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Health Management of Black Rhinoceros and White Rhinoceros Through Conditioning and Positive Reinforcement

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The health management of captive rhinos is often difficult and challenging. Simple medical procedures, such as blood collection, often require tranquilization or immobilization to accomplish. A sick rhino is often a diagnostic nightmare since even simple diagnostic procedures may require placing an already compromised animal at risk through chemical restraint.

Through positive reinforcement, keeper staff have been successful in conditioning several black rhinos (*Diceros bicornis minor*) and white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum simum*) at White Oaks Conservation Center to submit to blood collection, tuberculin testing, vaccination, treatment of minor injuries, and other minor medical procedures without the use of chemical or mechanical restraint. One female black rhino allows milk to be collected. Keepers achieve this by using preferred food items and tactile contact to gain the trust and confidence of the rhino. During conditioning, keepers feed small amounts of alfalfa or browse while simultaneously touching the rhino in areas where the blood is collected (i.e., leg or ear). More than one keeper participates in the conditioning process to prevent the rhino from becoming nervous or uncomfortable around unfamiliar people or groups of people. As a result of this conditioning process, the rhino responds positively to keeper and veterinary staff, making simple veterinary procedures less stressful for both animal and staff.

The black rhino suffers from numerous health problems in captivity, so preventive health screening is especially important for this species. The conditioning process allows veterinary staff to routinely collect blood samples to assess health and to detect problems early on. The ability to collect bio-samples non-invasively from our rhinos will continue to allow important research to be accomplished in the areas of rhino nutrition, blood cell physiology, stress physiology, reproductive physiology, pharmacology, anesthesia, and health assessment.

—reprinted from *Karatasi*, the Conservation Newsletter of White Oak Conservation Center

