

HAND-REARING RHINO CALVES

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Abstract - Rearing a rhino calf is not a task to be taken lightly - and if at all possible should be left to the natural mother. Management of the rhino (transport, handling, holding etc.) should cater to development of the natural bonding and rearing process. But should the need arise for hand-rearing a calf, a responsible and planned approach is needed. With a suitable milk replacement, modified handling techniques, suitable facilities and foster "parents" - the hand-rearing of rhino calves can be a viable management tool, well worth the time and costs, and contributing to the conservation of the species. Without due consideration for the needs of the animal, long term implications and a responsible approach, the rearing of rhino calves will have costly and disastrous results.

INTRODUCTION

Given the current conservation status of both the black and white rhino populations, each and every animal is of importance. Orphaned rhino calves can be hand-reared successfully if managed appropriately - the age-old cliché "*If you are going to do something, it's worth doing it properly*" is particularly appropriate when applied to rearing rhino calves. Cutting corners and costs results in the loss of a valuable animal and wasted expenditure of time, effort and funds. A successfully reared calf is an investment that grows....and growsand grows !

Rearing and nursing wildlife is our speciality and hard-earned experience has produced methods and techniques that can be effectively included in the management techniques of rhinos as game ranch animals.

METHODS

Put behind you all the preconceptions, bush machismo and cold scientific sense and soppy sentimentality - the successful rearing of a rhino calf requires a sensitive, sensible approach catering to the physical and psychological needs of the rhino calf and its long-term rehabilitation into a breeding population.

A brain-washed bunny hugger is the best foster parent. Calves imprint onto a foster mother and require stability and constancy. A back-up handler should be familiar to the calf and routine. A dose of Tender Loving Care and company are prescribed on a regular basis. Handling is very important. A rhino can become dangerous and behavioural maladjustments can be avoided with good handling. Avoid teasing, change in handlers etc.

Rhino calves, to state what is often not always obvious, are babies and not capable of caring for themselves: they cannot adequately control temperature, require regular feeds, security, comfort and mothering !

Diet and feeding: rhino milk is relatively high in lactose and low in fat - a suitable milk replacement formula should mimic the milk. Strict hygiene and careful food preparation techniques must be followed. Bottle feeding is preferred to bucket feeding. Calf teats on a 2l cooldrink bottle are most practical and well accepted. Teeth start erupting around 3-4 weeks. Access to suitable solids will

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usually encourage the calf to experiment with eating solids. Rhino calves are usually weaned at 18 months.

15% of body weight per day is required to supply nutritional needs. Cereals can be added when volume of milk required to satisfy rhino calf becomes too great for comfort.

Monitoring of temperature, weight, condition etc. is essential - enabling early identification of problems. But techniques of monitoring should be adapted to reduce stress and unnecessary handling and interference. Monitoring of rectal temperature is carried out only during stabilisation and illness - a competent handler can learn to monitor changes in respiration and temperature by feeling the soft skin under the hind leg, twice a day at the same time. Normal rectal temperature is around 37,5°C; normal respiration is 16-30/minute.

Handlers should be equipped to monitor, identify and institute emergency procedures when needed, eg. hypoglycaemia etc.

Exercise, sunlight and security are all important requirements. Regular mud baths and parasite control needed. Do not totally eradicate all ticks as the animal needs to develop a gradual immunity to local diseases. Excessive sterilisation of facilities is not advised, as the calf needs normal exposure to local pathogens in the soil and surroundings in order to build immunity and resistance.

Rearing a rhino calf is a challenge, but can be a rewarding and viable management tool. ARC are always available to assist with practical advice or hands-on rearing. A short 15-minute presentation cannot adequately cover the methods and techniques, but a data bank and reference material is readily available.

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