



Creating the Nation's first BioPark

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Letter From the Desk of David Challinor
April 3, 1990

Among the routine activities that are seldom witnessed or even considered by zoo visitors is the transportation of animals. Large animals in particular require much advanced planning before being moved from one zoo to another. Such transfers are necessary to exchange animals for breeding loans or exhibit, or when zoo surplus progeny are sold.

Mature giraffes are the most complicated animals to move because of their height, and their itinerary must be carefully checked for low bridges and power lines. Thus most zoos transport giraffes shortly after weaning when they are still of a manageable height.

Toni, the Indian elephant we received from Scranton, PA, was shipped last Fall in a large moving van with her keeper in attendance for the duration of the drive. This trip worked well, but you can imagine the contingencies that arise when such creatures as venomous snakes escape from their shipping crates.

The National Zoo has been very fortunate in avoiding such nightmares, but occasionally the transportation of large mammals has produced unexpected results. For example, some years ago the Zoo had a pair of white rhinos called Bill and Lucy after the then Director of the Zoo, Bill Mann, and his wife. We had for years hoped that they would produce young, but they never did. We eventually learned a great deal more about the reproductive physiology of rhinos and that their lack of breeding success was probably attributed to the fact that male rhinos have a reproductive cycle as distinct as females. Noah and his ark notwithstanding, two by two does not work well for rhinos, unless their respective cycles are synchronous. In the wild, with many males and females cycling, synchrony is not a problem.

On learning that the San Diego Zoo's breeding center had a small herd of white rhinos that were successfully reproducing, the National Zoo decided to move Bill and Lucy there to join the herd. The Zoo built two large crates and installed them in the



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rhinos' paddock. Each day the two pachyderms had to enter the crates to eat. When the appropriate time arrived, the doors of the crates were shut behind them and off they went by truck to San Diego. When they arrived about 3 days later, the doors were opened and Bill and Lucy backed out, looked up at the California sunshine, and promptly bred for the first time in the decade they had been together. Ted Reed, Zoo Director at the time, was quoted as exclaiming on hearing the news of this encounter, "Heck, if I'd known that that was all it took, I'd have loaded them up and driven them around the beltway for 3 days!"

It turns out that crate confinement and release often trigger such action in some animals, and a few years later the same phenomenon occurred when we released a pair of bongo antelopes in their paddock here at the Zoo after a lengthy trip by air from Africa.

There are still innumerable mysteries to be solved concerning the reproductive physiology of wild animals. As we begin to unravel the complex factors that stimulate animals to breed, we improve our chances of perpetuating many rare species in zoos. If successful, we can then mark time to protect and prepare habitats for their reintroduction to the wild. I will be writing you more about the efforts of our researchers in this fascinating field. I do hope that I will see many of you on May 10 at my house for supper and/or at our Council meeting on Friday, May 11.