

# Rhinos might be ugly

but they need our help!

by Renaud Fulconis & Susanne Toft Henriksen

of Save the Rhino International

Any rhino keeper or zoo educator knows that visitors' knowledge of rhinos is very limited, even confused. "They are carnivores"... "They only live in Africa"... "They are black or white"... "Their horn is made of ivory and is used as an aphrodisiac"... these are just some of the inaccurate comments commonly heard. And if asked what they look like, most would say, "They are ugly!"

Despite the lack of interest and knowledge of rhinos, few activities have been developed in zoos to improve the situation for these large charismatic mammals. This is surprising as rhinos can be found in 86 of the 292 European Association of Zoos and Aquariums (EAZA) member zoos. Why is that? Perhaps it is because they are neither as social as gorillas nor as cute as tigers and they don't entertain us the way penguins do. Yet everyone who works with rhinos finds them the most fascinating of animals, not least because they are (for the white and Indian species) the second biggest land mam-

mal on the planet.

See end of article  
for contact details

a great horned (Indian)  
rhino in CERZA, France  
(credit: G. Lacz)

EAZA

## Campaign 2005-6: Save the Rhinos

Perhaps because of its weaknesses as much as its strengths, EAZA has chosen the rhinoceros as the next species to be promoted in its annual campaign, starting in September 2005. Each year, for the past four years, EAZA has coordinated a year-long fundraising and awareness campaign, focusing on a particular conservation issue or threatened species. Past campaigns have highlighted the bushmeat trade, the South American Atlantic Rainforest and tigers, a programme which ran for two years, 2002-4.

The most recent drive was entitled "Shellshock", spotlighting the plight of turtles and tortoises.

Rhinos have been chosen not only because they are found in many zoos but, more importantly, because they are in serious danger of extinction and therefore a major conservation issue.

## Threats to rhinos

Rhinos are still being poached for their horn. Nowadays, when efforts to protect endangered species are stronger than ever, they continue to be persecuted. Although the southern white (*Ceratotherium simum simum*) is today the most abundant rhino, with more than 10,500 individuals after being on the brink of extinction a century ago, the last of the northern race (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*) is



**black rhino (*Diceros bicornis michaeli*)  
feeding in vegetation at Massai Mara,  
Kenya (credit: R. Fulconis)**



**white rhinos in Lake  
Nakuru National Park, Kenya  
(credit: R. Fulconis)**

thought to have disappeared from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) just a few months ago.

In Nepal, as a result of political instability, the Indian rhino is going through a tough time. The population in Chitwan National Park has decreased by 31% in the last five years. Outside sanctuaries, the only way to totally secure rhinos in the field would be to put a police guard on every one – an impossible task! Habitat destruction, of course, is the other major danger that rhinos have to face.

However, it's not all bad news. The eastern black rhino (*Diceros bicornis michaeli*), 87% of which are found in Kenya, is recovering from

the brink of extinction. In 1987, as a result of massive poaching pressure, the population had crashed by 98% from its 1970 level of 18,000. Thanks to a strong conservation and management plan, there are now 540 animals spread over 11 national parks, sanctuaries and reserves. This is just one example of the work being done.

### **EAZA Rhino Campaign funding**

The EAZA Rhino Campaign core group, chaired by Nick Lindsay from the Zoological Society of London, has received 53 applications for funding, from almost every rhino-bearing country, requesting a total of 2.6 million euros. The campaign is currently only set to raise 350,000 euros. Deciding which projects would benefit was really difficult as most of them made a very good case for support. We have settled on 11 projects, involving at least nine countries, and have kept a reserve list in case we raise more money. Hopefully we will, thanks to you all.

Some American zoos are likely to be involved too, through the International Rhino Foundation (a US-based rhino conservation charity). The selected projects range widely and include funding requests for protection units, monitoring and translocation equipment, research, education, community-based conservation and combating trade in rhino horn.

### **EAZA Rhino Campaign information**

With such a wide range of projects, there are many activities that can be developed by zoo education departments. While traditionally it has been difficult to access information about rhinos in the wild, the Rhino Campaign will make fact-finding much easier. Zoo members will receive regular updates from the funded projects. In fact, the EAZA Rhino Campaign Information Pack will do much more than give basic details about rhinos. We have been fortunate enough to work with the very best rhino specialists who have all added to the content, through text or consultation.

Members can look out for updates on the EAZA website (<http://www.eaza.net>), as well as on the EAZA Rhino Campaign site itself, which will be totally dedicated to the campaign. The website will provide some of the information found in the Campaign Pack in addition to many other interesting stories, tips and images, all updated regularly.



a young white rhino scratching his side on a dead tree in Lake Nakuru National Park, Kenya (credit: R. Fulconis)

For more information about the EAZA Rhino Campaign, please contact:

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### What can zoos with rhinos do to get involved?

So what can the Rhino Campaign bring to education? For one thing, the fact that so much information has been gathered will help you in developing educational activities. We have been working on some and we really hope they will be a good start for you. "Become a Rhino Ranger", for example, is an activity that has been modified from a real-life log book, used in the field by rangers and originally produced by the African Rhino Specialist Group. It is divided in two parts, the first an exchange between the public (children or adults) and the education officer aimed at learning how to become a good rhino ranger and what you have to look out for when meeting a rhino in the field. The second part finds the "rangers" in front of a rhino enclosure in the zoo, when they must find out what the sex, age and body condition of the animals are. They also have to note what kind of behaviour they are observing and draw the ears and horns on an incomplete animal.

We also plan to involve some zoos from the countries where rhinos live, providing them with the Campaign Pack, a most useful resource for any education officer.

### What about aquariums and zoos without rhinos?

Rhinos share their habitat with many other species and are seen as a flagship animal. When conserved, many other species benefit from their protection, or the protection of their habitat. Thus other species and habitat provide routes for such institutions to become involved – and we strongly invite them to become part of the team.

Another approach is through hunting for luxury products and oriental medicines, practices which affect so many species, not only mammals but birds, reptiles, fish and invertebrates as well.

Education can and should play a major role in supporting the Rhino Campaign. A strong relationship can be created between rhinos and visitors if we consider that raising awareness of rhino issues is the first step towards conserving them. Widening basic knowledge of these fantastic animals is very important, but itself is not enough. Visitors need to be informed about the dangers that rhinos are facing in the wild. There are just 300 Sumatran rhinos left, about 60 for the Javan – that makes the species one of the most endangered on Earth. How many of our visitors know this? Enthusiasm, fun and total participation will encourage people to spread the word. The work we do during this year WILL make a big difference and we should do our best for that goal!