

Close Encounters of the Conservation Kind

by Samantha Russak, PhD and Diana Waterman, Southwick's Zoo

Steve Irwin once said, "If we can teach people about wildlife, they will be touched. Share my wildlife with me. Because humans want to save things that they love." So how do we get the public to love and care about animals as much as we do, so that they will be inspired to save and conserve them?

One very successful way to meet this goal is by offering close-up animal encounters and experiences. Some people might be more hesitant than others to admit it, but everyone wants to feel special and significant, so there will always be an interest in having an opportunity for a VIP encounter, something that is different than what can be experienced by a normal zoo visitor. And despite the animal rights propaganda currently floating around social media and the internet, direct interactions with animals have been shown time and time again to lead to longer, more meaningful emotional connections that greatly surpass anything one can gain from reading a book or watching a video. So, the excitement of meeting an exotic animal up close will get people to book an encounter, but it is our jobs as zoo professionals and educators to ensure those same people leave with a better understanding and love for animals. Raising awareness, inspiring action, and fundraising are all worthy and obtainable conservation-related outcomes of close-up animal encounters.

Of course there are some practical items to consider when setting up an animal encounter. Rules and guidelines must be established to ensure the safety of all involved – the animals, the participants, and the staff leading the encounters. Things to consider include having a minimum age requirement, limiting the number of participants for each encounter, the duration of each encounter, how many encounters per day/week/month will be offered, etc. These rules should be made clear to all those involved and repeated in as many places as possible. Having participants sign a waiver and/or contract will help prevent any liability issues or misunderstandings that may arise (be sure to check your state's specific liability laws first before creating the waiver). In addition to the rules, the expectations of the encounter should also be very clear to participants – are they allowed to take pictures and/or videos, will they get to feed and/or touch and/or hold the animal, will the encounter take place on exhibit or behind-the-scenes, etc. Last, but certainly not least, as these encounters are supporting conservation efforts it is very important to decide upon what information will be shared during the encounter and how the profits will be disbursed.

At Southwick's Zoo, we offer a variety of opportunities for zoo visitors to get up close and personal with the animals, but for this article we will focus on two of our most popular and successful encounters: rhinos and sloths. With the collaboration of our non-profit, EARTH Limited, these encounters are offered as a unique way to bring awareness to important issues like poaching, illegal wildlife trafficking, and deforestation,

while also raising much needed funds for conservation organizations helping to save these species in their native ranges.

Southwick's Zoo currently houses two southern white rhinoceroses, Thelma and Louise, who are eager participants in our rhino encounters. These encounters are offered every Saturday and Sunday, as well as various weekdays, throughout the zoo's season from April through November. We only offer one encounter per day, and each encounter has a maximum of four participants, so that we do not overwhelm (or overfeed) the rhinos. Registration for rhino encounters occurs online (<https://southwickszoo.com/things-to-do/rhino-encounters/>), with dates posted at the beginning of each month.

As part of the online registra-

tion process, participants electronically sign a waiver agreeing to the rules and guidelines of the encounter, which are clearly posted on our website, the registration page, and the waiver. These rules include information about our cancellation policy, a strong recommendation to wear close-toed shoes, an age minimum of 12 years old, an agreement to follow the instructions of the staff member leading the encounter, and an acknowledgement that breaking the rules can lead to the termination of the encounter.

The day of the encounter, participants are met by staff outside of the main entrance at 9am, which is an hour before normal zoo opening. Having the encounters at this time offers the participants an extra opportunity to experience the zoo in a more quiet and calm setting before the general public arrive. Participants are led to the EARTH Discovery Center, the education hub of Southwick's Zoo; while walking to the Discovery Center, staff provide educational information about the zoo's history and animals, as well as the reasoning behind offering rhino encounters. Once at the Discovery Center, participants watch a short video detailing the rhino poaching crisis entitled "I am Not Medicine", produced by the World Wildlife Fund (video link here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=klUGnOEo9gE>; please note that this video is accessible to the public, but we did contact WWF for permission to use this video as part of our encounters). After viewing the video, participants are led to the rhino encounter area, which is at the back of the rhino exhibit and not accessible to zoo visitors. The walk from the Discovery Center to the encounter area allows for additional information to be shared with participants and questions to be answered.

Once at the encounter area, participants are given a more specific set of safety rules to follow; these include staying behind the protective barrier (concrete poles) at all times, only reaching through and not around the poles, and most importantly, following staff direction. The encounter is set up so that the rhinos are active participants and may choose to leave at any time. The rhinos, Thelma and Louise, are offered a bit of hay as a reward for participating in the encounter, but they

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usually stick around long after the last piece of hay is gone for continued scratches and pets. Most encounters last until at least 10am, meaning that participants get at least 20-30 minutes with the rhinos. Pictures and videos are encouraged to help spread awareness of our encounters and conservation efforts.

We have been successfully offering rhino encounters for the past 4 years, and conduct participation surveys so that we can make sure these encounters are as educational and impactful as possible. Initial survey results show that participants leave with a better understanding of the poaching crisis and a greater desire to contribute to conservation efforts for rhinos after spending time with Thelma and Louise. The money we have raised from rhino encounters directly supports conservation organizations like International Rhino Foundation (<https://rhinos.org/>) and Project Rhino (<https://www.projectrhinokzn.org/>) that are making great strides to help protect all rhino species in Africa and Asia through ranger protection and community education programs. We are proud to have contributed \$15,000 to \$20,000 each year towards these important projects, and look forward to continuing our support.

