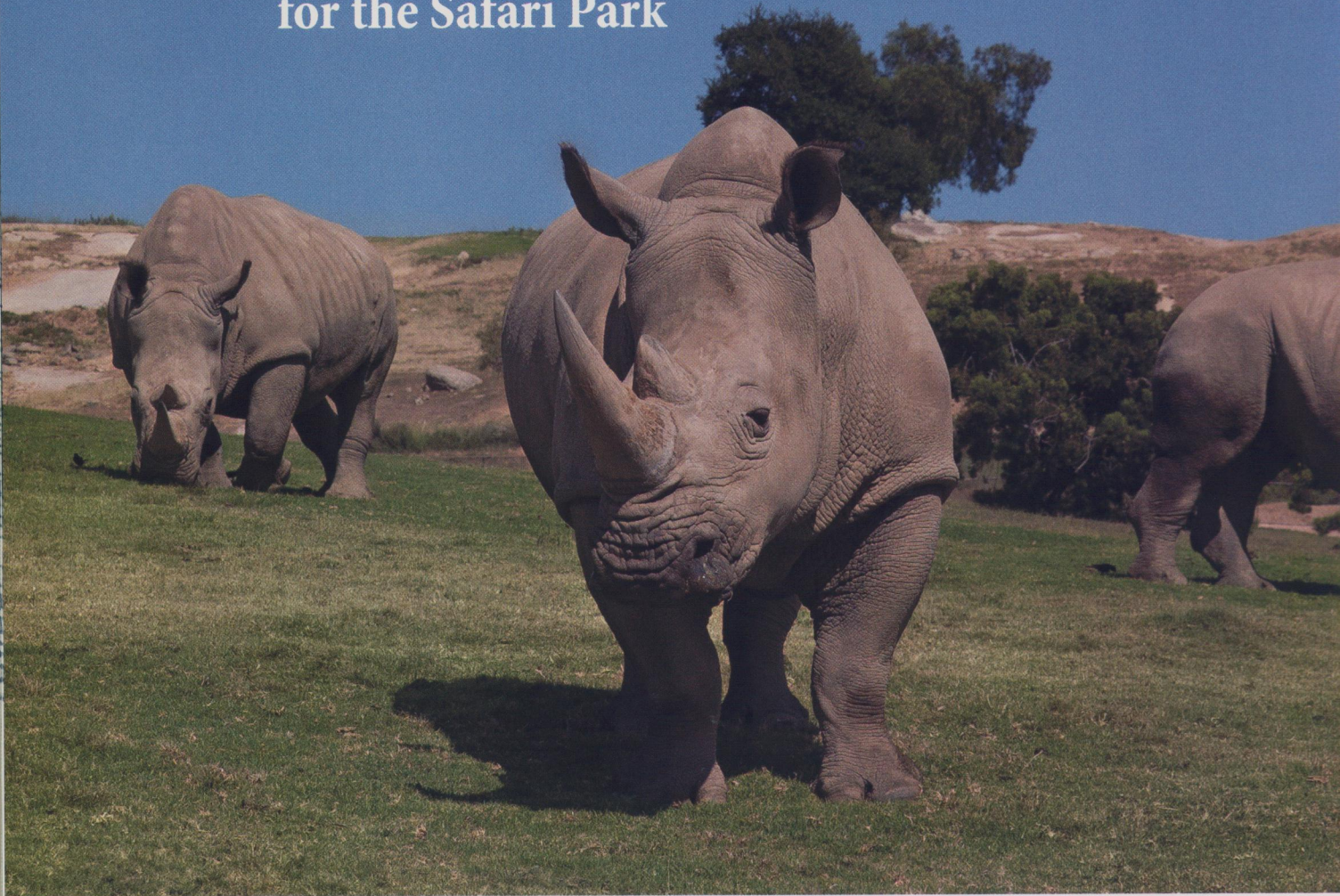


# The Future Is Near

## A New Generation of Rhinos for the Safari Park



**E**ACH MORNING AS I drive out to the African Plains exhibit at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park, the sun rises over the hills, and I reflect on my 26 years working with rhinos. I've cared for all four of the rhino species we've had at the Safari Park, observed eight rhino births, and helped hand raise five calves. As lead keeper for the African Plains area, I am again working with the southern white rhinos, and we are starting a new chapter with this species at the Safari Park.

