

## Rhino Open Mouth Behavior

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Here at the North Carolina Zoo keepers are training our herd of white rhinos an open mouth behavior that will help with preventative dental care.

Several years ago we were challenged with conditioning our females for artificial insemination procedures. In an attempt to make it as smooth as possible for all involved, keepers started training all four rhinos for behaviors necessary in the process. While originally feeding loose alfalfa as a reward we ran into frustrations with both timing of reinforcements and body condition concerns. To limit the calories and better define the moment of reward the loose alfalfa was replaced with compressed alfalfa cubes and eventually timothy cubes. Initially the cubes were placed on the floor at the time of the bridge but our hungry girls quickly learned to take them from our hands out of greed.

Around the same time staff was dealing with a geriatric female who we eventually lost. The necropsy revealed several worn and loose teeth that, although unrelated to her terminal condition, were probably very uncomfortable and could easily have led to infections and weight loss. With this in mind it was a short jump of capturing the hand feeding behavior and, by prolonging the reward, increasing the time the mouth was held open. At this point a keeper will station the rhino facing them, touch the middle of the upper lip while saying “open” and the rhino will hold it’s lips wide for roughly 30 seconds.



“Open” has been great for meet and greets with our rhinos. People can now not only touch them, but safely feed them, too, by tossing a cube to them. We are also able to get some photos of the teeth to check for any points, although it’s limited to the upper arcade.

Our next goal is to condition the animals to allow a pvc sleeve to be placed in their mouth that will house a laparoscope which will provide better lighting and more flexibility to view the lower teeth as well. We hope to be able to monitor dental health in our whole herd and arrange necessary veterinary care accordingly and address any points or infections that could compromise overall health.

