

Facility Focus: San Diego Zoo's Wild Animal Park

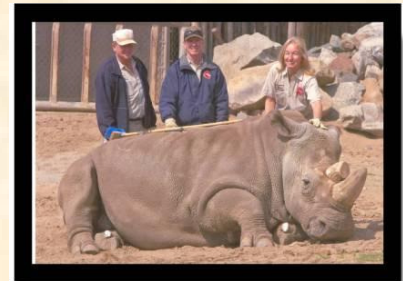
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Rhinos have always been a high priority at the San Diego Zoo's Wild Animal Park. Imported Southern White rhinos were the cornerstone species that brought public interest to San Diego's North County in the early 1970's. Since opening in 1972, this 1800 acre animal park has been a success with respect to its primary goal of reproducing large mammals.

Success has also brought many challenges. In the 1970's and 1980's the Southern white rhino reproductive output was outstanding. In the late 1990's, as our white rhino reproduction slowed, our greater one-horned rhino population blossomed. Both surges in rhino numbers forced upgrades and expansion of rhino holding facilities. Multiple rhino shipments each year has been the pattern for most of the park's existence. Several different structures have been used to help get rhinos into crates. Some have worked well, others not.

We have shipped out individuals of four different rhino subspecies over the years. Eastern black rhinos, Greater one-horned rhinos, Southern white rhinos, and Northern white rhinos have all been transported from our facility to destinations on other continents. White rhinos have accounted for most of the travel, so lets look at their facilities first.

For the entire history of the Park, white rhinos have been housed in large multi-species exhibits. White rhino "cage mates" include giraffe, oryx, wildebeest, waterbuck, and buffalo. These diverse displays have ranged in size from 60 to 100 acres. The perimeters of these areas have been defined by block walls, sprayed concrete walls, large cattle guards with chain link fence, and even railroad ties with chain link used years ago. The white rhino holding areas were 1/4 acre yards enclosed by telephone pole fences, plus three concrete block "bedrooms". The old telephone pole yards are long gone, but some of the concrete block bedrooms are still in use today.



Current white rhino holding includes two separate "bomas" or buildings. The oldest boma has a 1/4 acre yard with concrete block walls, plus three polygonal concrete block bedrooms. All three bedrooms are covered. Each room has a built-in drinker. If you look down on the rooms, the pattern looks like a Mickey Mouse head drawing. In this pattern, the area between the ears is a crating alley. The alley has doors to all 3 rooms plus the adjacent yard. For loading rhinos, the crate is secured inside the yard where it is pushed up flush with a metal sliding door to the central alley. Rhinos are crate-trained by giving them access to the crate from the rooms and alley. Food is used as the motivator to get them into the crate.

Our second white rhino boma is a very new structure. It was built for rhinos, giraffe and antelope. There are two adjacent 1/4 acre yards, each with adjoining covered rooms. The yards are side by side with the rooms sitting along the same side of the yards. In between the rooms are alleys leading to a giraffe tamer and a rhino chute. Both the giraffe and rhino containment devices have scales built into the floors. Most of our Southern white rhinos are not very tame, so rhino confinement in this boma has been an infrequent event.



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The Greater one-horned rhino boma is located in a 40 acre multi-species exhibit. These Asian rhinos share their home with Indian gaur, blackbuck, Persian gazelles, and several species of deer. The rhino boma has sections that are very old and added sections that are new. There are two large yards and five covered rooms. Recently, three hoofstock rooms were added to this complex. The two yards are connected as are the five covered rooms. The two end rooms have common doors with the respective yards. The best part of this boma is the rhino crating area. There is a 12 foot concrete block alley off one of the rooms. The alley has two medication windows and the floor area can be used as a foot bath. A rhino crate is attached to the end of the medication alley for shipments.



The last area I will mention is our black rhino complex. When the Park first opened, black rhinos were displayed in one of our large multi-species exhibits. This was a short-lived situation as it became clear that our black rhinos needed a separate enclosure. The black rhino exhibit is two acres with a sprayed concrete perimeter. Off exhibit, are three concrete block yards, each about 1/5 acre. Also, a 1/4 acre yard with cable barriers is attached to one of the block yards. For years we had to immobilize black rhinos and move them to another area for crate-training. This past year we modified a pass-thru alley between two block yards where we can set a crate and properly crate train and ship rhinos from this area.

The rhinos at our facility run the entire spectrum of personality traits. Because they are housed in very large spaces, some of the rhinos behave as if they just arrived from Africa. At the opposite end of the behavior scale we have a rhino that you can walk right up to, and give her a scratch behind the ear. It is this diversity of rhino personalities, and accommodations that makes the Park's rhino keepers feel like they have the best rhino experience in the world.