In November 1971, 20 southern white rhinos *Ceratotherium simum simum* arrived from South Africa to become the founding generation of the Safari Park's rhino herd. These animals were imported to help complete the dream of then-director Charles Schroeder, D.V.M., to have a safari park in San Diego's backyard. Dr. Schroeder and his team of animal-care experts brought in rare animals that needed this kind of refuge; their species were to be spared from extinction. Herds of Uganda giraffes, Nile lechwe, Defassa waterbucks, fringe-eared oryx, and many other species, several of which were endangered, made their new home in the Park's multi-acre exhibits. Dr. Schroeder considered the southern white rhino to be the flagship species of this new endeavor.

BY JANE KENNEDY,  
Lead Keeper, San Diego Zoo Safari Park  
PHOTOS BY KEN BOHN,  
San Diego Zoo Global Photographer



Dumisha, Holly, and Utamu (left to right) enjoy a sunny afternoon. Female southern white rhinos tend to form bonds with one or two other females.

Today, southern white rhinos are no longer threatened, partly because they were initially so prolific in facilities like ours. From the original 20 animals, which we refer to as the founder animals, 87 southern white rhinos have been born, most moving on to live in other facilities around the world. These are the first generation born at the Park, and we refer to them as F<sub>1</sub> animals. The Park still holds the record for the most rhinos born in a zoo: 165 from 3 species, including 5 generations of black rhinos and 7 generations of greater one-horned rhinos.



Rhinos can be affectionate and playful with one another. Here, Holly (left) says hello to Utamu.

For reasons not yet fully understood, our southern white rhino reproduction efforts have stalled, and we have only had five F<sub>2</sub> rhinos (second generation after the founders) born at the Park. This problem is occurring worldwide, with less than 10 percent of zoos having multi-generational southern white rhino herds. There are more than 20,000 southern white rhinos in South Africa, but this

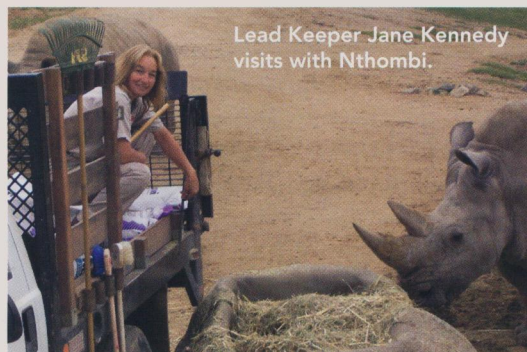
species may become rare in zoos as the founding generations pass away.

In 1999, Nthombi, one of our founder-generation rhinos, was chosen to be the surrogate mother to Holly, an 18-month-old F<sub>1</sub> female arriving from the Memphis Zoo. White rhino females have been found to live in pairs, called coalitions, so we wanted Holly to pair with an experienced female. Nthombi and Holly

## Our Greatest Generation

Recently my husband's grandfather, George Pershing Carlson (GP), passed away. He was part of the "Greatest Generation" of Americans who served in World War II. He also helped raise my husband, serving as a strong role model. At the San Diego Zoo Safari Park, we have a "greatest generation," too—of southern white rhinos, and Nthombi is one of

them. Nthombi has served her species by becoming a founding member of the most successful rhino reproductive program in any zoo, raising 10 calves of her own and being surrogate mom to 2 more. She is now 45 and is the oldest of our rhinos, living in the twilight of her life. It seems to me that Nthombi and GP both set the example for others: may we all make valuable contributions to our own greatest generation. —Jane Kennedy, Lead Keeper



Lead Keeper Jane Kennedy visits with Nthombi.



White rhinos aren't, of course, really white—the name may have come from the Afrikaans word *wijde*, meaning "wide," which could refer to this rhino species' wide, square upper lip, which is perfect for grazing.

quickly developed a mother-daughter bond—Holly followed Nthombi everywhere, and Nthombi made sure Holly was safe. As Holly matured, she had two calves of her own.

