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OBITUARIES AND TRIBUTES

Nan Schaffer and the long effort to save the rhinoceros

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Nan Schaffer

“One of the great tragedies of the 21st century,” 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 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 some rhino species, survival has become dependent 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.

Schaffer 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. She became a leading authority on rhino reproduction, helping explain why captive animals so often failed to breed and how those barriers might be overcome. She developed methods to manage pregnancies, collect & preserve genetic material, and support breeding among animals that might otherwise never reproduce.

She worked with persistence and a practical bent, adapting tools and techniques to animals whose biology was poorly understood. In Chicago, where she lived for many years, she was also active in civic life, supporting LGBTQ+ causes & contributing to local institutions, including helping found a newspaper that would become the Windy City Times. She was inducted into the Chicago LGBTQ+ Hall of Fame in 2004.

Through SOS Rhino, the organization she founded, Schaffer pressed for greater coordination in conservation efforts. She argued that fragmented populations and slow reproduction left little margin for delay, and that imperfect interventions were often the only option.

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.



By Rhett Ayers Butler

Rhett Ayers Butler is the Founder and CEO of Mongabay, a non-profit conservation and environmental science platform that delivers news and inspiration from Nature's frontline via a global network of local reporters. He started Mongabay in 1999 with the mission of raising interest in and appreciation of wild lands and wildlife.