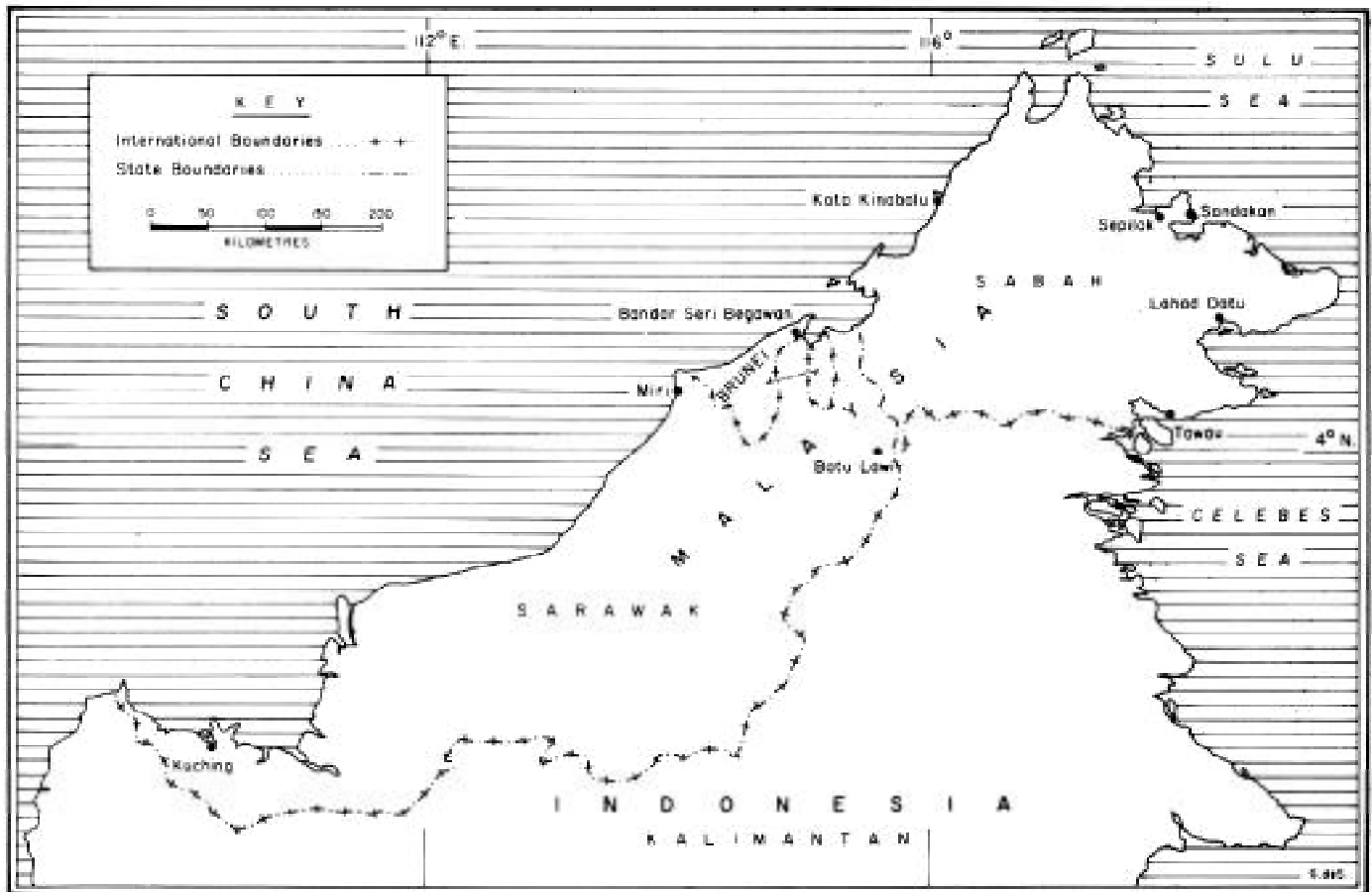


# The Rhino Product Trade in Northern and Western Borneo

Esmond Bradley Martin



Northern and western Borneo, comprising the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak and the Sultanate of Brunei, have carried on a trade in rhino products, both internally and externally, for centuries; but it appears that only Sabah has a significant rhino population left today. Having surveyed the trade in Brunei and Sabah in 1986, I returned to Borneo in July 1988, to carry out further investigations and to try and discover what measures can be taken to impede the trade.