We wanted to expand our animal encounter opportunities, and as sloths are the latest animal obsession, it seemed like an easy decision to allow their charm to serve the greater good. We are fortunate to house four Linnaeus's two-toed sloths across three outdoor habitats. These charismatic ambassadors are helping fight the illegal pet trade, promoting wildlife friendly tourism, and have already raised over \$10,000 for conservation. We are in our second year offering booked encounters with our sloths (<https://southwickszoo.com/things-to-do/sloth-encounters/>). Booking requires participants to sign an animal interaction release waiver and review rules for the experience. Encounters are offered up to seven days a week and three times a day, with no sloth doing more than two encounters daily.

Sloth enthusiasts wait eagerly for 7:00pm every Wednesday when the upcoming week of sloth encounters become available for online booking, and encounters regularly sell out within an hour. Releasing encounters on a weekly basis allows our keepers to look ahead at the weather forecast and decide which dates will have the best weather for animals and participants alike. Similarly, if any of the sloths are showing low interest in par-

ticipating in encounters, we are able to adjust the number of encounters offered to give the animals a break. It is extremely important to us that participating in the encounter is a choice that the sloths are excited to make.

Encounters begin at the EARTH Discovery Center where participants meet with a member of our education team before heading to one of two sloth encounter locations. Encounters are limited to two participants, and are held in view of the public so that family members and other visitors can watch and learn during the encounter. Our educators discuss sloth ecology and demonstrate how our sloths are fed. Participants receive a souvenir sloth cup containing vegetable slices from our sloth's daily diet to be fed out during the encounter.

Cutting vegetables into long, thin strips, keeps participants' fingers safely out of reach of the sloth. In order to ensure that our educator can keep an eye on the participant and avoid overwhelming the animal, only one person feeds at a time. All of the staff who are trained to lead sloth encounters have been educated on signs of stress in sloths in order to monitor the animal's comfort level. If the sloth is comfortable taking vegetable slices, encounter participants are then given the opportunity to pet the sloth's uniquely wiry fur while they enjoy their final pieces of food. Participants are encouraged to bring a phone or camera for pictures of their encounter, and are allowed to stand next to the sloth for some photos before finishing the encounter. The whole experience lasts around 20 minutes and has been described as life changing and inspiring by thrilled participants.

These encounters have been a perfect opportunity to connect visitors to conservation topics they will feel passionately about as sloth enthusiasts. We are proud to support The Sloth Institute (<http://www.theslothinstitute.com/>), a non-profit organization located in Costa Rica that specializes in research and education surrounding wild, rehabilitated, and captive sloths. The Sloth Institute is funding a project called "The Sloth Speedway", an initiative to build rope bridges across roads that are fragmenting habitats, allowing sloths to safely access their full habitat while coexisting with humans. This concrete conservation effort opens the door for conversation about appropriate human-sloth interactions. Our encounter guidelines make it extremely clear that sloth holding is never part of an encounter, and that touching is based on sloth comfort level and is never guaranteed. Many visitors do not realize that



White rhinoceros, *Ceratotherium s. simum*, at Southwick's Zoo. Dr. Samantha Russak, Southwick's Zoo

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popular tourist activities like sloth holding and selfies have a substantial negative impact on the wild population. We teach visitors to seek out conservation based organizations to fuel their passion for wildlife rather than interacting inappropriately with wild animals or contributing to the illegal pet trade.

Setting up successful animal encounters is definitely a learning process; adjustments are to be expected as you figure out what works best for your animals, your staff, and your facility, but the results are worthy of the effort. The success of our rhino and sloth encounters makes us hopeful that we can continue to not only offer special and exciting experiences for

our zoo visitors, but also use these experiences as a conduit for promoting and inspiring much needed conservation efforts. As zoo professionals, we are in a unique position to not only offer special experiences with animals, but to ensure these experiences have a greater purpose of education and conservation (even if that is not the reason why the public participate). This is obviously important for the field of wildlife conservation in general, but especially vital today when zoos are faced with ever-increasing scrutiny from AR groups claiming zoos have animals only for profit. Let's show them and the public the good that zoos do...and let them have fun at the same time! 🐼



*The sloth encounter at Southwick's Zoo is educating the guests while directly supporting NGO's. These conservation efforts include research and education surrounding wild, rehabilitated, and captive sloths, and an initiative to build rope bridges across roads that are fragmenting habitats. Linnaeus's two-toed sloths, *Choloepus didactylus*. Dr. Samantha Russak, Southwick's Zoo*



*Southwick's Zoo has been successfully offering rhino encounters for the past four years, making sure that the encounters are as educational and impactful as possible. The money raised from the rhino encounters directly supports conservation programs that protect rhino species through ranger protection and community education programs. White rhinoceros, *Ceratotherium s. simum*, at Southwick's Zoo. Dr. Samantha Russak, Southwick's Zoo*