



Go Take a Hike! Trekking for Rhinos 2015

By Bill Konstant

Last New Year's Eve brought about a somewhat whacky resolution. I resolved to hike 2,015 miles this year, in part to help draw attention to the plight of the world's rhinos. The logic may not be immediately apparent, so please bear with me.

The notion of tromping around for more than two thousand miles this year first materialized when I realized that 2015 represents a special anniversary for rhinos. Humankind has shared the world with the rhinoceros and its ancestors since our own species first appeared on the planet. Prehistoric artists left a permanent record of their relationships with these wild creatures in cave wall sketches and etchings. Centuries later, rhinos were brought to Rome for sacrifice and spectacle or were likened to mythical unicorns by explorers such as Marco Polo. However, it wasn't until 1515 – exactly five hundred years ago – that the rhino became recognized throughout the civilized world. That year, German artist Albrecht Durer, working entirely from a written description provided by a fellow artist and never actually laying eyes on the living creature itself, produced his famous woodcut, *The Rhinoceros*. Half a millennium later, Durer's artwork remains the most recognized rhino icon in the world.

A second factor contributing to my hiking resolution was the desire to celebrate a banner year for Bowling for Rhinos. In 2014, American Association of Zoo Keeper (AAZK) Chapters set a national fundraising goal of \$500,000 in support of rhino conservation, which would have been an all-time record. In fact, Chapters across the country blasted right through that milestone, tallying close to \$600,000 in support of rhino protection programs in Africa and Asia. Over the last few years, I've been fortunate to work closely with AAZK members, helping to promote Chapter involvement in these programs. Twice now, I've accompanied a number of lucky zoo keepers to project sites in Indonesia where they saw the results of their commitment firsthand. My own zoological career began forty years ago, working as a keeper at a small institution. I can remember wanting to do then what I believe most keepers still want to do today – more to help save threatened wildlife around the world.

Presently, Bowling for Rhinos dollars contribute directly to the protection of black rhinos and white rhinos in Kenya's Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, and to the protection of Sumatran and Javan rhinos in three Indonesian national parks – Bukit Barisan Selatan, Way Kambas and Ujung Kulon. For each of these projects, the financial resources provided by AAZK are on par with grants received from government agencies and a number of NGOs. Beyond rhinos, these protection efforts also benefit biological diversity in general, including dozens of amphibians,

reptiles, birds and mammals on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. In Africa, for example, protecting rhinos also helps safeguard elephants, hippopotamus, Grevy's zebra, lions, cheetah, wild dogs, martial eagles, crowned cranes, secretary birds and five threatened vulture species. In Indonesia, threatened populations of Asian elephants, Sumatran tigers, Javan leopards and banteng, clouded leopards, Malayan tapirs, sun bear and pangolins, nine primates, and nearly 20 other threatened mammals that share rhino habitats also benefit from the protection the rhinos receive. So do Javan torrent frogs, king cobras, reticulated pythons, white-winged wood ducks, green peafowl, Storm's storks, Sumatran ground cuckoos, black-winged starlings and perhaps a dozen other threatened bird species.

The name I've given my resolution, Trekking for Rhinos 2015, sounds like something intended for exotic locations. However, the bulk of my wanderings will take place right here in the good old USA, much within Pennsylvania, where I reside. There's an obvious logistic reason for this, but also one of perspective. I want to get closer to and learn more about the nature that surrounds me. For decades my professional focus has been on international wildlife conservation, so it's high time I got better acquainted with the plants and animals that inhabit my own backyard, and then move outward from there. The adventure will not only be a refresher course in natural history, but will allow me to learn more about what wildlife biologists are doing here at home today to help ensure the survival of threatened species and their habitats for the benefit of future generations.

Bill Konstant with Ujung Kulon National Park Rhino Protection Unit, Indonesia . Photo courtesy of Sectionov Inov





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Our own country's wildlife conservation history provides parallels to the sagas of endangered species from faraway lands. Here in the United States, we lament our failure to save species like the passenger pigeon, Carolina parakeet, heath hen, Labrador duck and great auk. At the same time, we've learned from and celebrate the success stories. Decades of dedicated work by wildlife professionals helped bring species like the American bison, bald eagle, peregrine falcon, alligator, timber wolf, California condor and black-footed ferret back from the very brink of extinction. Lesser known, but no less dramatic recoveries can be touted for what were once dwindling species – the eastern bluebird, Canada goose, wild turkey and even white-tailed deer – that have again become common, some to the point of actually being regarded as pests. Their stories have implications for efforts intended to save wildlife around the world.

