

Mongabay Series: **Asian Rhinos**

Bowling for Rhinos: a grassroots project with global reach

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An all-volunteer effort, Bowling for Rhinos combines having fun with raising funds for rhino conservation around the world.

- *Since the original event in 1987, Bowling for Rhinos — a project run completely by volunteers — has raised more than \$6 million to support rhino conservation efforts around the world.*
- *Funds have supported ranger units that protect the Asian rhino species, as well as conservation programs for black and white rhinos.*
- *Fundraisers, which happen across the United States, go beyond just bowling — some groups opt to host events like Painting for Rhinos or Winos for Rhinos.*
- *Some participants and supporters point to Bowling for Rhinos as an antidote to feelings of hopelessness in the face of national and global environmental problems.*

The first Bowling for Rhinos fundraiser almost didn't happen. In the summer of 1987, a small group of keepers at the Kansas City Zoo wanted to raise funds to support conservation of the critically endangered black rhino. They organized a modest event where supporters pledged a few cents per pin and about ten people signed up to bowl.

“Somehow the bowling alley lost their reservation and it was full, so they had only two lanes and they had to take turns bowling,” said Jacque Blessington, president of the Greater Kansas City chapter of the American Association of Zookeepers (AAZK) and senior recreation director/naturalist at Lakeside Nature Center.

Despite the complications, the event raised nearly triple its \$500 goal — and then the concept took off. Maybe the whimsical name attracted attention, an inspiration credited to keeper Janet Brannian that referenced a game show called Bowling for Dollars. Whatever it was, other AAZK chapters borrowed the idea and ran with it, raising over \$5,000 the next year and then in 1989, almost \$50,000.

The chapter's 30th-anniversary event took place this year, with about 90 bowlers raising \$4,500, and it's now just one of many. Since 1990, Bowling for Rhinos events have raised a total of \$6 million to support rhino conservation. In 2016 alone, 82 AAZK chapters raised over \$600,000.



Event organizers say keeping events fun is crucial for attracting attendees. Photo courtesy of Jamie Pham, Los Angeles AAZK Chapter, Bowling for Rhinos.

It's an impressive total, but for some there are implications beyond supporting this particular species. Not only does Bowling for Rhinos help conserve habitat for many other animals, these efforts also can serve as an antidote for hopelessness in the face of a global biodiversity crisis and a political climate in the United States that has many concerned about the direction of environmental policy. As a completely grassroots program run entirely by volunteers, Bowling for Rhinos shows how individuals with little or no institutional support can come together to make a real difference.

“A lot of people feel paralyzed and unsure of what to do when they hear of something like a poaching crisis that's happening on the other side of the planet. It's heartbreaking, but how is one person in small town USA going to have anything to do with saving that species?” said CeCe Sieffert, deputy director of the International Rhino Foundation (IRF). “Bowling for Rhinos counters that feeling that I'm just one person, what can I do? It's a group of 'just one persons,' and they're making a significant change.”

Funds raised go to conservation of all five rhino species through partnerships with different organizations. Through the IRF, Bowling for Rhinos is a significant source of funding for the Rhino Protection Units that are crucial to the protection of Asian species. Support also goes to conservation of black and white rhinos in Africa via the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in Kenya. Since its inception, Bowling For Rhinos has contributed over 6.6 million dollars to the conservation of these species and others in their habitat.



The Los Angeles AAZK chapter holds elaborate, themed bowling nights. Photo courtesy of Jamie Pham, Los Angeles AAZK Chapter, Bowling for Rhinos.

Big dreams

Jim Haigwood was so inspired by the concept of Bowling for Rhinos that he started an AAZK chapter at the Los Angeles Zoo with the express purpose of participating.

“I’d been at the LA zoo for almost twenty years and for a long time we didn’t have an AAZK chapter,” he said. “It bothered me that there was this wonderful fundraiser and we weren’t participating. I decided that LA was going to have one and we were going to be very successful at it.”

