

Emily Sexson – Education Specialist – 05/03/17 – Cinco de Rhino!

On May 5th, 1862, the Mexican Army defeated the French forces at the Battle of Puebla. This year marks the 155th anniversary of this momentous occasion that has been celebrated since with a variety of annual traditions. No matter what you do on the fifth of May, I hope you can take the time to celebrate another occasion known as Cinco de Rhino! Lee Richardson Zoo is home to two black rhinos named Johari and Jabari. The pair was brought together at our zoo as part of a Species Survival Plan through the Association of Zoos and Aquariums with hope for breeding opportunities in the future.

Cinco is Spanish for five, and with five different species of rhino, the fifth of May is a great time to learn about these unique and massive animals. There are two species of rhino native to Africa, the black rhino and the white rhino. While both species are actually gray in color, an easy way to spot the difference between the two is by looking at their lips. White rhinos are larger and have blunt square lips, whereas black rhinos are a bit smaller and have a prehensile lip that is pointed that they use to browse on trees and shrubs. White rhino were once on the brink of extinction with less than 50 left in the wild. Thankfully, due to extensive conservation efforts their numbers have increased. The black rhino is critically endangered with less than 5,000 individuals alive in the wild.

The three other species of rhino are native to Asia. Greater one-horned rhino are known for their ability to swim and are found in India and Nepal. Like their name suggests, these rhinos have only have one horn. Their scientific name *Rhinoceros unicornis* is proof that unicorns do exist, although a bit more rotund than we'd originally thought. But hey, chubby unicorns need love too! India Rhino Vision 2020 is a conservation group hoping to increase the population of these rhinos to 3,000 by the year 2020. The Sumatran rhino is unlike the other five species in that it has much more hair on its body. This critically endangered species only has 100 individuals remaining in the wild and is native to Sumatra and Malaysia. These rhinos are found in the dense tropical forests and spend much of their time resting in mud wallows.

The fifth species is the Javan rhino. This rhino is considered to be the rarest large mammal on Earth with less than 58 total individuals in the wild. The Javan rhino is native to Indonesia and has a mosaic pattern on its back that makes its skin look almost like scales. Their skin folds are unique and make them look almost armored in appearance. While all five species of rhino have thick skin, it isn't enough to prevent habitat loss, and poaching for their horn.

No matter the species, all rhino horn is made of the same material called keratin, the same protein that our fingernails and hair are made of. Keratin has no medicinal benefits, and although this has been scientifically proven, it does not prevent some people from believing otherwise. Because rhino horn is so sought after, it is worth more than its weight in gold on the black market. Many are willing to risk their own lives as well as killing off an entire species for it.

In 1862 the Mexican army, with few weapons and only around 4,000 soldiers were able to defeat the well-armed French forces that had over twice the amount of men. The odds were stacked against the Mexican army, but they were able to fight against what was thought to be an inevitable loss. Today, five species of rhino are facing their own battle, a fight against extinction. It's up to us to help them win. While most of us don't have the ability to fly to Africa or Asia to fight against poachers face to face, or to repair and restore habitat on site, we do have the ability to advocate for rhinos right here at home. With our voices we can spread education and awareness, we can use our voting power to keep legislation against the illegal trade of wildlife including rhino horn, and of course we can use our money. Money talks, and when we purchase items that come from sustainable sources we are making the choice to help not only rhinos, but all wildlife.

The odds may feel stacked against rhinos but together we can save species. Many species, such as the bald eagle, have made a triumphant comeback through focused conservation efforts put into

action by people. I implore you to visit Johari and Jabari at the zoo and learn more about all rhinos and how we can help secure their future. Feliz Cinco de Mayo y Feliz Cinco de Rhino!