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Black rhino dies enroute to Oregon Zoo

By Katy Muldoon | The Oregonian/OregonLive

Veterinarians and zookeepers from three states worked frantically for more than 16 hours Monday, but they could not save an endangered black rhinoceros that collapsed en route to the Oregon Zoo.

The 8-year-old rhino named Kipenzi, Swahili for "precious one," died about 9:30 p.m. at the Phoenix Zoo. The cause of death was unknown.

The rhino's traumatic journey began Saturday in Kansas City as a typical animal transport -- one that not only held risks, but that also came with high hopes: Kipenzi was bound for Portland because she was the best possible mate for Pete, the Oregon Zoo's lone black rhino.

The two were genetically different enough that those in charge of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums' Species Survival Program thought their pairing could help the critically endangered species. Fewer than 3,700 black rhinos exist, 68 of them at AZA-accredited facilities.

The Oregon Zoo's Gilbert Gomez, assistant curator, and Richard Grudzien, Africa keeper, traveled to Kansas and worked with veterinarians and zoo staff there to sedate Kipenzi and load her into a crate Saturday morning. A crane lifted the crate onto a rented flatbed truck and about noon, Gomez and Grudzien began driving west on one of the thousands of U.S. zoo-animal transports that occur each year.

About 90 minutes later, Gomez said, the truck broke down.

The rental company sent a wrecker, which towed the rhino-bearing flatbed to a garage. A mechanic was unable to make the needed repairs, so the company sent a replacement flatbed.

Two tow-truck cranes lifted the 2,400-pound animal and her crate from one truck to the next, and by about 7 p.m. the Oregon Zoo men and rhino were on the road again.

By then, the weather ahead had worsened.

If they proceeded through Denver, forecasters said, they'd hit snow, a particularly dangerous proposition for black rhinos, native to balmy Africa.

Gomez said he and Grudzien decided to head south. The route through Arizona and California would add about eight hours but would allow them to avoid the snowy Rocky Mountains. They expected to make Portland late Monday.

As the truck rumbled along, Gomez and Grudzien felt it shift as Kipenzi stood or laid down in her crate, specifically designed to transport rhinos.

About 5 a.m. Monday, outside of Phoenix, they felt the truck shift again.

"It was a bigger shift -- a little louder, a little different," Gomez said Tuesday. "That's when I said, 'Let's stop and look.'"

When he peeked into the crate, Gomez saw Kipenzi lying awkwardly on her right side, one leg in the air."

"That's not normal," he remembered saying.

Gomez dialed Lisa Harrenstien, an Oregon Zoo veterinarian. He explained the situation and told Harrenstien he was turning around. The Phoenix Zoo wasn't far. Maybe its veterinarians could help.

Gomez hung up and Harrenstien dialed a Phoenix Zoo veterinarian at home.

The zoo rallied its troops. Administrators, veterinarians, keepers, maintenance workers and security guards were waiting for the truck when it arrived at 6:30 a.m.

Someone alerted a crane company and a piece of machinery big enough to lift a rhino arrived within 45 minutes. The crane set the crate down in a stall in the zoo's elephant barn.

Rhinos are such dangerous animals that Phoenix's veterinary staff anesthetized Kipenzi and gave her Valium. Workers covered her head with a towel, wrapped straps around her back legs, attached the straps to a winch and inched the enormous beast out of her crate, said Dan Subaitis, Phoenix Zoo's director of animal management.

Repositioning the straps, they moved Kipenzi into soft hay, in a position that would make it easier for her to breathe.

In Portland, Harrenstien boarded a flight for Arizona.

Phoenix Zoo veterinarians tested the rhino's blood, administered fluids and monitored her vital signs. They X-rayed her leg; it wasn't broken. They gave her an antidote designed to quickly reverse the anesthetic but it didn't work.

By the time Harrenstien arrived midafternoon, Kipenzi still hadn't gotten up.

"For all these large animals," she said, "the longer they're down the less likely they are to get up."

Rhinos pose special risks. "They're pretty sensitive to just about everything," Harrenstien said.

She and the Phoenix medical crew, plus a visiting veterinarian from Iran, worked into the night, but Kipenzi failed to respond. They consulted with the Kansas City Zoo's veterinarian, who is a leading authority on rhinos, and with Mitch Finnegan, the Oregon Zoo's chief veterinarian.

They wondered whether Kipenzi had a reaction to medications, whether she was sick, stressed or simply worn out.

They administered stimulants, but the drugs failed to bring the animal out of her sleepy fog.

Keepers, meanwhile, massaged Kipenzi's legs and shortly before 9:30 p.m., she grew a little more alert and lifted her head.

They moved her legs into position, hoping she'd stand, Subaitis said. Instead, the rhino let out one final exhale and died.

Though the Phoenix Zoo staff had no connection to Kipenzi, other than trying to save her, a handful of them worked alongside the Oregon Zoo's staffers until 2 a.m., performing a necropsy, or animal autopsy. Two to three weeks from now, the tissue samples they collected could help determine what caused the rhino to expire.

Before the night was over, Harrenstien said, one of the Phoenix zookeepers took impressions of Kipenzi's feet. She planned to send them to the Kansas City Zoo as a keepsake of a favorite animal they'd never see again.