## Sabah

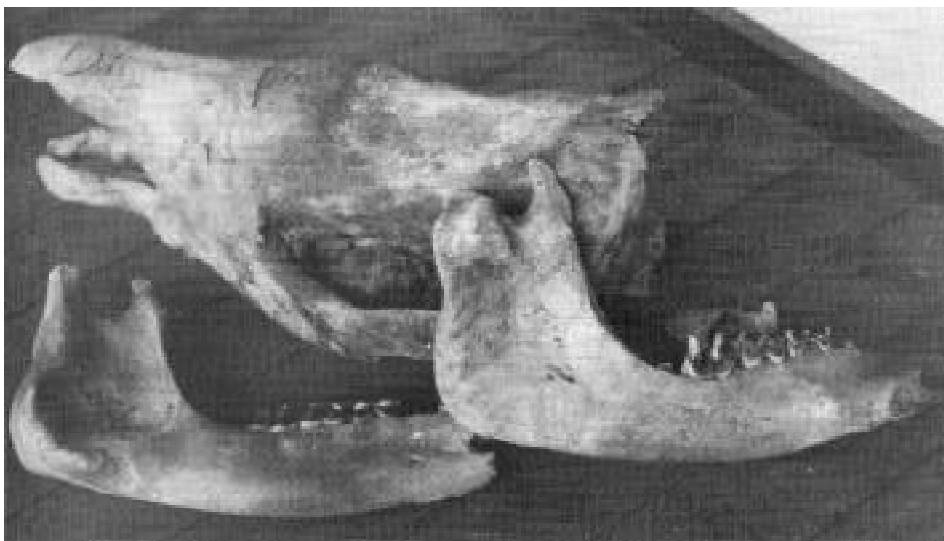
The official estimate of the number of rhinos in Sabah state is 30; however, some people believe that there could be close to a hundred. It is generally agreed that the majority of the rhinos are in the southeast of Sabah and that these are the largest grouping on the island. There has never been a census of Sabah's rhinos, so the figures are only guesses. On the other hand, we know from wildlife traders in Borneo that a minimum of ten pairs of horn are annually exported from Sabah.

Most of the hunters are older Iban tribesmen who migrated from Sarawak to Sabah in the 1950s, in search of jobs or agricultural land in rural areas. They have recently been encouraged by dealers to intensify their poaching activities because of a growing demand for rhino horn in Taiwan which has in turn increased

the prices being offered for it in Singapore and Hong Kong. When the Ibans hear about the presence of a Sumatran rhino in a certain area, they get together in gangs of three to ten and go into the forest, taking with them 12-bore shotguns, cooking utensils, salt, sugar, rice and coffee. They are good trackers who are able to identify rhino spoor — not just footprints which do not last long in the moist soil, but also vegetation which has been damaged by browsing rhinos. Once they have learned the particular habits of the rhino they are seeking, there is a very good chance that they will eventually come across it. They are willing to spend a month or more in their search, and they usually plan to ambush the animal in a mud wallow, where they shoot it, remove the two horns, nails, some hide, meat and bones.

## The Value of a Rhino Horn

It is difficult to ascertain present prices being paid to hunters for the rhino products they supply to traders, but I did learn that a poaching gang northeast of Tawau received the equivalent of US\$ 7,300 for the pair of horns, nails, a good portion of hide and a few bones in 1987; northwest of Tawau, in the highlands, another gang made US\$ 2,700 from the sale of just one horn in 1988. In the town of Tawau, which has a population of about 100,000, there are three traders who buy rhino products from poachers.