In Africa, a century of intensive conservation was necessary for the white rhino's recovery, as was also the case for Asia's greater one-horned rhino. Both species had been reduced to only a few hundred animals by the end of the 1800s, but have made incredible comebacks and now number in the thousands or tens of thousands. Today, both Sumatran and Javan rhino populations have dwindled to the low hundreds or less, forcing conservationists to pull out all the stops in the effort to save them. The black rhino was never reduced to such low numbers, but lost more than 90% of its population before protection and recovery efforts finally began to take hold. Unfortunately, none of the world's five rhino species is close to being "out of the

woods" and probably won't be for the meaningful future.

Trekking for Rhinos 2015 acknowledges efforts that help stop the decline of rhinos and other threatened wildlife, especially those initiatives supported by America's zoo keepers. While reports of rhino and elephant poaching from several countries remain depressing, rhino protection programs that receive AAZK support have been relatively successful. In some cases, they have reduced rhino poaching deaths to zero for a number of years running. Reliable annual support generated by Bowling for Rhinos has contributed significantly to this success. Interestingly enough, 2,015 miles is close to the average distance covered each year by Rhino Protection Units operating in the three Indonesian national parks that receive support from Bowling for Rhinos.

Bowling for Rhinos is magnificent in its simplicity - the fact that essentially anyone can take part. And it's the same for trekking or hiking. The activities themselves are obviously symbolic. Neither bowlers nor hikers go out on patrol, slinging automatic weapons over their shoulders to track or face down poachers. The average person, however, wants to make a difference and that is best done by finding ways to raise essential funding for rhino ranger salaries, equipment, food, training, and transportation.

The fact that bowling is such an enjoyable form of social recreation attracts more supporters to the cause. Its only limitations are the number of available lanes and bowling shoes. The limits



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to hiking are those of personal endurance, but the incentive of getting closer to nature counters that quite effectively and there is no shortage of trails from which to choose.

Hiking commenced for me on New Year's Day. My dog Blue and I logged five miles in Wissahickon Valley Park, a beautiful forested park located within the city limits of Philadelphia. Blue is a Siberian husky/Karelian bear dog mix who hates being left behind if I walk out the front door without. I document each hike with photos and a journal entry, posted as a personal blog at www.facebook.com/trekking4rhinos2015. I also like to include some fact regarding rhino ecology, behavior or conservation, or perhaps a bit of trivia that relates in some way to the day's adventure. Anyone wishing to contribute to Trekking for Rhinos 2015 can do so at www.crowdrise.com/trekkingforrhinos. Just like Bowling for Rhinos' dollars, 100% of the funds raised via this site support the nuts-and-bolts of rhino protection programs in the field.

In order to reach the 2,015 mile goal, I'll have to average about 5.5 miles a day. However, I won't be able to hike every day and my hope is to finish before next New Year's Eve rolls around, so the average daily trek will be a bit longer. At this point, I've just passed the 300-mile mark, meaning I'm about 15% of the way there and have just a bit more than 1,700 miles to go. That's a bit behind schedule, but January and February have got to be the most difficult months in which to hike here in the northeast, and I'm fairly confident that I'll pick up the pace when spring finally arrives.

Destinations to date have included public trails, municipal parks, county parks, state parks, national wildlife refuges and national parks, most here in Pennsylvania. Future treks will expand into neighboring states, taking advantage of work-related travel and invitations from AAZK Chapters to hike with them or on their behalf. A few months from now, I plan to begin hiking segments of the Appalachian Trail. This might provide an opportunity to partner with AAZK Chapters from the 14 states through which the Trail passes on its course from Georgia to Maine. Perhaps one day I'll join the club of folks who've completed it piecemeal over a number of years. Coincidentally, the Appalachian Trail was 2,015 miles long when first opened in the 1930s. That was another contributing factor to setting this year's symbolic goal.

Come December 31, I hope to look back on 2015 with the satisfaction of finally following through on a New Year's resolution, something I can't remember ever having done. But should I fall short of the mileage goal, I'm quite confident that Trekking for Rhinos will catch on and become another tool in AAZK's fundraising tool chest and have the added benefit of getting members across the country to experience the unique nature that surrounds them. As for me, it's probably the only way I'll ever achieve a New Year's resolution that's defied me since I can remember – to lose 10 pounds! 🌿

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