

# Conversations on a Healthy Rhino

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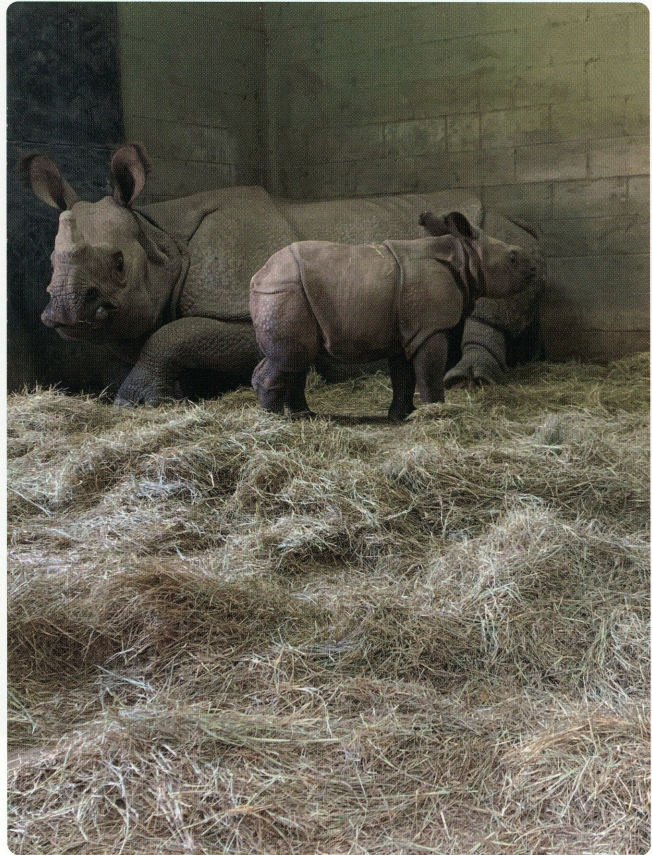
## INTRODUCTION

Rhinoceros husbandry is a challenging, ever-evolving field. In 1996 the Association of Zoos and Aquariums' Rhino Advisory Group (AZA RAG) and the International Rhino Foundation (IRF) collaborated to produce the first Rhinoceros Husbandry Resource Manual. In 2010, the AZA RAG and the IRF decided to write a new manual since research and experience had transformed husbandry practices. The original 1996 document was an excellent reference for people caring for rhinos worldwide. The depth of rhino management knowledge has increased, including advancements in tools and techniques as well as research projects that have brought forth other ideas about care, welfare, enrichment, and nutrition (Metrione and Eyres, 2014). Rhino health and welfare have been the theme of discussions in the rhino community in places like the International Rhino Keepers (IRKA) Conferences. Although everyone has the same goal to keep rhino populations healthy in human care, each person, from zookeeper to dietician, has different thoughts behind what makes a healthy rhino. With the continuing decline of rhino populations worldwide, understanding and providing the best care for rhinos in human care is vital to the future of rhinos.

## INTERVIEWS

To learn more about how rhino keepers assess and perceive the condition of rhinos, I spoke to several rhino keepers. Their responses were very similar when asked how they would describe a healthy rhino. Every keeper talked about good appetite, social interactions, interacting with the animal care staff, normal feces and urine, body condition, and “normal” behaviors for an individual rhino. However, it was evident from the interviews that even if a rhino is not exhibiting disease symptoms, it doesn't mean they are healthy. In addition, because they are not showing signs of illness or stress, should it be assumed that a rhino is healthy? These animals evolved in their native region, where they did not have veterinarians to take care of them. As a survival mechanism, rhinos hide their illnesses because illness is a weakness, and weaknesses would get them attacked or killed in the animal kingdom (Tizard, 2008). When caring for rhinos, testing blood, feces, or other bodily fluids and daily observations of physical details are crucial because a keeper may not know that an animal is sick until it is too late.

I asked the keepers what signs they look for when an animal is not feeling well and the top three indicators they think about when considering whether it is healthy. Healthy appetite was at the top of the list, followed by activity levels and reproductive health. Others mentioned were body weight and condition, herd communication, and how bright and alert the rhinos appeared. The signs they look for to see if an animal isn't feeling well were similar indicators but expressed in different ways, e.g., does the animal have a low appetite, poor or off fecal and urine output, exhibit little movement, or is away from the



herd and not interacting with the keepers. It is essential to understand that determining the health of animals needs to be done on an individual basis because each animal can and will show signs in its own way (Komdeur, 2006). For example, one rhino could be less active and slower than another, and because the slower one is not showing the same signs of activity, it doesn't mean it's unhealthy.

By using various tools and resources to assess an animal, keepers can better gauge rhinos' health because there isn't a single evaluation tool that will be complete and accurate for every animal. Instead, every zoo has access to or uses different tools or assessments to record an animal's health. The most popular tools for evaluation reported were body score and weight sheets, quality of life score sheets, blood sampling, fecal sampling, physical examinations, and animal welfare assessments. In response to “Does an animal's age or preexisting health condition affect the evaluation?”, the resounding answer was yes, age does play a role in assessing an animal's health and well-being. Consequently, geriatric animals are monitored more frequently to ensure their quality of life is up to the facility's standard.

When asked if they thought their facilities were doing well and what could be improved, the responses were positive. The interviewees believed their facilities were doing well because



they could replicate the natural behaviors and environment in human care; examples given were grazing, social interactions, wallowing, herd settings, naturally reproducing, and foraging. The facilities also provide the best diet and management available to them, and some said that ideally, there would be more space, but since breeding has been successful, the area becomes limited.

### CONCLUSION

One keeper pointed out that a rhino in a smaller enclosure may be as healthy as one in a larger area based on different standards. The same applies to a rhino which weighs more; being overweight may be beneficial in the situation provided to them, and each facility has to manage and assess depending on their space and their animals. This point helps highlight that as much as the rhino community tries to set standards for animal care and welfare, we have flexible standards because each animal is different. An interviewee shared that the reproductive system is one of the first bodily systems to shut down in an unhealthy animal, so if animals are reproducing, especially females, they are generally healthy.

This conversation contributes to the work of the Animal Welfare Committee (AWC), whose mission is to help advance the science and practices of animal welfare and educate the public about the evidence-based welfare efforts that are in place in zoos (Silver, 2021). From the interviews and this article, I hope that I have helped continue the conversation

of what is a healthy animal and animal welfare. Beth Posta, a former chair of the AWC, said that “this will be a living process. It’s going to be a work in progress for many, many years. As we learn more, we’ll put that knowledge to work to ensure that animals in our care experience good welfare” (Silver, 2021).

### DISCLAIMER

The information in this article is from interviews with rhino keepers and the rhino keepers’ personal experiences.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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### PHOTO CREDITS

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