*Skull of a Sumatran rhino*

According to reliable sources in Sabah, only a few cases of rhino poaching are specifically known by the authorities since 1978 because there are not enough rangers patrolling the state. There are just 32 for an area the size of Austria. Even when poachers openly sell to middlemen, there is little success in apprehending the offenders. For example, in 1978, an employee working in a timber company killed a Sumatran rhino with a shotgun and sold the pair of horns, nails and a little hide to the Chinese owner of a general store for about US\$ 1,500, but news of this reached the wildlife officers too late for anyone to be arrested. In 1981, a young Sumatran rhino was trapped by a group of timber camp workers who brought the valuable parts into the town of Lahad Datu for sale. Wildlife officers heard that they were being kept in a private house which they raided. They found the rhino hide but nothing else. They then set up a surveillance of the Chinese medicine shops in Lahad Datu but failed to catch the poacher who was trying to sell the nails to one when he suddenly became suspicious and fled.

### **The “Chinese Connection” in Tawau**

Most of the Sumatran rhino horn exported from Sabah is handled by a syndicate of Chinese dealers conveniently located in the port of Tawau which is in the extreme southeast of the state, on the Indonesian border. This is a rough frontier town with numerous legal and illegal immigrants from the Philippines and Indonesia milling around the streets. Some of these immigrants work on agricultural plantations and in timber camps, but there is quite a large number involved in smuggling cigarettes, clothing, spices and handicrafts from port to port in small fast boats.

Tawau has other assets which also contribute to its role as the major entrepot for rhino horn in Borneo. There is an airport serving Kalimantan, another source for rhino products, and there are good roads into the hinterland where the poachers operate. Also, there is a relatively large and wealthy Chinese community with close links to Singapore. Furthermore, the Wildlife Department is far away in Kota Kinabalu.

It appears that one of the members of the Tawau syndicate is the owner of a Chinese restaurant which specializes in preparing

medicinal stews. Another is probably one of the more prominent medicine shop owners. At the time of my visit he was offering the only Sumatran rhino horn for sale in a shop; it was priced at US\$ 20,851 a kilo retail. He gave me a lot of information, but I was unable to find out from him who might be the third member of the syndicate, although he confirmed that there was a third. He told me the horn and nails collected in Tawau come from rhinos killed in Sumatra as well as in Sabah and that these products are exported primarily to Singapore but occasionally also to Hong Kong. Relatives of the syndicate members flying out of Tawau carry them in suitcases and deliver them to pre-

arranged contacts. The medicine shop owner showed me some photographs taken in Singapore of a trader with ten Sumatran rhino horns which he claimed had come from Tawau a couple of years ago. When I told him that I would like to have copies, he refused because he did not want to part with any which had his “friend” in them; however, the next day he did give me copies of other pictures showing just rhino horn which he said had been more recently sent to Singapore from Tawau. I discovered from discussions with pharmacists in other Tawau medicine shops that Indonesians frequently bring in rhino horn and nails from Sumatra and Kalimantan to sell. In early 1988, an Indonesian businessman offered a Sumatran rhino horn to a medicine shop for US\$ 15,690 a kilo; another Indonesian came in with 16 rhino nails for which he wanted US\$6 each.

While Tawau is obviously the main centre for rhino horn trade in Sabah, some sales do take place in other towns. I found no horn in Sandakan; but until January 1988, the Wildlife Division of the Forest Department had its headquarters here, and officers did inspect the shops for contraband. In the state capital, Kota Kinabalu, the medicine shop owners are now keen to dispose of their rhino products, apparently because the Wildlife Department has moved in. Of the 18 medicine shops, only two have any horn left. I learned that two others had sold their horns earlier in the year to Singaporeans, and a third had, just the morning before I made my visit, sold all his horn to “a Chinese merchant from Tawau”.

