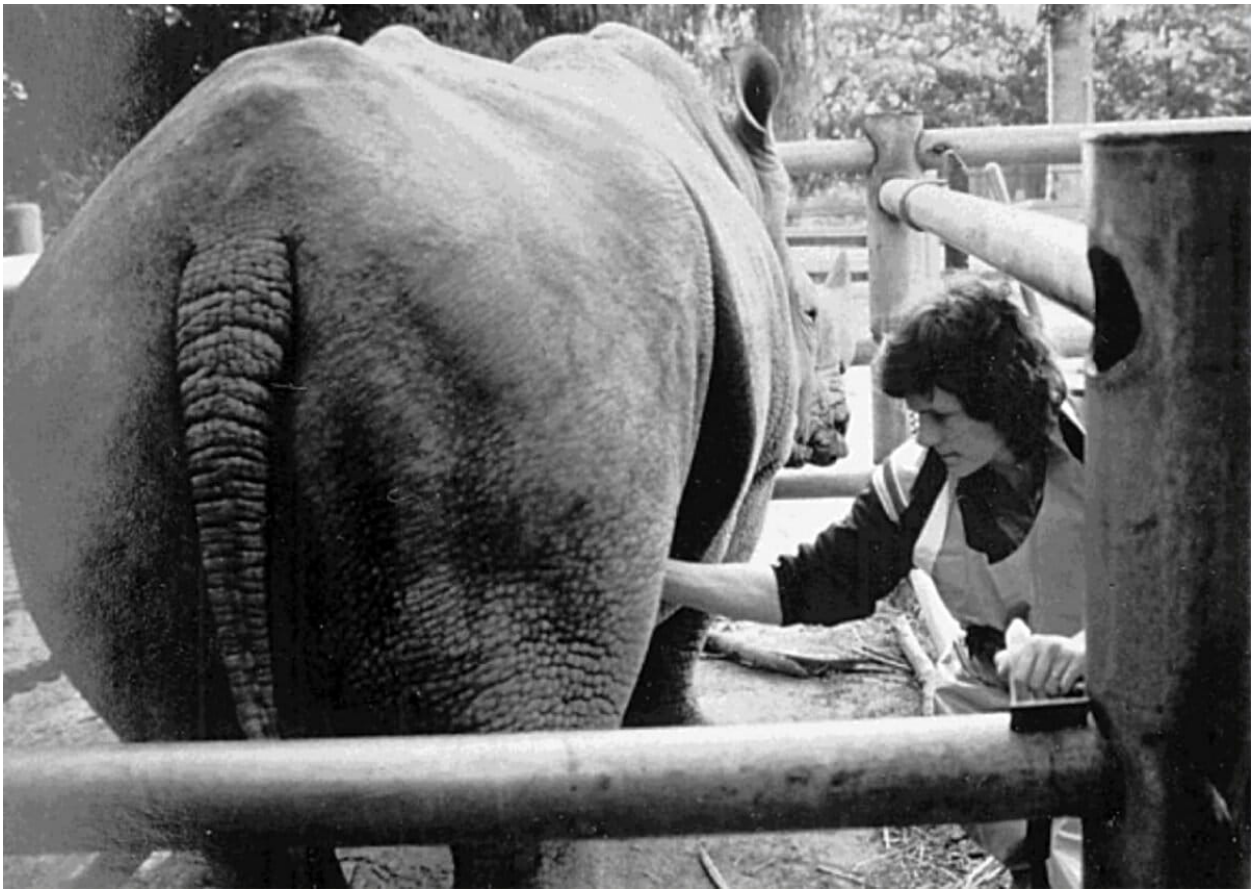
Sumatran rhino at the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary. Image by Rhett A. Butler/Mongabay.

Schaffer, a veterinarian who pioneered the science of rhino reproduction, died on March 27th after a prolonged battle with cancer. She was 72.

Her work took her into pens and barns, across zoos and wilderness sites, and into a field that barely existed when she began: the reproductive physiology of large, endangered mammals. She was one of the world's leading authorities on rhinoceros reproduction. Over decades she published widely, lectured internationally, and developed techniques that helped explain why captive rhinos so often failed to breed. The problems were many. Females miscarried. Males produced semen with little or no viable sperm. Even when animals were paired, mating could be violent or ineffective. Each failed attempt narrowed an already fragile gene pool.

Schaffer approached these obstacles with a mixture of pragmatism and persistence. She improvised equipment, tested methods, and spent long hours observing animals whose reproductive cycles were poorly understood. In one case, she helped manage the pregnancy of an older black rhino that had repeatedly aborted, ultimately resulting in a successful birth. In others, she worked to collect and preserve semen from males unlikely ever to breed, storing genetic material for a future in which technology might succeed where nature could not.

Her interests were not confined to conservation. In Chicago, where she lived for many years, Schaffer was a prominent supporter of LGBTQ+ causes, contributing time and money to a range of organizations and helping found a local newspaper that would become the Windy City Times. She was inducted into the Chicago LGBTQ+ Hall of Fame in 2004, recognition of a parallel career in civic life that she pursued with the same steadiness she brought to science.



Nan Schaffer. Photo courtesy of Universiti Malaysia Sabah

Her work extended beyond laboratories and enclosures. As founder of SOS Rhino, she became an advocate for the species globally, pressing governments and institutions to treat dwindling populations with urgency. She warned that the Sumatran rhino, already reduced to scattered individuals, was close to collapse and that conservation efforts would require coordination across borders and institutions.

The scale of the problem she was addressing was stark. Rhino populations had been fractured by habitat loss and decimated by poaching. Small, isolated groups struggled to find mates. Captive breeding, once viewed with skepticism, became an increasingly necessary strategy, even if its early results were uneven. Schaffer was among those who insisted that imperfect efforts were preferable to inaction.

Her motivation was not only technical. When asked why she devoted herself to rhinos, she offered a broader view of what their disappearance would mean. Such uniformity, she believed, would not come suddenly, but through attrition—the loss of species that could not be replaced once gone. “No matter how hard we try, we cannot ‘build’ nature,” she said. “We can build another bridge, paint another picture, but we cannot make another rhino.”

Nan Schaffer receiving a lifetime achievement award from the Brookfield Zoo in Chicago. Photo courtesy of the Brookfield Zoo

Her work did not resolve the fate of the species she sought to save. The Sumatran rhino remains on the edge, its survival dependent on a combination of captive breeding, habitat protection, and political will. But much of what is now known about how to breed and manage these animals in captivity rests on foundations she helped lay.

In the end, her contribution was not only to prolong the life of a species, but to insist that its loss would diminish something less easily measured. She saw in the survival of

rhinos a test of whether humanity would accept a world of its own making, or continue to make room for one it did not fully control.

Banner image: *Nan Schaffer. Photo courtesy of Universiti Malaysia Sabah*