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Press release

The Last of Their Kind: Mission Rhino Rescue

Tierpark Berlin Establishes Research Station for International Species Conservation Program; Similar Facility Is Being Built in ZOO Dvůr Králové

The Northern White Rhinoceros is on the brink of extinction; only two females remain, living in a nature reserve in Kenya. Without collaborative action, this rhinoceros species, once native to Central Africa, will disappear from the Earth forever. Although the extinction of this subspecies of the White Rhinoceros seems inevitable, researchers from the international BioRescue team, led by the Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research (Leibniz-IZW), Germany, and coordinated by ZOO Dvůr Králové, Czech Republic, are working on developing and utilizing new methods of vital reproduction for wildlife to save these ecologically valuable giants from complete extinction. Tierpark Berlin will now cooperate with these scientists to implement a crucial step in the project, which will hopefully result in one of the first calves of this endangered species.

A New Rhino Research Station at the Heart of Tierpark Berlin

A Rhino Research Station is being built at Tierpark Berlin, where Northern White Rhinos will be carried by females of the closely related Southern White Rhinoceros. Up to six adult Southern White Rhinos will move to a new, approximately 3-hectare rhino facility in the zoo, ensuring the survival of their highly endangered relatives. "The story of the Northern White Rhino, with its two last surviving individuals, has already touched people worldwide – it's hard to comprehend that we are on the verge of losing such a large and fascinating creature," explains Zoo and Tierpark Director Dr Andreas Knieriem. "Since we humans have brought this rhino to its current desperate situation with our actions, it is now up to us to use every available means to prevent this animal from vanishing from our planet," he adds.

The new rhino facility at Tierpark will also feature a research station to provide the necessary veterinary care for the animals. Researchers need to have protected access to the rhinos at all times to conduct procedures such as ultrasound examinations without anesthesia. The first Southern White Rhinos will arrive at the new rhino facility in Tierpark Berlin from other zoological institutions in Europe starting in 2026.

Berlin's research station for rhino will not be the only one. A parallel project will be implemented at the Czech Zoo Dvůr Králové. The last two Northern White Rhinos in Kenya, Najin and her daughter Fatu, were born in the Czech zoo and were relocated to Ol Pejeta Conservancy, Kenya, in 2009. "Without zoological gardens, the Northern White Rhinoceros would be already extinct now. Even before we went to Kenya to collect first oocytes, all the tools and protocols we use for producing northern white rhino embryos were developed in



close cooperation with European zoos. It's great to see that zoos will continue to play a crucial role in saving this charismatic animal," says Jan Stejskal, the BioRescue coordinator and Director of International Projects at Zoo Dvůr Králové. The rhino facility in Dvůr Králové that will be involved in the program is now being reconstructed and it is expected to be finished by the end of 2025.

Optimizing Expertise and Infrastructure for Innovations

The team led by Prof. Thomas Hildebrandt is confident that the joint rescue project will succeed. "We are optimistic that small rhinos will be born this way, preserving this subspecies," predicts Prof. Hildebrandt. He adds, "It's about much more than just the Northern White Rhinoceros. This could be the first step for many more rescue operations. If we succeed in saving this rhino from extinction, hundreds of other species will benefit directly and indirectly."

This unique rescue operation is made possible only through the use of the latest reproductive technology. In January 2024, the BioRescue team succeeded for the first time in creating a pregnancy in a white rhinoceros via artificial means using a newly developed method. The embryo of a Southern White Rhinoceros created by the researchers was successfully implanted in a Southern White Rhino female, paving the way for the first attempt with an embryo of a Northern White Rhinoceros. All hopes for the Northern White Rhinoceros now rest on the embryos currently stored at minus 196 degrees Celsius in biobanks in Berlin and southern Italy.

Construction in Tierpark Berlin, which is set to begin in autumn 2024, is being supported with 3 million euros from the Senate Department for Finance as part of funds allocated for innovation. Completion is scheduled for spring 2026. The new rhino facility will cover nearly 3 hectares and can house up to six adult Southern White Rhinos. Existing barn and animal facility structures on the site will be cost-effectively converted or expanded, keeping costs as low as possible. A total of 5 million euros is budgeted for the mentioned construction measures.

To mark the launch of this joint project, a life-sized rhino sculpture made from recycled materials was unveiled. African artist Raymond Chataira created the sculpture from old engine parts and discarded tool pieces.



Planned Area for the Rhino Research Station at Tierpark Berlin