### **Steps That Might be Taken**

Sabah’s Wildlife Department officials are aware of their inadequacies and they are trying to improve their attempts to control poaching. The Department has been allocated money to pay for doubling its staff of rangers by the end of the year; but even so that will not be enough to provide the protection necessary. It would perhaps be advisable for the officials to consider trying to win the support of the Ibans for rhino conservation and bringing them in to fill the additional ranger posts. Certainly they are the most qualified people in the state to patrol the rhino habitat

and without their help the animals are probably doomed.

Insofar as the trade in rhino products is concerned, the Sabah Wildlife Department should send out senior officers with orders to confiscate all Sumatran rhino products from medicine shops throughout the state, and to repeat the exercise at various times. The Department should also set up an intelligence gathering network, especially in Tawau, so that members of the syndicate may be caught

and that exports of rhino products may be stopped. There is not much demand for them locally because they are so expensive, and if the Chinese traders learn that a major effort is being made to combat the trade they will probably be afraid to continue it.

Unlike most places having a rhino population, Sabah is not short of funds to pay for rhino conservation. The government has been generous in its financial backing and deserves praise for this; however, there is an apparent lack of expertise, particularly in Sabah's rhino capture programme. In early 1986, a substantial sum was allocated to rhino conservation, primarily for catching isolated rhinos for breeding in controlled surroundings. Of the four caught in pit traps, two died, probably of stress although they did have old bullet wounds, one escaped and the remaining one is on public view in a small pen at the orangutan rehabilitation centre in Sepilok, near Sandakan. All four rhinos were male, and it is believed that most females have already been taken by poachers since they are easier to find because they have smaller home ranges and tend not to be loners. Further evidence of harassment by poachers is the fact that three of the rhinos caught had injuries from snares and/or bullets. For comparison, in peninsular Malaysia where nine rhinos are now in captivity all but one are females. Law enforcement is more intensive there, and traditional hunting for rhinos is rare. Since Sabah has now at least temporarily stopped its capture operations, its captured male rhino should probably be sent to Malacca to be with the others. The Sabah government could earn good publicity for this which also makes sound conservation sense.

## Sarawak

In Sarawak there are very few rhinos. Many conservationists presumed they were extinct until August 1986, when the zoologist Julian Caldecott confirmed the presence of three near the Kalimantan border at Batu Lawi, a remote area where there are no human settlements nor logging activity. Although he never



*Sumatran rhino in captivity*

saw the actual rhinos, there is no doubt about their existence, and more of their tracks were seen again in June 1988. Dr Caldecott believes that there are other rhinos in the general area (personal communication, July 1988).

At present Sarawak's rhinos do not seem to be in great danger from poachers even though traders in the state capital, Kuching, know of them. I heard an extraordinary report of a man in Miri, a town in northern Sarawak, who contacted the owner of a pharmacy in Kuching this year to inquire whether he would purchase the horn from a rhino that a friend of his knew the whereabouts. If he could be certain that he could sell the horn, a hunting party would be organized to go after it. The medicine shop owner not only declined the offer but put off the idea entirely by stating that there was no real demand in Kuching for it and no one would pay much for it.

It has not been since the 1960s that rhinos have been killed in Sarawak for trade. Then Dayak and Iban hunters went after them as in the 1930s Kelabit tribesmen had, but they stopped after they had eliminated those in the lowlands. People in Sarawak do not have contact with rhino horn traders in Tawau, and outsiders have not come in to hunt. The rhinos are thought to be so few in number that it would not be worth either the time or effort to seek them out in their rugged highland refuge to which access is extremely difficult at present.

## Protection Needed

Nevertheless, the area should be gazetted as part of the proposed Pulong Tau National Park. It is possible, otherwise, that logging could begin; and, according to Philip Njau Jalong, the Head of the National Parks and Wildlife Office of Sarawak, the government does not favour the idea of translocating the animals because the expense would be very great indeed and the natural habitat is not being destroyed as in Sabah, peninsular Malaysia and Sumatra. Moreover, greater protection needs to be given to

these rhinos as when word spreads of their existence, and the high price being offered elsewhere for horn becomes known, hunting is likely to start up again.

