

Keeper Professional Development Program : Cassandra Kutilek

It was a chilly and damp morning outside, but inside the rhino barn, it was warm and filled with the earthy scent of rhinos. The cheery good morning that the two black rhinos got from their zookeeper roused them enough to plod their way to the front of their enclosure for some breakfast and extra attention.

This was the scene every morning in the rhino barn at the Cincinnati zoo where a pair of Eastern black rhinos and a saucy Indian rhino named Manjula call it home. The black rhinos Utenzi, the male, and Zuri, the female, are a young pair that have been paired together since March. The usual fireworks that are often associated with black rhinos seemed to have settled down, and the two were in a routine that involved breakfast, yard access, and being together all the time. For me, having come from a background where rhinos were only paired during the time of estrous, I was a bit incredulous at the apparent indifference that the pair had with one another. Every pairing that I had seen was with a 28 year old male and a 7 year old female that had erupted in chasing, sparring, and undivided attention to one another. This world, where a pair sleeps next to each other was totally foreign to me, but very clearly worked since the zoo has since announced Zuri's pregnancy due in the summer of 2017.

My main purpose for going to the Cincinnati zoo was to see how another institution paired their rhinos. What they looked for behaviorally and physically and what safety measures were taken for both the rhinos and the staff alike. I had previously worked at Lincoln Park zoo in Chicago, where we used behavioral observations and fecal hormone tests to confirm where Kapuki, our seven year old female, was in her estrous cycle. We would howdy her and our male, Maku, daily to gauge his reactions to her, noting flehmen, erections, foot shuffling. Maku is a like a stodgy old man, and he demands a certain amount of respect. Kapuki, on the other hand, is as sweet as they come. If a muppet came in rhino form, it would be her. When finally the day came for introductions, it was all hands on deck, and it was an intense, but well managed day. There was little interest from Kapuki, seemingly quite the opposite as she ran cautiously away from him, but in captive populations where females are often sent to other institutions at the age of two, I feel like this is often to be expected with young females. Maku was all business and nothing would deter him, but maybe some fresh browse and alfalfa cubes that we used would distract him while we shifted her out of the stall. Sometimes the introduction would last ten minutes and sometimes hours depending on their behavior. Introductions went on like this for over a year, until the day they bred. One breeding session, 150 ejaculations, and fourteen months later we had a little boy calf named King.



Recently, I moved facilities and found myself at the Brookfield Zoo, where once again a five year old female, Layla, and a twenty six year old male, Nakili, have a breeding recommendation via the Species Survival Plan. In only having been at Lincoln Park zoo and seeing how their successful rhino breeding plan went, I would often find myself leaning on my prior experience and some of the difficulties we had had at Lincoln Park. What if they won't separate? What if we miss her cycle? What if there is paramount aggression? Going to Cincinnati and working with their amazing staff, especially Marj Bruzina-Barthel and Wendy Shaftstall, was an exercise in education. The staff understands their animals and they act accordingly, recognizing signs for when the rhinos need a break from each other, or when and whom to shift first, or even when the rhinos might need some extra attention from their keepers. The fact that these two rhinos coexisted during the day together without any aggression or frustration left me with more questions than I had started with, such as if they would come into a "friend zone" or by bucking the natural history if it would spark a quicker attraction. I would fire question after question to the saintly Cincinnati staff, who would answer them as patiently and diligently as possible.



By the end of my week long foray, I was left with the irrefutable proof that the supposed solitary black rhino might not mind being paired together for extended periods of time.

I was also fortunate enough to become better acquainted with CREW and the research that they are doing. I am also proud to say that Brookfield zoo has become a participant in one of their rhino studies as well, which is a direct effect from being at Cincinnati.

At this point, we, at Brookfield zoo have done a handful of introductions and unlike Lincoln Park zoo rhinos, Nakili and Layla seem to want to be around each other, and unlike the Cincinnati rhinos, Nakili and Layla have no issues shifting to wherever we ask. The best lesson learned is that each set of rhinos is unique and

although you should plan for the worst case scenario, it doesn't hurt to hope for the best case scenario. As we learn our animals and strive to do the best we can for them, it's good to know that there are people to lean on and places to go to ask for help, before reinventing the wheel. A special thank you to their fearless and magnificent leader, Christina Gorsuch, who was beyond welcoming and thoughtful with the entire experience. Randy Pairan, Marj Bruzina-Barthel and Wendy Shaftstall, and the rest of the Cincinnati staff, my thanks again for allowing me to infiltrate your daily life, and a thanks to IRKA and Joe Hauser for their help in setting up this exchange. As always a heartfelt thanks to both Lincoln Park Zoo and Brookfield Zoo for your support and cooperation.