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# Raising a Baby Rhino

By Daphne Sheldrick

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Being mother to a wild animal is undoubtedly a most enlightening and very rewarding experience, but it is not always quite as simple as it might at first appear. It's not only a question of finding the correct milk formula, shoving a bottle into the animal's mouth, forcing the animal to slot into a human routine and spending only the time one can spare with it now and then, whilst someone else does all the donkey work. To be successful, one must be a mother in more than just name. What one feels for one's charge must be totally sincere, for an animal can gauge such things with an uncanny accuracy. What one is prepared to put into the relationship will be the measure of what one will reap from it.

There are sacrifices that must be made, too, and no matter what your experience, never presume to know all the answers, because you never will. I have been raising wild animals since the tender age of five, when my first orphaned duiker was brought in, and although I have successfully reared and rehabilitated to the wild most species in my time—from elephants to rhinos to antelopes to mongooses and mice—each occasion has been full of hidden and unexpected surprises. Each time I have emerged the richer and with a sense of wonder and awe of Nature generally, and a new awareness of the limitations of man's knowledge of his fellow creatures. So humility is a valuable prerequisite for being a successful foster mother.

The first basic fact one must understand before all else is that each animal is an

individual in its own right, with its own unique temperament, its own special idiosyncracies and peculiarities; its own very special personality. Forget doubts about being labelled anthropomorphic in one's approach. Such scientific dogmas are not only being proved outdated and incorrect, but shutter an ability to probe the thinking and the mind of an animal. Anyone who subscribes to this philosophy will never be able to penetrate the barrier that isolates human from animal, for absent in their make-up will be some of the vital ingredients for opening the door to confidence: sympathy, compassion, and an ability to project oneself beyond human ignorance and arrogance and see things from the other side, measuring an animal's reactions in relation to one's own. Unless you achieve this, success will elude you, and you'll never really know why. This, I suppose, is what is meant by the term 'an empathy for animals'.

Animals are 'different' to ourselves—not inferior. There are many things about them we will never fully understand, for they have evolved in an older world than us and along a very different branch of the tree of life. They are endowed with mysterious abilities and senses that we have lost or never ever known. Whereas we communicate by the power of speech and the written word, animals communicate no less effectively by much more subtle means: by telepathy, by ritual, by scent, by mannerism and by instinct, that inborn 'Memory' inherited over aeons of evolution that is the blueprint for survival and which dictates certain of their actions and social organizations. So, it is necessary



to accept the fact that they are not always masters of themselves; other forces are at play and often intervene. But, instinctively, although raised by humans, most wild animals know exactly what they are; they know what and what not to eat, what and what not to fear, where and where not to venture. But, instinct is something that needs to be honed by exposure, so it is vital to understand this simple truth when rearing a wild animal. Don't mete out 'smother-love'. Don't shelter it too much. As it grows up, it must be allowed its freedom and the space to venture into its own world in its own time; to be exposed to all that it harbours; to hear and understand the language of the birds, explore the events of yesterday on the grasses and scent trails; interpret the different scents borne on the wind, and 'know thine enemy'. So, it is important never to assume that a wild animal belongs to you, for it never will. Regard it as being only on loan and be happy that you have been privileged to share its life until it responds to the call of the wild and takes its rightful place amongst the natural order. If you can do this, a 'Goodbye' may turn out to be just an *'Au revoir'*, and the animal will remember you with affection, and feel the need to return from time to time. Never confine a wild animal for selfish reasons. This is unforgivable, and if one cannot offer it some form of freedom and a natural life, it is better not to raise it in the first place.

It is important also to know a little about

the social characteristics of your charge. Is it, for instance, from the ranks of the gregarious types or one of Nature's loners? Does it seek seclusion and solitude when young, or is the constant companionship of others a basic commodity in its upbringing? An animal's psychological well-being is equally important as its physical, so one must try and simulate what it takes to give the baby a sense of security. If it 'lies out' during infancy, for instance, provide the necessary cover to enable it to feel hidden. Understand animal codes of behaviour, too; what are aggressive actions and what are subservient signals. Never stare at a primate, for instance, or hold the head or horns of an antelope. Above all, know that all animals have very long and unforgiving memories. One must respect that, for an unkindness or cruelty will be remembered and perhaps a grudge harboured until an opportunity presents itself to get even. Remember that animals have feelings and emotions, likes and dislikes. Like us, they sorrow and are happy, they have loved ones and loyalties too.

Rhino babies are, strangely enough, one of the easiest and most uncomplicated of infants. However, rhinos are delicate in many respects and when subjected to any kind of shock, tend to go down with pneumonia and tick-borne diseases normally latent in their blood. Even a very young rhino will fight and charge its captors with all the aggression for which its species is known, and if this is the case, be warned that

within about four days of capture, the baby will become very ill, even though it has settled down and tamed easily. Dose it immediately with one of the sulphur based drugs, and be prepared to forestall babesia or tick-fever with injectable Berenil. Guard against pneumonia by keeping the animal warm, if necessary with a blanket tied around its body at night.