When the Park received another young female from the Knoxville Zoo, the staff chose Nthombi to be her surrogate mom as well. Holly was expected to be pregnant again and would bond with her own calf. Holly and Nthombi were separated, and Nthombi was paired with the 18-month-old new girl, named Kiazi. As a youngster, Kiazi needed an older female to guide her, and the two bonded well. Kiazi grew up under the guidance of Nthombi, and she went on to breed with our bull, Chuck, but she has not yet become pregnant.

Holly became a coalition partner with Dumisha, a 21-year-old female born at the Park who had never reproduced. Ever since Holly was separated from Nthombi, however, she has not bred.

Whether it was because of the separation, because she chose to pair with a female who was not reproductive, or some other reason is unknown. What we learned was that it would be better not to separate Nthombi and Kiazi. We've found over the years that separating rhino coalitions is a tenuous thing—sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. It's kind of like you and your BFF: sometimes a new friend just doesn't measure up to the old one!

With no new southern white rhino births since 2005, the Park decided to bring in new rhinos to jumpstart the breeding program. In 2009, two young F1 females, Kacy and Dakari, arrived from

Florida. Since their arrival, they have been bred regularly by Chuck but have not become pregnant, just like Kiazi. The next decision was to bring in a new bull, Maoto, since 42-year-old Chuck may no longer be reproductively viable. Maoto is a 22-year-old, founder-generation rhino born in South Africa who had not reproduced at his former zoo. Since his arrival at the Safari Park, Maoto has bred three different females. We hope the new members of our herd can now form the core of the future of the southern white rhino breeding program for the Safari Park, building a foundation for many more generations of southern white rhinos in the future.

## Taking Their Medicine—Beautifully!

Southern white rhinos are big and powerful, and, like most animals, they can be temperamental. So what do you do when a rhino needs medical care? Or to modify the old joke, how do you treat a rhino? Very carefully! Carefully yes, but often it just takes patience, trust, and a few treats.

When Maoto, our newest southern white rhino bull, arrived, he had never been in a training chute. However, the veterinary staff needed a sample of his blood so he could pass his quarantine and join the herd. That could have been a tricky situation—new rhino, new and strange place. But the animal care staff worked with Maoto over the course of four weeks, asking him to approach, then enter the chute calmly in return for treats. Maoto responded well, and as a result, the veterinarians were able to draw the blood without anesthesia. Success!

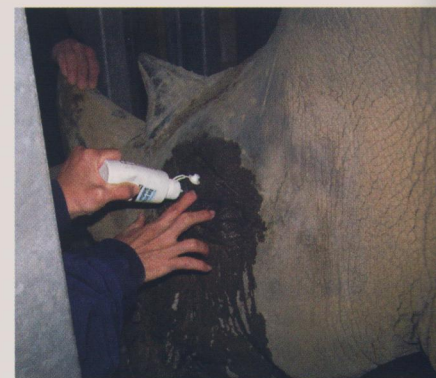
Imagine sitting in the doctor's office and hearing: "You can't see me right now, but I need you to stay still—I'm about to take the sutures out of your eye." Sound scary? Here's another small detail: your name is Chuck, and you're an adult southern white rhino.

Earlier this year, Chuck injured his left eye and needed medical attention. He was brought from the field exhibit into a holding area, where veterinarians immobilized him and treated his eye with the help of an outside ophthalmic specialist. His eyelids were temporarily sutured shut to allow his eye to heal for two weeks. Determined to avoid another anesthetiza-

tion, keepers worked on a plan that would allow the sutures to be removed without anesthesia. Over the next two weeks, keepers worked daily with Chuck, asking him to stand calmly in a chute in return for a treat. Gradually Chuck allowed the keepers to wash mud from his eye and even tug on the sutures.

On the final day, the veterinary staff and keepers met to take out the sutures. The doors to the chute opened, and Chuck stepped in, right on cue. He waited patiently while a veterinarian removed the sutures and examined his eye. The veterinarians stepped back, and the keepers approached to see the now-healed eye. With a smile, one of the keepers leaned close and asked: "Can you see me now, Chuck?" He could.

—Matt Gelvin, Senior Keeper, and Jane Kennedy, Lead Keeper



Chuck the southern white rhino willingly allows animal care staff to wash out his injured eye.