

## Rhino Crate Training at the Tulsa Zoo

### By Mike Connolly

Late summer 2014 presented the animal care staff at the Tulsa Zoo with a new and unique challenge. We needed to crate train our two white rhinos, Buzbie and Jeannie, to safely and effectively relocate them from the exhibit they had been housed in since the mid 80's to their new exhibit, the Mary K. Chapman Rhino Reserve. As soon as our operations department was wrapping up the finishing details on the crate that would be utilized for the transport, we began brainstorming on just how we would embark on this adventure.

As we all know, there are often several possibilities to accomplish a goal and crate training rhinos is no different. While we had confidence in both our abilities as rhino care professionals and our rhinos cooperativeness, we decided to initially stage the large crate just outside the rhinos access shift door leading from the barn to the exhibit. We also decided that we would limit the rhinos access to the crate during training sessions only as we had some concerns they might damage it if left access to it unsupervised and/or overnight. Therefore once training sessions were complete, we shifted the rhinos into an adjacent yard. Fortunately the weather cooperated for us during the majority of this timeframe.

Our crate was constructed with wood for the most part with steel reinforcement along the top, bottom, and sides of the crate. The front and back of the crate had vertical metal sliding pipes and two separate Dutch doors on each end. Staging the crate just outside the barn in an area that the rhinos were already familiar with shifting in and out of helped expedite the training. To introduce them to the crate for

the first time we decided to stage the crate outside the barn after shifting the rhinos in for the morning. While we speculated our rhinos would take to it fairly well, we were surprised that on the first day both approached, entered, and exited the crate very quickly. To begin with we left both ends of the crate wide open and were hoping each would pass through it and shift to an adjacent yard after passing through it. For this step, as one would expect, we coaxed them utilizing many different tools including diet and body positioning. Basically anything to get their initial focus on the crate and us was utilized to encourage them to head

in the direction we needed them to. Once the first rhino passed through the crate, we shifted them into a separate yard from where the crate was staged and kept a staff person assigned to this rhino so that the process could be repeated with the other rhino without the other interfering. During this process, we utilized their daily ration of Mazuri ADF-16 as well as a minimal amount of alfalfa hay, some alfalfa cubes, and on a couple of occasions fresh cut grass clippings to maintain their interest and keep their focus. Following sessions with each of the rhinos, we decided to restrict them to the lower adjacent yard minus the crate so that their only access to it was monitored. After they were both familiar passing through the crate, we decided to have the vertical slider pipes in place to the front end of the crate prior to shifting them in. This step did not faze them and they readily entered the crate and remained in the crate accepting primary reinforcement from animal care staff unless otherwise instructed. We then instructed them to back out of



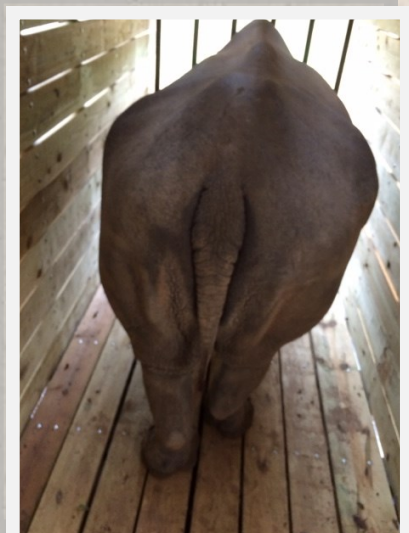
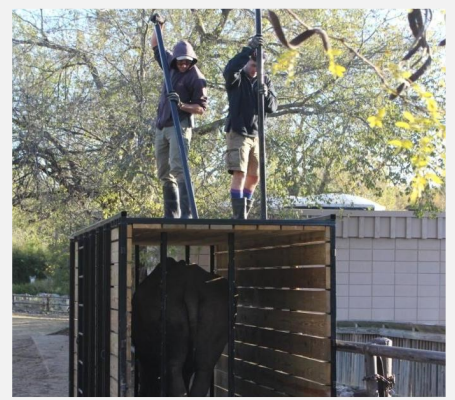
the crate and back into the barn stalls. This step was actually one that took the most encouragement and coaxing as they were a little uneasy about going backwards and making the 6-8 inch step downward out of the crate. We decided to remove the vertical sliding pipes at the front of the crate after the rhinos backed out of the crate and were secured in the barn. We thought this would be better than trying to remove the vertical slider pipes with them directly on the other side. Once the vertical slider pipes were removed, we then shifted them through the crate into the adjacent yard. Animal care staff stationed the first rhino worked with into the lower yard while the process was repeated with the second rhino. On most days, staff was able to work two sessions into a day but if staffing or time did not permit one session occurred. Our next step was to have staff on top of the crate when the



