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Rhino bones dug up by UW

Picnic Point was site of '83 burial

By Kathryn Kingsbury

Correspondent for The Capital Times

The malodorous scent wafting through Picnic Point Wednesday afternoon was one Madisonians almost never get a chance to smell: a decomposing rhinoceros.

The UW-Madison Zoological Museum buried a 3,200-pound female white rhinoceros near Picnic Point in 1983 with the intention of excavating the bones after the animal's soft tissue had decomposed. The rhino, who was born in the wild in Africa, died of pancreatitis at the age of 26 in the Milwaukee County Zoo.

Carcasses destined for the Zoological Museum's bone collection are usually fed to the museum's insect colonies, whose job is to pick the bones clean.

But this rhino was just too much for the flesh-eating beetles, said John Dallman, a retired curator for the research museum. So it went into the ground instead.

He headed the 1983 burial and led an excavation in 1995 just before his retirement, wanting to get the bones into the university's collection before leaving his position. But nature had not yet finished its work.

The ligaments were so intact that "if we'd picked up the entire skeleton, it would have looked like a marionette," Dallman said as he stood perched on the edge of the six-foot-deep excavation pit. He waved his hands to illustrate.

Dallman and his crew reburied the rhino after that first excavation, but before starting out this week, he pledged to remove it no matter what.

The smell was much worse the last time around, Dallman assured visitors Wednesday. That was little comfort to Richard Slaughter, a UW geologist who had been working in the pit for the last five hours.

"I can still smell it," he said as he reached into the dirt for another bone.

There weren't so many ligaments this time, but Slaughter and his fellow digger, researcher Joe Skulan, found plenty of adipocere, body fat that has been turned into a soap-like substance due to an interaction with lye in the ground.



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Researcher Joe Skulan hands up the pelvic bone of a white rhinoceros to John Dallman, retired curator for the UW-Madison Zoological Museum. The dig took place Wednesday on Picnic Point.

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They also found toe pads, skin, and a cache of internal organs that had been sheltered from the surrounding dirt by the animal's ribcage. "There's a cave inside the abdominal cavity," Skulan remarked in an awed voice upon first peering under the top set of ribs.

Time had removed much of the moisture from the organs, transforming them into unidentifiable leathery disks. Slaughter noted that they were, however, still slimy. And one or two were nonetheless being feasted on by small brown bugs.

He said some of the soft tissue would be reburied and some would be brought back to campus for further examination. Dallman has been involved in the burial and excavation of several large mammals over the course of his career, including elephants and a giraffe. The giraffe and one elephant had also been buried near Picnic Point, but were both out of the ground by the time the rhino went in.

The elephant took only seven years to decompose because most of the flesh had been removed ahead of time, Dallman said. The rhinoceros, on the other hand, had been buried



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Dallman brushes off the bone.

almost fully intact.

The reason for that, Dallman said, was the lack of facilities for dealing with such a large corpse. "We couldn't get it up to the prep room," he said.

The skeleton, which Dallman hopes to have out the ground by Thursday, will need a little more cleaning back at the Zoological Museum. Fine layers of muscle and tendons still coat many of the bones.

They will be handed over to the bug colonies after almost 20 years. Dallman estimates it will be another month and a half before the insects have completed their work.