

Training Greater one-horned rhinos at Zoo Basel: Do it with a gentle touch!

By Dr. Friederike von Houwald, Curator Zoo Basel

When thinking about training of zoo animals, most of us think about target training. But there is also another way of training an animal and some zoo keepers will not be aware that they are doing it already during their daily work.

What I would like to write about is the way, how we – here at Zoo Basel – work with our GOHs. It is a bit a different way and has helped us in many situations during the past years.

We don't use the target training on a routine base and I will not write about target training as this is something most keepers are aware of. But very often, time is limited during the day, so target training is squeezed into the daily routine, often not leaving many options to train for new traits.

But what will happen if the training with the rhinos is done during each minute while you work with the rhinos?

We have noticed that the more you learn during the daily routine about your individuals the more you can truly work with them. But in order to do this, you – the keeper – have to be very alert and 'read' the rhino's behavior like a book. This way of thinking is not new and has been performed by some very good horse trainers. They read the horse like a book and this enables them to communicate with a horse in a totally different way, every second, without force, without hectic, with clear aims and a huge success.

Knowing rhino behavior, knowing the likes and dislikes of every individual, the keeper can then adopt his 'routine' work towards this behavior and it is amazing how easy it suddenly becomes to move animals from one section to the other or how easy it is to lay them down and to also draw blood from the ear veins without a command.

How does that work? It is a process which will not take place from one day to the other and it needs a keeper who will really look at his animals. Not in terms whether the individual looks healthy, has eaten, has well-formed feces, etc. but in the way of body signals: what is the rhino doing with the head, how does it get up, how does it walk, why is it grinding the teeth, eye movement, ear positions, etc.

When noticing the differences, it will allow the keeper to choose the 'right' moment to ask the rhino for something. For example foot care: a rhino that has eaten, looks relaxed and is in a positive mood, can be scratched between the folds of the hind leg and the hind legs itself and it will not take long and the animal will lie down. No command is needed, no target used, only a very positive attitude from both sides. When the rhino is down, it is easy not only to examine the feet but also to work – if necessary – on the feet. Or drawing blood, same scenario: Choose a good moment – and you can predict such a moment if you know your animals – and when the rhino is down, approach it, scratch it, and make it feel comfortable. We usually use some crème (local anesthetic) on the ears that prevent the pain to occur when inserting the needle. Then we will wait some minutes scratching the rhino and can then take blood. This has worked in many cases.

Of course the security factor always has to be kept in mind. Never work with a rhino – no matter how nice it is - in a situation which can potentially trap a human being, always have an escape route and never work in such situations alone, never.

This really gentle approach has led to a complete shift in behavior in our rhinos (and other animals we work with). We also changed some management aspects in order to give the rhinos more options to choose from: For example: All our stables are connected to the outdoor exhibits. We have heavy duty plastic stipes on each door, to keep the warmth in and give the rhinos themselves the options to decide when they want to go out and if they want to go out at all. This is particularly useful in those seasons when the weather is changing or is not so nice.



GOH training continued...

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Of course the keeper can influence the rhino's behavior, you don't have to wait for an hour until you can clean an exhibit, but what we want to achieve is a higher degree of flexibility – also in the thinking of the staff – and also in the rhinoceros thinking. By providing options, you keep a rhinoceros brain busy. And when they choose, they choose what they think is the best. The daily routine is sometimes nice, but a strict daily routine is also a killer. It becomes a routine that a) can become dangerous b) is really boring c) your creative brain cells will slowly die... and this is exactly what will happen in the animals as well.

Having a 'broad' routine is not a bad thing to have, we all have to make it through the daily work, but leave room for options! And use those options; you will be amazed how much fun it is!

There is no need to shout, push, or even use other items to move a rhino (or any other animal). They are absolutely gentle animals and you can do it with a gentle touch if you know your animals and can read them like a book.



IRKA Board of Directors says THANK YOU!!

The IRKA was pleased to recognize Adam Felts and Dave Clawson for their years of dedicated work to the organization. Adams award was presented by former Board of Directors member, Randy Pairan, and Dave's award was presented by his supervisor Dan Beetam. Thank you both for all of your hard work and dedication to the International Rhino Keeper Association. YOU BOTH ROCK!!!

Presented to Adam Felts

BOD (2005-2015), President (2005-2013), Executive Committee (2005-2015)

Your commitment to establishing and guiding the IRKA, and it's dedication to rhinoceros conservation, is appreciated.



Presented to Dave Clawson

Founding Board of Directors IRKA

Your design and development of website, combined with your knowledge of technology, were invaluable to IRKA.