rhinos entered the crate as they would need to be there to place the rear vertical sliding pipes in place behind the rhino. Once again, this step was no big deal to the rhinos and we very quickly began placing vertical slider pipes behind them two at a time. Our crate was designed to have up to six of these vertical slider pipes in place in front of and behind the rhinos so two staff members could easily place these slider pipes in place and remove them quickly. Initially we just put the slider pipes in and almost immediately removed them. We started with just placing two in and removing them until we worked our way up to all of them. These steps took no time at all. Because of little to no response from our rhinos we were able to quickly increase the duration of time they remained in the crate. This was never an issue for us but we wanted to be diligent to release them only when calm and cooperative. Our next step was to get them acclimated to noise

and other activity in and around the crate. Staff on top of the crate became more and more active making more and more noise. While we were unable to completely mimic the equipment and activity that would occur on the actual day of the move we did what we could including driving a skid loader around the yard and right up to the crate with the rhinos secured in the crate all along reinforcing them for calm and cooperative behavior. We decided that because the rhinos were accepting this whole process so well that we did not need to add the Dutch doors to either end of the crate. It was our intention to put these in place the day of the move to minimize their vision and more effectively enclose them in hopes of keeping them calmer. We did not feel this step would be a big deal to them and needless to say, these Dutch doors were extremely heavy and cumbersome.

I can proudly say that our rhinos were fully crate trained in less than two weeks. Since the physical move of the rhinos kept getting delayed we decided to remove the crate from their exhibit as we were getting to the time of year when weather might necessitate us needing to give the rhinos access to the barn, shelter, and supplemental heat. Our management preferred for the crate to remain staged in the exhibit so we compromised by putting it back in the exhibit after a couple of weeks and placing it in another section of the exhibit parallel to their perimeter fence so that we could still allow the rhinos indoor access to the barn overnight without the crate becoming a bottleneck as we were concerned it could become a negative for them. For quite some time the crate remained in the exhibit with the rhinos and much to our surprise they did not really mess with it



much that we could ever tell. A few weeks out from the actual physical move, we decided to see how they would train with the crate in this different location from where previous sessions occurred. They amazed us again by picking right up where they left off. We were able to do sessions with both rhinos in the same yard by simply stationing one at the far end of the yard while the other rhino was trained.



Because of what I believe was a well thought out training plan, constant and continuous communication, as well as two incredibly cooperative and willing participants we were able to accomplish our goal without any issues on the morning of November 10, 2014. On the day of the actual move we did put three of the four Dutch doors in place but we decided to leave the front, lower Dutch door off so that we

could continue delivering primary reinforcement to the rhinos during the move. As soon as the first rhino was safe and secure in their new barn, we repeated the process with the second. As is usually the case, the second move went much quicker due to the fact that by moving the first one, the equipment (crane, flatbed truck, etc.) was familiar with what was needed for the second. Within minutes each rhino backed out of the crate and settled into their new home quickly and comfortably. We decided to back them out of the crate and into the new barn so that they would exit slower and not be as likely to injure themselves. All along verbal praise from those they know best was utilized. We also decided to broadcast some of their fecal matter in the new barn in hopes that it would help settle them if they were agitated.

I am extremely proud of the animal care staff's commitment to seeing this process through. Everything that was asked of them they delivered. Discussion was held between animal health and animal care staffs to evaluate the potential need for sedatives before and during the move. In the end, the decision was made to not administer any sedatives due to the short, on grounds, move as well as how well the rhinos had progressed in general during the training process. Many of us were more concerned that by administering anything ahead of time, that it might limit the rhinos capabilities and inadvertently make them more suspicious and leery. Animal health staff was present the entire time, however, and plans were in place in case we needed them to intervene.

We could not be more pleased with how well our rhinos crate trained. We realize they are white rhinos and much more relaxed and laid back than other species of rhinos. We also recognize that Buzbie and Jeannie are individually even more relaxed and laid back than many other white rhinos. However, they still have their moments and crate training in this manner was completely new to them and the staff that cares for them. What we were able to accomplish was only possible due to every member of our team understanding and executing their responsibilities. What worked for us may not work for others but I hope you are able to gain something from our experience. We certainly feel more confident in our abilities as animal care professionals and are pleased to have helped make this move one of little to no stress for our rhinos. The entire rhino training process and physical move required several departments working together. Animal care, animal health, operations, and security all played vital roles to see the entire process through and we are thankful for everybody's contributions. After all, we are here for the rhinos and always will be!

