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Henry Vilas Zoo Is Sad to Announce the Passing of George the Rhinoceros

One of the longest-term residents of the zoo

The Henry Vilas Zoo is mourning the loss of George, the 44 year old white rhinoceros, one of its oldest and longest-term residents, Dane County Executive Joe Parisi announced today.

“We will miss George,” said Dane County Executive Joe Parisi. “He was a beloved member of our community. I want to thank our Henry Vilas Zoo staff for their great care of George over the last 40 years. This is a tremendous loss for our zoo family.”

George was one of the ten oldest living white rhinoceros in the North American Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) accredited zoos, and had been closely monitored by animal care and veterinary staff during his elder years. Recently it became clear to the animal care staff that it was necessary to make the difficult decision to humanely euthanize George due to his deteriorating health and comfort.

Beloved by zoo staff and visitors, George arrived at Henry Vilas Zoo in 1976 with female rhinoceros, Gracie and quickly became an iconic resident of the zoo. George was always a favorite amongst staff and visitors due to his engaging personality. After his companion, Gracie passed in 2012 at the age of 42; Henry Vilas Zoo consulted with the Rhinoceros Species Survival Plan (SSP) who recommended George to remain a bachelor at the zoo. Adult male white rhinos are solitary in the wild and George continued to enjoy mud baths, lying in the sun and was always happy to spend time with his keepers, especially his primary keeper, Shane Elsinger, who has cared for George for over two decades.

White rhinos are found in Africa and typically only live 20-30 years in the wild. All rhino species are facing pressure from unprecedented poaching and there are only about 20,000 white rhinos left in Africa. According to Adam Eyres, the Rhino SSP Chair, “thanks to excellent care in AZA zoos white rhinos have continued to expand their life expectancy from their mid 30’s in the 1990’s to ages more closely related to George’s.” However, George far surpassed even AZA zoo life expectancy due to the excellent care received by Henry Vilas Zoo staff.

The zoo has been at the cutting edge of rhino reproductive studies. Partnering with world rhino experts, Henry Vilas Zoo was the first zoo in North America to build a chute to allow reproductive examinations over 15 years ago.

“George was an iconic member of our zoo family that over his forty plus years at the zoo connected with millions of visitors including myself as a child in the 1970’s. He and Gracie sparked my desire to work in zoos and help conservation efforts of all animal species.” said Henry Vilas Zoo Director Ronda Schwetz. “He will be sorely missed by us all and was an ambassador for his species. We hope his legacy will live on.”

The zoo will continue to work closely with the Rhinoceros SSP on next steps to acquire rhinos for our institution while continuing to spread the message of and support rhino conservation efforts worldwide.

To honor the legacy of George the rhino, Friends of Henry Vilas Zoo and Henry Vilas Zoo have announced a “George the Rhino” fund, which will be used to support the International Rhino Foundation and a memorial on zoo grounds. “Henry Vilas Zoo has led two conservation-oriented trips to Tanzania affording local residents the opportunity to connect directly with these majestic animals in the wild” said Friends of the Zoo Executive Director Alison Prange. “The International Rhino Foundation has a direct impact on rhino conservation efforts in Tanzania and across Africa.” If you would like to give a gift in memory of George, please visit vilaszoo.org/donate.

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