

WHAT'S "GIRAFFE AND GRAFFITI" GOT TO DO WITH RHINO CONSERVATION?



BY RANDY G. RIECHES

Conservation of Indian Rhinos, both *ex-situ* and *in-situ*, is one of the highest priorities of the Zoological Society of San Diego (ZSSD), both in our facilities and through participation in the AZA Rhinoceros Advisory Group and coordination of the Indian Rhino SSP.



In terms of *ex-situ* efforts, ZSSD has a long history with this species, one that has at times proven to be difficult, but usually most rewarding. During the initial years of attempts to propagate this species, breeding Indian rhino in a large multi-species habitat was incredibly challenging. Introductions were difficult to control due to aggression and the terrain in the enclosure. Over the next 30 years, much was learned about this species' behavior that greatly improved management. Behaviors have been catalogued, ethograms produced, and video methods developed to facilitate introductions, breeding and calving. To date, 51 calves, including a fifth generation calf, have been produced at the San Diego Wild Animal Park – a world record!

Over the years, great relationships and partnerships have significantly increased the amount and the exchange of information about Indian rhino behavior and propagation. Regionally, working with AZA's Indian Rhino SSP has provided opportunities to move animals to other institutions to create new breeding pairs or provide animals for exhibit purposes. Internationally, animals have been placed in European Endangered Species Programs (EEP) and also Asian zoos. Now, in partnership with the International Rhino Foundation (IRF), there will be an exchange of rhinos with Indian zoos enhancing the gene pools of both regional populations.

To arrange for this exchange, Dr. Tom Foose and I traveled to India in July 2005. Many different options were discussed with officials of both the Indian Central Zoo Authority and various zoos. After visiting several zoos, it became apparent they could also benefit from exchanging other species as well, to increase genetic diversity in those populations. After much discussion, an exchange agreement was reached, identifying the rhinos for exchange but also including reticulated giraffes and plains zebras from the U.S. that would be advantageous for the Indian zoos' breeding programs.

Exporting reticulated giraffe is no simple task. First there was the challenging task of locating giraffe young (short height!) enough and available for transport to India. After extensive communications, Como Zoo and Cheyenne Mountain Zoo provided giraffe, despite that neither of these institutions have Indian rhinos. The giraffe were then relocated to the San Diego Wild Animal Park to be prepared (crate training, medical tests) for the shipment. And then there was the paperwork, a daunting task to verify import requirements for India – complicated by the Indian veterinary authorities' preoccupation with avian flu issues. A further challenge was securing an air carrier for shipments of giraffe in crates measuring a little over nine feet in height. Then, there was the weather.

By the time all the preceding preparations were completed, daytime temperatures in India were over 100 degrees. The shipment had to be rescheduled, creating another saga.

The US-India zoo rhino exchange complements the significant and increasing involvement of the AZA Rhino Advisory Group/SSP and IRF with *in-situ* conservation of the species in India through a unifying program known as Indian Rhino Vision 2020 (IRV 2020). IRV 2020 is a major population and range expansion program for the species in the state of Assam.

Numbers of rhino in Assam have increased from a low of 20 in 1905 to about 2,000 in 2006. However, the rhino are restricted to three protected areas and most are in Kaziranga National Park. Concentrating so many rhinos in a single protected area like Kaziranga exposes the species to risks of calamities (epidemics, floods, massive poaching events) – the all-the-eggs in one basket syndrome. Further, rhinos exceeded carrying capacity and numbers must be reduced to protect the habitat and mitigate the increasing rhino-human conflicts.

Thus the goals of IRV 2020 are:

- (1) Increase population numbers from 2,000 to 3,000 by the Year 2020, i.e. over the next 14 years (about one rhino generation); and just as importantly
- (2) distribute the rhinos over more protected areas (from the current three to seven) to protect against localized catastrophes.

These goals will be achieved through increased protection in all protected areas with rhinos and through translocations of rhinos from source populations like Kaziranga to target areas such as Manas NP. Manas once had at least 100 rhinos, but they were exterminated during a period of ethnic conflicts that have now subsided. In fact, the local Bodo people now want the rhino back in Manas to develop conservation tourism. IRV 2020 is an eminent example of a collaborative partnership between governmental (Assam Wildlife Department) and non-governmental partners (IRF and WWF being the lead NGOs providing financial and technical advice).

Because of its significance for conservation of *Rhinoceros unicornis*, IRV 2020 is one of the main programs supported by the North American Save the Rhinos Campaign. ZSSD is playing a major role in the Campaign by contributing funds itself and also by recruiting funds from other zoological institutions.

ZSSD has joined the partnership between IRF and *ecko unltd., a U.S. urban wear and accessories company and primary corporate sponsor of the Campaign. Marc Ecko founded the company using a rhino logo on items marketed along themes of hip hop and graffiti culture. His announcement of a large multi-year financial commitment to IRF in January 2005 came about the time an Indian rhino calf was born and orphaned at SDWAP. In April 2005, Marc visited SDWAP to become acquainted with the young rhino that was being hand-raised and was named "Ecko" in recognition of the contribution to rhino conservation by Marc Ecko that really launched the Campaign. ZSSD, *ecko unltd., and IRF are partnering to market a t-shirt bearing a hangtag telling the story of the Indian Rhino calf and featuring the Campaign logo – which happens to be a rhino covered in graffiti saying "Save the Rhino."

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