



David M. Jones, DVM  
Zoo Director

## **N.C. ZOO'S ELEPHANT AND RHINO EXPANSION PROJECT COULD SERVE AS BLUEPRINT FOR PACHYDERM EXHIBITS NATIONWIDE**

In 2005, the North Carolina Zoo announced a mammoth undertaking, one that may well serve as the prototype for a new wave in the captive care and management of elephants and rhinos in American zoos.

An \$8.5 million expansion and improvement project for the zoo's African Elephant and Southern White Rhinoceros habitats and holding facilities, along with changes to the adjoining African Plains exhibit for antelope, has remolded the existing exhibits into a new complex called the Watani Grasslands (a Swahili term meaning "fatherland"). Nearly \$7 million of the project's \$8.5 million cost was raised through private contributions to the N.C. Zoological Society, the zoo's private non-profit support organization. Construction began in November 2005 with the grand opening held April 4, 2008.

With the project now complete, the former elephant and rhinoceros exhibits of 3.5-acres each have been combined to create a single, seven-acre habitat just for elephants. The new elephant exhibit now has a large bathing pool, lots of shade and abundant grass and other vegetation for these gentle giants. Meanwhile, the rhinos have been relocated to the 37-acre African Plains habitat to share that space with 10 species of antelope in what is now a spectacular exhibit on its own. New and expanded educational graphics and interpretive information, along with total immersion viewing areas, has also improved the elephant and rhino viewing experience for zoo visitors.

Equally as important to the project is a new elephant barn—a \$2.5 million, state-of-the-art facility complete with calving rooms, heated floors, two bull stalls and a large community room. The old barn that previously housed both elephants and rhinos has been renovated to accommodate just the rhino herd.

These improvements have enabled the zoo to increase its current collection to as many as 10 animals of each species. Certainly such an increase in numbers of two of the zoo world's most popular animals is expected to have a positive impact on zoo attendance in the coming years. But much more importantly, it will dramatically improve the N.C. Zoo's ability to breed both elephants and rhinos, placing the state zoo at the forefront of the effort to sustain a viable captive population of both species as well as contributing to the scientific knowledge needed to conserve wild populations.

The renovation and expansion of the zoo's elephant and rhino facilities could not have come at a more appropriate time. An ongoing debate over the captive care and management of elephants among animal rights organizations and member institutions





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of the national Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) has become a topic for national media coverage.

The decision by several major zoos, including Detroit, San Francisco and Philadelphia, to discontinue exhibiting elephants, has spurred animal-rights groups to call for the removal of elephants from all U.S. zoos. Officials in Detroit and San Francisco cited the cold climates of their cities, which prevented their elephants from being outdoors more than a few months a year, among their reasons for removing elephants. Inadequate space to build larger, more naturalistic exhibits in these land-locked city zoos were also listed as factors.

In addition to the questions of temperature, space and concrete exhibit surfaces that can damage the animals' feet, zoo opponents have cited the long distances, often 20-30 miles, traveled daily by wild elephant herds as a factor that zoos can never replicate. But AZA experts have countered that wild elephants travel in search of food and water--not because their physiology demands such daily activity.

Still, the fact is that elephants have traditionally not bred well in captivity. Despite being featured in most American zoos of any size for more than 100 years, the first successful birth of an African elephant did not occur until 1978, and few have occurred since. Presently, the population of African elephants in 48 AZA institutions includes 128 females and only 23 males. But the majority of females are approaching the end of their reproductive life span, and many of the males are not viable breeders. Few elephant calves have been born and even fewer have survived long after birth.

In response, AZA created an Elephant Task Force in 1998 to address the problem and propose solutions. The results were new Elephant Management Standards adopted in 2001 that now are part of requirements for AZA accreditation. Among other standards, they require that zoos housing elephants have at least three females because of their highly social nature. They also require that zoos breeding elephants keep calves with the mother for at least four years.

But the Watani Grasslands project has placed the N.C. Zoo far ahead of even current AZA standards for elephants. The size of the new exhibit, along with specially designed facilities both inside the habitat and in the off-exhibit holding areas, provide the elephants with plenty of activities, both physical and mental, to assure their well being.

State-of-the-art technology enables keepers to not only provide the animals with the best veterinary care and husbandry available, but also helps the staff gain knowledge about the animals that can contribute to improved breeding, nutrition and physical well-being. Such information not only helps the captive population, but also can potentially improve the conservation of wild elephant populations.

In the final analysis, however, it is the educational impact of elephants on zoo visitors that may hold the key to the long-term survival of the species. Despite rapid improvements and growth in technologies such as satellite and high-definition





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television, or IMAX theater experiences, nothing can replace the personal experience of looking up into the eyes of a real, 11-foot tall, 10,000-pound elephant.

Zoo elephants serve as ambassadors for their wild counterparts, helping to inform the public about the need to conserve elephants and their wild habitats. That personal experience is what prompts the public to continue to care about conservation. And that could be the largest payoff for the zoo's investment.

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4401 Zoo Parkway • Asheboro, NC 27205 • 336.879.7000 • [www.nczoo.org](http://www.nczoo.org)