

## IRKA PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT VISIT TO THE DENVER ZOO

**Written by Jonnie Capiro, Mammal Keeper, San Diego Zoo Safari Park**

I rolled over to the sound of the alarm and felt panicked when I read 5:30 on the clock. Am I late? I thought. I usually get up at the un-godly hour of 4:30 am to get to the San Diego Zoo Safari Park by 6:00 to take care of all the animals in my area. I looked around and remembered that I was in Colorado and today I was going to work at the Denver Zoo! This wasn't just any visit; I was going to see some old rhino buddies that I had previously worked with at other facilities and learn about how they were doing in their brand new, high-tech Toyota Elephant Passage home.

I arrived at the front gate promptly at 7:00 am to meet Chris Bobko, my host for this week. She explained that we would get right to work, and then break in about an hour to catch up with the rest of the team for a daily morning meeting. We walked into the impressive, state of the art barn to be greeted by two old friends of mine. Both had lived in large, open outdoor settings in big social groups and I was impressed to see them immediately respond to our presence by approaching the bars and begging for food – oh, silly, greater-one-horned rhinos, it's always about the food!

First, we met Bandhu, the 3-year-old male we shipped out from San Diego Zoo Safari Park last Thanksgiving. He looked noticeably bigger and his horn was growing nicely into the broad, characteristic shape of a male rhino's horn. Bandhu promptly greeted us and was super friendly. I knew instantly that he had acclimated well to his new surroundings.

Transports can be tough on animals and we had a difficult time getting him crate trained last year. Additionally, moving a rhino from a larger, more social setting like the Safari Park, to a more traditional zoo setting can be a pretty big change for the animal. Bandhu's move was recommended for him to be paired with Tensing, a beautiful female from the Wilds.

This partnership is especially interesting to me for two reasons: I worked with both of these rhinos in their previous facilities and secondly, the research study that I conducted at the Wilds was about translocation and its effects on glucocorticoid activity and its relationship to animal management. It was great that I had known both of these rhinos in their former social settings before they were



**Chris Bobko working with Bandhu**

transported and was seeing them after their arrival at their new home.

Seeing this lively little rhino, I never would have guessed he was the same animal I knew from the Safari Park! His keepers report that he's been really easy to work with since day one, and in the last month or so he's really turned into a puppy dog of a rhino. I'm sure you know the type. Tensing is coming along well after a more difficult transition. She approached us and was interested in our attention. She looked so much bigger than the last time I saw her, which was well over two years ago. It's obvious that the keepers at the Denver Zoo LOVE these two rhinos!

After getting reacquainted with Bandhu and Tensing we went about a typical daily zoo routine: cleaning, quick morning meeting, more cleaning, shifting animals onto exhibit, hosing out barns, preparing diets, and training sessions. However, there is something truly unique about the Denver Zoo; their new Toyota Elephant Passage area. They have Asian elephants, the two rhinos, a couple of Malayan tapirs, clouded leopards, gibbons, Asian small clawed otters, a pair of black rhinos and two hippos that live in the pachyderm area. During my visit, the keepers were gracious enough to show me their areas and let me meet all the animals. I have to admit, the playful otters stole the show!

Just like most other facilities, the day began with a morning meeting that was a crucial part of the day for this specific team of keepers. The new exhibits and barns are so complex that through a system of shift gates, walkways and even a bridge, the elephants and rhinos can actually be shifted onto any of five separate yards. It was a little confusing at first, but the different

options for exhibiting animals was really impressive. During the meeting, keepers talked about which animal would go in which exhibit for the day. Communication is critical and it was quite obvious that this team trusts one another and can work very closely to achieve daily goals. It was decided that Bandhu would go in yard 1 that has a nice big pool and lots of mud wallows, and Tensing would have access to the barn and big yard all day.

Later on that day, we discussed training projects, breeding plans and options, and what the future would hold for this cute little rhino pair. It was nice to see them and the new exhibit as part of the bigger picture of the greater one-horned rhino SSP. There are so many collaborative efforts



**Jonnie setting up hay diets in the demo area that has a pool**

that are needed to create a new exhibit, start a breeding program, and comfortably house these incredibly important animals. Indian rhinos are a new species for Denver and it was nice to be able to share some of Bandhu and Tensing's previous husbandry info and anecdotes. It was also reassuring to them to hear about some of the intricacies of caring for Indian rhinos, as compared to the African species of rhino, which are much different in temperament, medical needs, reproductive activity, and courtship behaviors.

I spent the next two days at the zoo helping with the routine, getting to know the keepers, and learning as much as I could about the goals and expectations for this new program, and the challenges they have met thus far. Another interesting part of visiting another zoo is watching the dynamics among the team. I was impressed with how thoughtful and communicative the keepers were with one another. They explained that due to the unique barn and yard structure that they have to be able to communicate effectively and they depend on each other all the time.

On the last day of my visit, I was fortunate enough to see some of the features of this innovative exhibit in action. The keepers shifted Bandhu across a pathway that crossed over part of the public area. There were giant, elephant proof gates that swung shut into a chute for Bandhu to exit one yard and enter another. Although it was still quite early and no guests were present, it was easy to see that this would be a memorable part of any zoo visitor's experience. Later that day, the keepers shifted him across a bridge that went directly over zoo visitors, allowing Bandhu access to the far yard, equipped with a huge pool where the elephant demonstrations occur. It was great to see all of these features in use and to observe how enriching this type of environment is for the animals.

I had a wonderful visit and was able to share my experiences working with these two rhinos in the past while acquiring new information to take back to the Safari Park. The keepers were gracious hosts, allowing me to tag along, ask endless questions, and help out in their barn for a few days. Many thanks to the IRKA for offering this opportunity and helping coordinate this visit, the keepers in the Toyota Elephant Passage area of the Denver Zoo, and to Chris Bobko and Dale Leeds for letting me tag along for a few days.



**Bandhu , a greater one-horned rhino**