

Rhino Conservation Mission

Lumbering from within the boma's walls toward us are 2 majestic creatures each weighing in excess of 300 lbs. They are hungry and ready to feed. I approach the barricade separating us to feed them. As they approach they release a high pitched squealing sound in anticipation of their upcoming meal. Then they start to suck down their 2 liter bottles of milk formula.

Rose and Rubybelle are two orphan rhino calves I had the opportunity to care for during the 2017 Christmas Break near Nelspruit in Mpumalanga, South Africa. Both of these rhino calves arrived at Care for Wild Rhino Sanctuary within the prior 6 months. Their mothers had been victim of poachers who killed them to obtain their horns. Care for Wild Rhino Sanctuary's "mission is to save black and [southern] white rhinos from extinction... [They] are committed to rescue abandoned, injured, and orphaned rhinos and to rehabilitate them wherever possible... [Since its founding in 2001 it] has grown to be the largest rhino sanctuary and orphanage in the world" (Care for Wild Africa).

World Wildlife Fund states that the biggest threat to rhinos is poaching. In Vietnam, rhino horns are ground up for use as a traditional oriental medicine or as an expensive gift item. In China, rhino horns are used for art carvings, as an investment or as a status symbol of success and wealth. The middle class is growing in Vietnam and China so more people can afford purchase of rhino horns. This increase in rhino horn demand has led to a lucrative black market since legally selling rhino horns was banned internationally in 1977. Widespread poaching now occurs in South Africa to supply rhino horns on the black market. Poaching of rhinos in South Africa started increasing in 2008 and peaked to over 1200 rhinos in 2014 (PoachingFacts). During the past 10 years over 7000 rhinos were confirmed poached in South Africa (PoachingFacts). There are likely many more poached rhinos whose remains are not found due to the dense forest or scavenged by animals (PoachingFacts). As a result, the southern

white rhino population is estimated to be less than 20,700 (PoachingFacts) and are “classified as [a] near threatened [species]” (World Wildlife Fund). The black rhinos population is estimated to be less than 4,885 (PoachingFacts) and “considered [a] critically endangered [species]” (World Wildlife Fund).

I became involved with Care for Wild Rhino Sanctuary and their mission to save rhinos from extinction by chance. I am a senior in high school with a career goal of becoming a veterinarian. I have volunteer and work experience providing care to companion animals and farm animals. In my endeavors to broaden my animal care experience to include exotic animals I searched online for mission trips with animals. Care for Wild Rhino Sanctuary stood out since it offered me the opportunity to provide hands on care to orphaned rhinos.

I raised \$2,500 to fund my own mission trip with proceeds from selling my ski and softball equipment, organizing a garage sale and selling my old baby clothes at a Mom2Mom sale. A portion of the trip cost was used for rhino care supplies at the sanctuary. The most impactful donation to the sanctuary was volunteering 2 weeks of farmhand labor at the sanctuary. When I was there it was summer so we worked in 100F summer heat, took moderately warm to cold showers and slept in non-air conditioned quarters. However, the experience of helping the orphan rhinos made the lack of creature comforts insignificant.

The typical workday at the sanctuary is from 6 am until 6 pm. The day is spent preparing bottles and feeding the baby rhinos 6 times a day and preparing dry feed (hay) for the older rhinos; collecting leftover hay from the prior day to determine if the rhinos are eating properly or if ill due to a change in diet; and cleaning bomas of feces to maintain clean living environments and inspecting the stools for signs of parasites or illness. The orphan rhinos I had cared for were nursed with milk formula in the ICU due to the absence of their mothers. During my stay I assisted with transport of these rhinos out of the ICU boma to a larger boma which was the next step in their rehabilitation. While Rose was sedated during the move, I monitored her respiration rate to ensure that it did not drop too low which could be

fatal due to too much anesthesia. If the respiration rate started to increase, that provided indication that the anesthesia was wearing off and the rhino may need to be sedated further if the transport to the larger boma needed more time to complete. In the larger boma the rhinos have more area to roam while still being quarantined from other animals until it is determined that they are not infected with tuberculosis. Once the rhinos mature they will be released into the wild on the big game reserve to safely roam free, guarded by the sanctuary's Anti-Poaching Unit (APU).

There are many ways that we can help save rhinos from extinction. Care for Wild Rhino Sanctuary requires passionate volunteers to keep the place running and saving lives of rhinos. A mission trip as I have described is the most tangible way to assist. During my mission trip I met a variety of people from around the world who had similar interest in helping the rhinos. There were even families with children whose vacation was a mission trip. This is an opportunity to interact with these animals in an intimate way that you cannot experience on a sight-seeing safari. Picture and videos from Care for Wild Rhino Sanctuary can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/careforwild/> which provides current events happening at the sanctuary.

If you cannot afford the expense of a mission trip a donation to Care for Wild Rhino Sanctuary can be made online at <https://www.careforwild.co.za/> to help save the rhinos. At this website you can read more about the organization and its mission. The cost of a growing rhino is over \$1,100 per month not including veterinary care expenses. You can adopt an orphan rhino and you will receive information on your adopted rhino, pictures and updates on their progress. There are many other expenses which you can allocate your donation to defray costs which include Anti-Poaching Unit ranger, K-9 dog, horse for mounted rider and miscellaneous wish list supplies. Any size donation will help make a difference.

Education using study results which debunk the belief that rhino horns provide medicinal benefit is another way to reduce the poaching threat to rhinos. In 2012, Africa Check cited multiple reports which indicated rhino horns provided no medicinal benefit. Pharmaceutical company

Hoffmann-LaRoche in 1983 and researchers at the Chinese University in Hong Kong in 1990 published results that rhino horn did not reduce fever. The American College of Traditional Chinese Medicine confirmed at a 2011 Coalition Against Wildlife Trafficking meeting that “rhino horn is no longer approved for use by the Traditional Chinese Medicine profession and there is no traditional use, nor any evidence for the effectiveness of, rhino horn as a cure for cancer” (Becker). New studies with rhino horn could be performed on gout and rheumatoid arthritis to increase the number of ailments that rhino horn has been studied on and confirmed that it does not provide health benefits. Changing people’s misconception about the medicinal benefit of rhino horns will reduce the demand and thus reduce the monetary incentive to poach rhinos.

Dehorning rhinos is another method currently being used to prevent rhino poaching. While I struggle to accept cutting off the rhino’s horn and the pain that the rhino suffers, this is an effective countermeasure to curb poaching. The poacher’s goal is to obtain the horn without care for the rhino’s life. They brutally take the rhino down, remove the horn and leave it to die a slow and painful death. Dehorning a rhino in the care of a veterinarian and aiding the rhino in its healing is better than being poached. There have been instances where poachers still killed a dehorned rhino out of anger of their wasted effort tracking a dehorned rhino. Hopefully, the numbers of dehorned rhinos that are spared greatly outnumber those that poachers kill in vengeance.

From my mission trip to Care for Wild Rhino Sanctuary I have seen the injuries inflicted on rhinos at the hands of poachers and the orphan rhinos who need to be nursed in the absence of their mothers. Care for Wild Rhino Sanctuary has inspired me to spread awareness about the plight of rhinos and the risk of extinction. When in college studying Animal Science I plan to advocate for a Study Abroad trip associated with rhinos to increase awareness with my fellow students. This experience has left me considering a veterinary career associated with animal conservation.

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