

GUEST EDITORIAL

For the love of rhinos. . .

Ever since I first saw a rhinoceros in a picture book of zoo animals as a young boy, I have loved rhinos. Ever since I stood as a teenager in one of the greatest zoological libraries of the world deciding which animals to study, I have loved rhinos. I still remember, forty years later, my realization that I could never read all the books on the shelves of the Artis Library in Amsterdam. A choice had to be made, so I decided to learn everything possible about the family of rhinoceroses. What a great choice that has proved to be. Rhinos are charismatic flagship species in conservation and cultural icons in society, focal points for museum exhibits, safari tours and zoo visits alike. Ferocious yet gentle, pachydermatous yet cute, rhinos have engendered a large and fascinating body of experiences and literature. My own first articles, published before I graduated from high school, were about the six rhinos that were seen in Europe before the end of the eighteenth century and about black rhino births in zoos.

Forty years have now passed. Rhinos were endangered then, and the battle for their survival continues daily and globally to preserve all those that are left. It is thanks to truly heroic efforts on the part of many organisations and people that there are still places on this earth where we can find rhinos in their own habitat. Depressingly, the dangers remain real and imminent. Numbers in zoos have fortunately increased dramatically over the years, as well as the number of births. In the range states, whole populations, even subspecies, have been wiped out in just a few decades. Rhinos will only survive if we reverse the trends and give them a secure habitat. This can be achieved when we work together and keep up-to-date with the latest developments and techniques.

In the past forty years, the literature on all rhinos has increased exponentially. In 1983 I compiled a comprehensive bibliography listing 3,106 references. At first, I visited libraries and copied papers and parts of books into notebooks; later, of course, there were photocopies, more recently supplemented by digital texts on the internet. My own collection of books, articles and reports on the five living species of rhino now easily numbers over twelve thousand, accounting for many metres of shelf space and a room full of filing cabinets. About 6,000 of these items were published after 1983 – and I continue to add several hundred items every year. The collection crosses every boundary between geographic locations and subject matters, making it one of the greatest interdisciplinary tools, albeit on a restricted subject. It is undeniable that we all struggle to keep up with the literature, whether we are a zoo director, curator, keeper, or a researcher in a university or in the field. We may find relevant titles in an internet search, but to get hold of the actual paper is often far more challenging. In reality, most of us probably rely on news stories and e-mail newsletters, except for papers in our immediate area of interest. It is not uncommon to hear at conferences how we wished that we had been aware of efforts made on other continents or in other facilities.

So, what would I like to see? It would be a great achievement if every observation, every action plan and every event involving rhinos could be written down and published. It would be convenient if all these publications could be accessed in a single library, where they could be browsed and searched, where we could find papers relevant to our own situations or problems. When we

understand the results of previous research and the outcomes of earlier management and conservation practices, we can ask the right research questions and refine practical tools in the field. We can and must learn from the past and from each other. Relevant research and good management practices lead to good conservation, and that in turn should lead to better policies, and ultimately to an increase of rhinos in zoos and in range states. Communication is the key to success in research, management and conservation.

A unique opportunity

The internet enables us to turn a private library into a global resource. Hence the establishment, now some ten years ago, of the Rhino Resource Center (RRC). A charity was registered, a small board was formed under the able chairmanship of Dr Nico van Strien, and a website was designed. Limited sponsorship was offered by SOS Rhino and the International Rhino Foundation. The website **www.rhinoresourcecenter.com** became our main tool to reach anybody who wants to know about rhinos, with all available references, many pictures, a message board and links to other organisations. With well over two hundred hits on the website every day, the RRC has grown to be the prime location to look for information on any of the five species of rhinoceros, regardless of language, date or subject matter.

The website of the Rhino Resource Center certainly includes literature that no scientific, technical or general search engine will ever be able to find, but is far from perfect. More references need to be available in full text, more pictures (one for every rhino kept in a zoo) need to be added, more information needs to be presented in a manner which can be easily digested by students in primary and secondary education, by educators and journalists, as well as by managers and academics. The task of summarizing over 12,000 items is enormous, sometimes overwhelming, but it must be possible to extract at least the main observations and facts. At the moment, the RRC has limited funding and only two part-time workers, Willem van Strien as webmaster and myself as editor, fortunately aided by rhino enthusiasts who volunteer their time and expertise.

The Rhino Resource Center must now take the next step, which may be considered a small one, but to me it looks like a giant leap. The library must find a place where it can be preserved for future generations. It must be set up to remain accessible to students from across the globe. Books need to be written to consolidate and review the available knowledge. The website needs to be constantly updated and new sections for news items and short stories of the known facts need to be added. In short, the RRC needs an institutional base where the resources collected in the past forty years can be an asset for the present and future. This can be anywhere in the world. It needs only a vision to provide the best and most up-to-date information and to help the conservation and research of rhinos.

It will only take a small increase in funding in conjunction with a suitable environment to ensure the long-term viability of the collection. The Rhino Resource Center is a uniquely useful tool to thousands. There is no other center for any endangered animal which provides such comprehensive and timely information. You can help (contact me on **rhino@rookmaaker.freeserve.co.uk**) to find the next home for the Rhino Resource Center to serve the academic and conservation communities on a truly global scale. It is because we love rhinos.