Rhino babies are very endearing. They quickly lose the head-heavy infant look, and, but for a blunt nose and soft smooth skin, become perfect miniatures of an adult, sturdy and rounded. At birth a rhino stands between 18 and 25 inches only at the shoulder, and weighs between 60 and 80 lbs. Rhinos, strangely enough, tame more quickly and easily than any other animal. Even an adult can be tamed down within only two days. They slot into a routine with philosophical ease, being very much creatures of habit. They love a comfortable 'rut' and are content with less than most other animals. Their food on time, a dry, warm stable at night, a small enclosure embellished with a mudwallow and sandpit for the day, and a walk and romp in the late afternoon will keep a baby rhino thoroughly content. Never do they shove or jostle for the bottle, as does a buffalo, but ask with a plaintive 'mew' and gently take whatever is offered. They need a companion—just another living soul, close-by at all times—to replace the mother that would have been a part of their early life.

Even baby rhinos have 'middens' or



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lavatories. They can be persuaded to perform to order if, near the midden, one kicks one's feet backwards, as does a rhino when scattering its dung.

A 'humanised' brand of milk is the key to raising a rhino. I always used bottles of Lactogen, given every four hours throughout the day, and mixed in the ratio of 8 measures powder: 24 fl. ozs. warm water. A few days on this weak solution is necessary for the animal's digestion to adjust, then one tablespoon of Nestum cereal and one tablespoon of Bemax wheat germ should be introduced to fortify the feed. The strength of the milk is then gradually increased: 9 measures of powder to 24 fl. ozs. for four days or so, then 10 for a further four days, 11 and finally 12 measures to 24 fl. ozs. which is the maximum strength that should be used. Quantity must be governed by appetite. Once the animal is on full strength, the bowels normal, and the calf playful, you know you are on the road to success, and then it is just a question of gradually increasing the quantity and the solids as the calf grows, and allowing it access to herbage at about three or four months

Every mother knows when her baby is 'off-colour', and its no different if the baby happens to be a rhino. Don't rush for needles, drugs and the vet. Inevitably, a hand-raised animal, deprived of the antibodies it would normally have acquired through its mother's milk, will have its ups and downs,

as it develops its own immunity. Allow a few ticks on the animal, but not too many. They are Nature's means of inoculation, and part of the process. As long as an animal is in good health, it will cope with any minor setbacks itself.

When the calf begins to eat shrubbery, one can think about changing over to Trilk, or some other less expensive milk substitute. At 14 months, the baby should be completely weaned off milk.

To begin with, the horn appears as a little bump on the end of the nose, and gradually begins to take shape. All our rhinos deliberately knocked off the first, and sometimes the second horn, leaving a sore and bleeding mess, but each time the horn grew broader and better. Baby rhinos are playful and very entertaining. They rush about, huffing and puffing like miniature steam engines, spinning round on a sixpence, and bouncing up and down on the spot before charging off again at speed in a wild game of chase and counter-chase. They love mud, especially the red mud of Tsavo, and they love a dust bath in powdery volcanic dust. They also have a very sweet tooth, and a sweet morsel will be enjoyed and savoured for hours afterwards, sucking the tongue and smacking the lips, overcome by a blissful torpor during the process.

The rehabilitation to the wild state is by far the trickiest part of raising a rhino, for rhinos are, by nature, intensely territorial,

and whilst those born into a resident community are accommodated and known to the others by scent, any newcomer, regardless of sex or size, is vigorously repulsed, hounded by all the residents and often killed. Yet, if several rhinos are moved and settled into an area where there are no already established residents, they seem to get along fairly peacefully, intent on establishing themselves rather than preoccupied with the neighbours.

To me, rhinos have always been something of an anomaly. Capable of extreme gentleness and affection, by nature they are solitary in the wild, and extremely unsociable to one another. They have been labelled 'vindictive, unpredictable and dangerous', yet when one knows a rhino intimately, one discovers instead an endearing, sloppy and affectionate character, simple and yet complicated. In evolutionary terms, the black rhino has reached perfection, and is surely one of Nature's successes, enduring unchanged through 70 million years, moving through the ages with myopic vision, yet other senses so keenly tuned that it has survived in spite of all, and stepped into the 20th century well represented. However, today rhinos face 20th-century man's insatiable greed for riches, and if they can survive what is happening today, they will, indeed, be Nature's true success story. If they don't, it will be a blot on the conscience of so-called civilized and enlightened modern-day man.

