

How can zoos benefit from relationships with field programmes?

Zoos are quick to tell visitors how relationships with programmes in the field can benefit the field organisations themselves, but discuss what zoos gain from this relationship less often.

Leah Drury | Rhino keeper, Knowsley Safari Park

Relationships with field programmes change our whole mission as organisations. Zoos have moved away from their Victorian 'living museum' roots and drastically changed during 1970s with the opening of safari parks where visitors are in the 'cage'.

Now, zoos aspire to be 'shop windows for conservation' (*World Zoo and Aquarium Conservation Strategy, 2005*). Zoos endeavour to contribute to field projects responsibly and constructively, ensuring that contributions are not merely a cheque-writing exercise! So, how do zoos benefit from relationships in the field? The benefits can be seen in many areas, but three main ones are animal husbandry, education programmes and publicity.

As a zookeeper, my first thoughts were of animal husbandry. I was very fortunate to join Peter Litchfield (Head of Animal Division) on a trip to the Lowveld Rhino Trust (LRT) in Zimbabwe to find out how Knowsley Safari Park could help in addition to financial support. We had the opportunity to participate in translocating rhinos to safer areas in the Save Valley Conservancy in Zimbabwe. This trip not only increased my knowledge of black rhino but showed me a very different working environment, giving me the chance to explore different veterinary and animal handling techniques and to witness a strong team work ethic. Being in the field allowed me to gain a feel of how conservation issues are perceived in a different cultural setting.

Animal husbandry

Seeing animals in their natural habitat creates a better understanding of their needs, natural behaviours and interactions with their natural habitat. This benefits their conspecifics in human care. Animals in zoos nowadays are often born and bred in captivity and as a result are completely desensitised to humans and accustomed to daily routines and

veterinary husbandry. This makes them no less dangerous than their wild relatives (unlike wild animals they have no fear of people), but the individual is reliant on keepers and its captive environment for all its proximate needs.

It is crucial that zoos that are actively involved in captive breeding programmes of vulnerable species (like rhinos) are aware of how animals behave in their native habitat. This not only aids us to understand and encourage natural behaviour in captivity, but gives keepers the ability to design and provide more suitable environments for the animals. The preservation of natural behaviour in captivity is paramount for animal well-being, educational benefits, research and any future prospect of reintroduction to the wild.

Handling and veterinary techniques

The translocations during our visit were carried out due to the current high poaching pressure in Save Valley Conservancy. This is thought to be due to the encroachment of unplanned settlers into the Conservancy itself. Moving rhinos in a captive environment requires a very different approach compared to the field. The smaller scale of the captive environment allows a lot more flexibility for meticulous preparation, desensitising, crate training, and buckets of carrots! Different methods and highly skilled professionals are required for translocations in the field, not to mention the logistical needs and costs involved.

Shadowing the LRT and their highly skilled team of trackers showed me a lot about the natural daily activity of rhinos that you just can't pick up from reading husbandry guidelines. As keepers, we often forget how the routines of our captive wards suit the structure of the working day rather than benefiting the animals. Although, zoo opening hours can very often resemble the length of the African day!

We also had the opportunity to explore contrasting veterinary techniques. These ranged from exploring different parasites such as number of ticks borne, worming regimes, to ear notching and implanting transmitters. It was also great to see microchips inserted in the older rhinos that were being translocated.



The opportunity to microchip older rhino is not often an option in captivity, with most collections chipping rhinos at birth. I can also say that the issue of keeping a sedated rhino cool during an op is something we don't often encounter when doing procedures in Merseyside, neither is the issue of tracking and finding the rhino at the beginning of the day!

Working environment

A different work ethic is required in the field because of the harsh surrounding elements, the heat, the immensity and accessibility of the area, and the time frame for doing the job (you can't just have a 'brew' because it's 10am!) A very strong team work ethic was needed to make these translocations successful. Such a team ethic is often not present in zoo settings where most jobs can be done by merely one or two staff members.

Education

Updates from the field programmes we support provide us with valuable material that we incorporate in our School Outreach programme, bringing worldwide conservation to our local classrooms.

These relationships also allow our education department to capture visitors' imagination by incorporating stories and facts about field programmes and also in signage and guide books around the Park. This way, visitors can create a direct link between the money they donate and their favourite animals and organisations that actively make a difference in the field. Hosting fundraising events for field programmes helps us showcase current environmental issues and also has the added bonus of bringing together departments at the Safari Park. Education, marketing, catering, visitor services and keepers alike all throw themselves into the fun, not to forget our priceless students and volunteers. We host events throughout the year; I don't think our field programmes could ever imagine how many people they bring together overseas for one cause!

Publicity

Zoos work hard to build mutually beneficial relationships with field programmes. Naturally, our fundraising events become our billboard for conservation and both zoos and those in the field gain mutual publicity. Zoos also benefit from being able to use links and updates from field programme on our websites. This not only encourages visitors to stay longer on our web pages but also provides the programmes with a wider, global audience.

Knowsley Safari Park is incredibly proud of the programmes we support, such as LRT's *in situ* work in the face of logistical, sometimes political, adversity and increasing incidence of poaching. We cannot thank the LRT enough for allowing us to visit and their generous hospitality. This trip has not only enabled my own personal development but has had an effect on the improvement of our conservation programme at the Park as well.

Thanks

We would like to thank Knowsley Safari Park, which gives around \$6,000 per year, and Dublin Zoo, which gives €5,000 per year, for their support for the Lowveld Rhino Trust, as well as individual donors including Shannah Adams for their support.

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You have to be quick to note all the physical measurements and chip numbers while the rhino is sedated



How zoos assist *in situ* conservation

- Raising and donating funds
- Supplying experienced staff and essential equipment
- Providing husbandry and management skills learned through captive management of species
- Implementing local educational and conservation awareness programs in developing countries
- Providing practical experience for field biologists and vets to train with animals in a captive setting

www.biaza.org.uk/conservation



Below left: Buckets of carrots come in useful when crate training captive rhinos

Bottom: A sedated rhino is sprayed with water and covered with shady branches to keep it cool