The stocks of rhino horn that are available in two of Kuching's medicine shops are very old, and no one seems interested in them; no rhino hide nor nail is for sale. It may well be that because the medicine shops' owners have been unable to sell off their old horn that they do not wish to deal in any new supplies; this is the best deterrent to poaching there could be, but if businessmen from Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan begin asking for rhino horn when they pass through Kuching, the situation could change.

## Brunei

There has been a consistent worry among conservationists that the Sultanate of Brunei could become a major entrepot for rhino products, particularly after the legal ending of Singapore's role in the international trade. Fortunately, this has not happened, and I do not think it will. When I went to Brunei in 1986, there were less rhino products for sale than when I made my first visit in 1982. In July 1988, only one medicine hail in the capital, Bandar Seri Begawan, had any rhino horn at all for sale, and that was from an African rhino and had been purchased in Singapore in early 1988. Although it did not enter the country legally, it was for consumption in Brunei, not for re-export.

When Brunei's medicine shop owners need supplies of Chinese traditional medicine, they go directly to Singapore. Local wholesalers are unnecessary because Singapore is so close and of easy access; Brunei middlemen would merely raise costs. In the absence of any major wholesalers or traders in rhino horn, it is unlikely that the small Chinese community of 40,000 would turn the country into a major entrepot. They are the only people in Brunei with any interest in rhino horn, but they are quickly becoming more sophisticated and westernised. Today the medicine shops appear to do a brisker trade in modern cosmetics than in herbal remedies. The Chinese in Brunei are also generally law-abiding.

The government of the Sultanate is concerned with conservation issues and has legally entrusted to the Brunei Museum the care of the country's wildlife. In 1978 the Wildlife Protection Enactment was passed, which includes prohibiting the export of any Sumatran rhino products. While there is no law against such imports, since February 1987, following a letter officially received by the Brunei government from H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh, President of WWF International, a special permit must be issued for imports of products from any rhino species. According to a senior Customs official, such a permit has not been granted to anyone, and it is unlikely that one ever will be. Despite the fact that I discovered one African rhino horn recently

brought in, the smuggling of goods into Brunei hardly exists aside from a few electronic items which residents pick up in Singapore for their personal use.

## Sabah is the Only Hope

The information I gathered in western Borneo indicates that the only severe problems of rhino poaching and trade in rhino products exist in the state of Sabah. As I have pointed out, there are solutions which could be implemented to solve them. Sarawak might in the near future experience difficulties in saving its half-dozen or so rhinos, but there is not much hope for these animals to increase their numbers into a viable population anyway. In Brunei there are probably no rhinos at all, and the trade is minimal. We have little information on Kalimantan's rhinos, but poaching has been extensive. Thus, I believe that if the Borneo rhino is to survive into the 21st century, it will depend entirely upon the success of conservation measures taken in Sabah.

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AVERAGE RETAIL PRICES FOR RHINO HORN IN  
NORTHERN AND WESTERN BORNEO

Place and Year	Number of Pharmacies Visited	Number and percentage selling Horn Types of Horn	Average Price per kg in US\$
<b>Sabah</b>			
Kota Kinabalu			
1986	18	2 1%	Sumatran 14,697
1988	21*	210% African	Sumatran 4,070 20,350
<b>Tawau</b>			
1988	18*	1 6%	Sumatran 20,851
<b>Brunei</b>			
Bandar Seri Begawan			
1982	5	2 40%	mostly African 6,895
1986	7*	1 14%	? 3,797
1968	8*	1 12%	African 6,614
<b>Sarawak</b>			
Kuching			
1988	12*	2 17*	mostly African 9,666

\*total survey

Source: survey undertaken by the author