

Young white rhino shot and killed at Wild Florida safari park days before grand reveal

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Photo credit: FWC investigative report

KENANSVILLE, Fla. - Days before planning to reveal a new 2,000-pound white rhinoceros to the public, WILD Florida, a drive-thru safari park in Florida, shot and killed the young rhino because it was acting "very wild," repeatedly tested its fencing, and ultimately escaped its enclosure, according to an investigation by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC).

FWC officials said the shooting happened in September, a day after the young rhino arrived at the park. However, it does not appear that details of the rhino being shot or killed were publicly known previously.

WILD Florida had planned a "massive announcement" on Sept. 22, 2022 regarding the debut of its rhino and rhino habitat to coincide with World Rhino Day. However, in an email to FOX 35 at the time, the event was unexpectedly postponed.

FOX 35 asked for details on why the event was postponed at the time, specifically asking if something had happened to the rhino, but our email went unanswered.

In a statement to FOX 35 on Tuesday, four months after the incident, WILD Florida confirmed that it had to shoot and kill the rhino last fall because it "began to pose an immediate danger to the park at large."

When asked why news of the rhino's death was not made public months ago, Wild Florida said "the impacts of this event were tragic and broke out hearts," and that it continues to work closely with FWC.

According to the FWC's report, the rhino arrived at Wild Florida on Sept. 18, 2022, and was placed in its FWC-approved containment area to acclimate before being released into the main enclosure. Staff noted that the rhino began to test parts of the enclosure and the fencing before relaxing for the night.

As a safety precaution, the safari park remained closed that day to allow the rhino more time to acclimate to its surroundings, the report said. However, the rhino once again tested fencing and managed to escape the containment area and enter its main enclosure, which had been reinforced, according to the report.

Staff told an FWC investigator that it ordered staff to have their guns ready should the rhino manage to get out of his main enclosure – and if that happen, the order would be to shoot and kill the rhino, according to the report. Ultimately, that happened.

The rhino managed to get out of its main enclosure and was then pursued by staff. The rhino was shot at least 15 times at which time it collapsed and died, according to the report.

The FWC report said staff then quickly moved the rhino to a burial area and began to bury it quickly because staff feared it would be seen by a helicopter. They left part of the rhino's skull visible from the ground for the FWC investigator.

Part of the rhino's escape was captured on the safari park's security cameras and corroborated what employees said had happened, the FWC investigator noted in their report. The FWC also said in its report that it would take no further action.

Here is WILD Florida's complete statement, which was also shared on its Facebook page late Monday:

“For more than twelve years, Wild Florida’s mission has been to provide an unforgettable Everglades experience that promotes a connection with animals while inspiring education and conservation. Unfortunately, we are sometimes faced with unforeseen situations and circumstances that require an immediate response to ensure the continued safety of visitors, staff, neighbors, and, most importantly, animals in our care.

In September 2022, a new rhino began to pose an imminent danger to the park at large, and after consultation with leadership and Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) guidelines, we made the difficult decision to humanely euthanize the animal. As an organization, Wild Florida will continue providing the best care for our animal family and promote the importance of conservation through our educational programs.”