The chapter has definitely achieved the success Haigwood was driving for: they’re now the top fundraiser. Their event this year was their ninth, so as he says they are “relative newbies,” but

their first eight events made them the top earners each year, and now they're the all-time leader with the largest overall total of over \$320,000.

And as is true of all BFR events, it's all been done on a volunteer basis, with keepers donating their time to organize the event. "We don't get paid to do this, we don't get time at work to do this," he said. "This is our own free time. Meetings are during our lunch break." The zoo doesn't provide financial support, although they do help with press releases and social media posts. Haigwood estimates that he's personally put in "thousands" of hours over the years. "Having people give you money is not easy," he said. "We don't just roll out the red carpet and people show up. You have to work to get the money."

That work involves making the event enjoyable, with silent auctions, raffles, costumes and animal-themed menu items in addition to bowling, so there's a reason besides do-gooding to attend. "It's a very festive event. I think that's helped a lot with the momentum," he said. The total raised at their May 13th event won't be announced until all chapter events are over for the year, but Haigwood said, "I can tell you that we made a lot of money and had a really great 50s theme this year."

While Bowling for Rhinos funds go to support all rhino species, Haigwood and Los Angeles have a special connection to Asian rhinos. He once cared for Andalus, one of the last remaining Sumatran rhinos, who subsequently was sent to Cincinnati Zoo and then Way Kambas sanctuary in Sumatra to be part of the breeding program to save the species. "Sumatran rhinos are one of the most charming animals on the face of the planet," he said. "Everyone who's worked with them at LA zoo has such a fondness for the species. Lots of people on the Bowling for Rhinos board were involved in his care."



Beyond bowling, AAZK chapters raise money through events like silent auctions or art evenings. Photo courtesy of Jamie Pham, Los Angeles AAZK Chapter, Bowling for Rhinos.

Doing what works

The LA event is probably exactly what the name Bowling for Rhinos conjures up if you tried to imagine it: there's bowling, and the zoo and organizers have a connection to rhinos.

But in fact, there is no single kind of BFR event, no rules about what it has to be, and that's what makes it work. Chapters do whatever makes sense for their community and their volunteers. Some hold smaller fundraisers advertised only to keepers and friends; some do car washes or dog washes; a number of chapters offer "Winos for Rhinos." Some use existing connections and programs to come up with their own ideas.

"We do a myriad of kinds of events. We don't marry ourselves just to the bowling event because bowling's not for everybody," said Erica Buckwalter, naturalist instructor at Oklahoma City Zoo, who's chairing her chapter's event this year.

Organizers are taking advantage of an extensive art network that is already involved with the zoo to plan art-themed events, including a Painting for Rhinos class at a local "paint and sip" studio and a contest to design the t-shirt for the event

Buckwalter's favorite memory of a previous event was a Bowling for Rhinos sleepover, with a behind the scenes tour where guests got to hand-feed the Indian rhinos.

"People were amazed at how slobbery our Indian rhino's mouths were," she said. "People got an amazing experience that they're never going to forget."



A rhino calf at the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary in Indonesia's Way Kambas National Park. Some of the funds raised by BFR go to support patrols in the park. Photo by Rhett Butler/Mongabay.

Where the money goes

Because Bowling for Rhinos is run entirely by volunteers, none of the funds go to pay staff or organizational overhead. "100 percent of the profits from every event go to conservation, and some of the chapters actually underwrite all of the expenses," said Ed Hansen, CEO of AAZK. Since 2011 the Asian species have been supported via International Rhino Foundation, who receive 45 percent of the total funds raised.

