

Rhino memories

Jan Robovský

Faculty of Science University of South Bohemia

České Budějovice Czech Republic

Elephants and rhinos have fascinated me since childhood, but my affection for rhinos was dramatically increased when I had an opportunity to get very close to them at the Dvůr Králové Zoo (Czech Republic) in 2007. Since that time I have perceived rhinos as very gentle and co-operative animals, and also, obviously, as different personalities, which were always ready to receive endearment and a ‘kind word’.

Northern white rhinos were co-operative and peaceful at the Dvůr Králové Zoo, therefore we were able to take many body measurements and collect hair samples from different parts of their bodies (both surveys are being prepared for publication) without anaesthesia. My study of hair distribution along flanks was gladly accepted by them, because mud first had to be properly removed with brushes. The most cooperative were a male named Sudan—despite his age he was in perfect condition—and a female called Nabire who had the shaggiest ears in the group. They were both rather different from Fatu, a young female with fast reactions. The male Suni seemed to be dominant in his behaviour, whilst the female Najin was solicitous about her Fatu and old female Nesari was simply ‘the old lady’ with a somewhat different perception of the world.

Black rhinos were difficult to deal with because of their mercurial temperament. Even so all of them (!) allowed us to collect hairs for morphological and genetic comparisons. Rhino babies were often suppressed by their mothers when we attempted to get close, partly due to their protection, but the main reason was simple: mothers did not want to ‘share’ as far as our stroking was concerned.

My survey of captive rhinos was enabled by many experienced and kind zoo curators and zookeepers and at least five names deserve mentioning. They are Luděk Čulík, Jiří Hrubý, Roman Lár and Jan Ždárek of Dvůr Králové Zoo and Pavel Král of Ústí nad Labem Zoo. Roman was especially helpful—he repeatedly took with Jan Ždárek shoulder heights of all the northern white rhinos, with me their body lengths and we also collected hairs from all possible body parts. All these activities required many days, but these days were really glorious for us. Tragically, Roman died in 2011 at a traffic accident; he was only 31. I miss him greatly...

I am very happy that I have personally experienced many rhino personalities and also people taking care of them, mainly in zoos of Dvůr Králové, Ústí nad Labem and Plzeň. Considering this, the cruelty of some people towards rhinos is something I absolutely cannot imagine; it must be admitted that along with the rhinos’ decline internationally, we also face a crisis of our humanity.



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Figure 1. Nesari, an old female in the Dvůr Králové Zoo. Born in Sudan, 1972; died 26 May 2011. Photo taken 8 March 2011.