"Bowling for Rhinos has been critical for the protection of rhinos," said Sieffert of IRF. The Asian donation supports Rhino Protection Units in three national parks: Bukit Barisan Selatan and Way Kambas in Sumatra, and Ujung Kulon in Java, Indonesia, which holds the entire world population of Javan rhinos. Rhino Protection Units monitor threatened wildlife, deactivate traps

and snares, apprehend intruders including poachers, and protect the borders of protected areas from human incursion. The funds from Bowling for Rhinos cover nearly one-third (about 32 percent) of the Rhino Protection Unit costs, which includes salaries, health insurance, pension, training, and equipment including uniforms, camping gear and food.

A smaller BFR side grant sometimes goes to other Asian species as well, for example, the 2015 construction of ranger towers in Burachapori Wildlife Sanctuary as part of the India Rhino Vision 2020 project which translocates rhinos to protected areas.

BFR also makes a substantial contribution to the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy in Kenya, a sanctuary for both black and white rhinos and home to other wildlife including elephants, lions, Grevy's zebra, elephants, and over 400 bird species.

More Motivation



Ann Knutson with Delilah the Sumatran rhino during a trip to Indonesia she was awarded for her work on Bowling for Rhinos. Photo courtesy of Carey Knutson.

Contributing to conservation is its own reward for volunteers, but there's also the possibility of being awarded a trip to see the results of their labors. Funded by partner organizations IRF and Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, recipients are chosen from two pools: One trip goes to a volunteer

from one of the top-fundraising chapters, and all other chapters can nominate a candidate for the other.

One recipient, Ann Knutson, has a job at the San Diego Zoo that is about as far from rhinos as you can imagine – she raises baby birds. She first got involved in organizing Bowling for Rhinos in her previous job at the much smaller Sedgwick County Zoo in Kansas. “I think I was just looking for a way to put my other talents to use that I don’t get to use in my job,” she said. “I’m very social, I like putting events together.”

Rhinos were not her passion at the time, although that has changed. “Starting out I looked at it as, by saving rhino habitat, you’re saving everything in that habitat, and there’s plenty of birds in that rhino habitat,” she said. “But as I kept doing the event I learned more about rhinos, I got to meet rhinos and their keepers. I really fell in love with them as well.”

One very special place she got to meet them when she was top fundraiser for her chapter and won the trip to Sumatra and Java in 2016. “I really love Sumatran rhinos,” she said. “It was so fun to hear about their different personalities and see them up close, and to talk to the keepers. They are so passionate, just as passionate as we are — they don’t have as much of the infrastructure and luxuries that we have in life, but still are so devoted to these animals. When you go on the trip you get so inspired by all the people you meet.”



Crafts and novelty items like these little rhinos are sold to raise extra funds. Photo courtesy of Jamie Pham, Los Angeles AAZK Chapter, Bowling for Rhinos.

Lessons

Some, like Knutson, feel that the example set by Bowling for Rhinos is more important than ever in a political climate where we can't count on the government to protect the environment.

"Bowling for Rhinos is a good example of what grassroots can do," she said. "Zookeepers that don't make a ton of money themselves, coming together throughout the country to make \$600,000 makes a huge difference. That's not even including the social impact that we're making and how much we're educating the public. This is such a great example of what people can do without having the government help."

Some point out that in a lot of ways, though, the situation is nothing new.

"I don't think that governments around the world have ever done enough or cared enough. It's never been their priority," said Buckwalter. "We can't make other countries agree to protect these animals, but we can buy land, we can fund rangers. We can do that by raising money."

And Haigwood said, "I don't hold out a lot of hope for governments in general. I've always believed more in individuals to take on these problems and that's what I love about Bowling for Rhinos. It gives people a chance to help these animals that are another world away."

And while the title of the program is very specific, its effect is much broader than just rhinos, as Knutson knew when she started out by thinking about all the birds in the rhino's habitat. "The tagline we use is "orchids to elephants," said Hansen. "The interesting thing that has happened in Asia through the rhino protection units monitoring the sanctuary is that the other wildlife has rebounded. Bowling for Rhinos saves much more than rhinos. In Asia we're saving species that we don't even know are there, that haven't even been discovered yet."