

## Catastrophe at Sungai Dusun

*Adapted from "Catastrophe at Sungai Dusun" as appeared on [www.rhinos-irf.org](http://www.rhinos-irf.org), by Dr. Tom Foose.*

Conservation organizations prefer to announce successes and achievements. At other times, there are needs for notification of crises that require action and support. But sometimes, there are also significant setbacks to report.

From April through November of 2003, and particularly the last two weeks of that period, a major catastrophe occurred at the Sumatran Rhino Conservation Center at Sungai Dusun in Peninsular Malaysia.

In April, an adult female rhino "Rima" died, most likely from tetanus. This loss was most unfortunate because Rima was a known breeder. She had been captured pregnant in the mid 1980s but most of her pregnancy occurred while she was in captivity. She died the day after what was most likely a successful breeding.

But the worst was yet to occur. From October 28 to November 16, five other animals died: the sole male Ara (who appeared to be reproductively healthy) and four females Minah (who was the youngest and had recently resumed normal reproductive cycles), Panjang, Seputih, and Mas Merah. Thus the largest population of Sumatran rhinos in captivity had been annihilated.

The cause of this tragedy is not yet verified but is probably either a very virulent and infectious disease or an environmental toxin. Sungai Dusun has maintained healthy Sumatran rhinos for over 15 years without

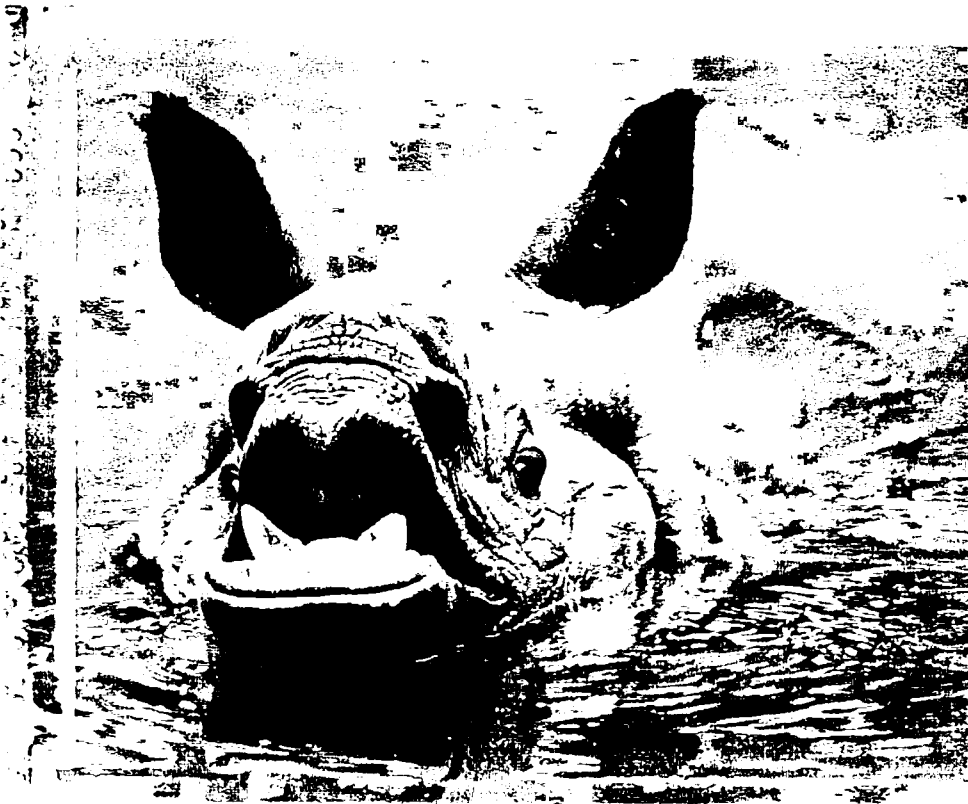
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In June, 2002 the African Rhino Specialist Group of IUCN's Species Survival Commission reported that the total population of the two African species of rhinoceros continue to increase. African countries have helped the black rhino population increase from an estimated 2,704 in 1999 to 3,100 in 2001. A similar increase for white rhinos from an estimated 10,405 in 1999 to 11,670 in 2001 was highlighted.

The recovery of the white rhino may provide the best evidence that rhinos can bounce back from the brink of extinction. Currently the largest population of the five rhino species, white rhinos were at historic lows earlier in the twentieth century. Their recovery was thanks to the actions of conservationists in South Africa. It resulted from years of increased protection and translocation to areas within their former range. The Indian rhinos' recent recovery parallels that of its African cousin. Currently there are over 2,400 Indian rhinos surviving.

At the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden we understand the important role zoos must play in conserving the habitats and wild relatives of species we have in our care. In 2001 the Cincinnati Zoo adopted a comprehensive five-year action plan that will direct our contribution to rhino conservation. It includes scientific research that may one day help effectively manage captive and wild populations of Indian and Sumatran rhinos, partnerships with the dedicated colleagues and organizations in rhino range countries and conservation education programs

The recovery of the Indian rhino has paralleled its African cousins. There are now over 2,400 Indian rhinos surviving.





Terri Roth

any similar incidents. Moreover, these deaths decimated the population despite the heroic efforts of the Center's Curator and Veterinarian Dr. Mohd Aidi, assisted by a team of veterinarians led by Dr. Vellayan from the National Zoo in Malaysia. Also consulting long distance were Dr. Robin Radcliffe of Fossil Rim Wildlife Center and Dr. Terri Roth from the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden. Providing overall coordination of these efforts has been Mohd Khan, Chair of the IUCN/SSC Asian Rhino Specialist Group and of the Malaysian Rhino Foundation.

Despite these setbacks, many of the Sumatran rhino conservationists believe we must persevere to develop a viable program of captive propagation as a supplement and back-up to the primary program of protecting the species in the wild against ever increasing odds. Hence, the program at the Cincinnati Zoo and at the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary in Way Kambas National Park will continue. For now, the conservation program for Sumatran rhino in Peninsular Malaysia (where perhaps 75 rhino survive in the wild) will concentrate on supporting Rhino Protection Units (RPUs), the teams that patrol the forests to deter poaching and protect wild rhinos.

*The Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden is proud to partner with the International Rhino Foundation and its mission to support and operate rhino conservation and research programs both in nature and in captivity, with particular emphasis on intensive management and protection.*



[www.rhinos-irf.org](http://www.rhinos-irf.org)

designed to not only raise awareness but also to provide participants with the tools necessary to take appropriate action.

During the past three years there have been significant achievements that have provided a spark of hope for the Sumatran rhino. Researchers under the leadership of Dr. Terri Roth at the Zoo's Center for Conservation and Research of Endangered Wildlife (CREW) have made landmark break-throughs in our understanding of Sumatran rhino reproduction and management, which led to the birth of Andalas in 2001—an achievement that will hopefully be repeated when Emi, the female that successfully gave birth and raised Andalas, produces her second calf sometime in the summer of 2004 (see "Preparing for Emi's Unprecedented Encore Performance," page 9).

Unfortunately, the deaths of six Sumatran rhinos at Sungai Dusun occurred right as real progress was being made. Even in the shadow of this tragedy work must continue. The exchange of experience and expertise between colleagues in Malaysia, Indonesia and the United States must continue. Additionally the support of anti-poaching teams known as Rhino Protection Units (RPUs), has proven to be one of the most effective strategies to deter poaching and protect wild Sumatran rhinos in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Indonesia. The Zoo has funded one RPU each of the last three years.

The Zoo's rhino conservation efforts are not exclusive to the Sumatran rhino. To help ensure a genetically healthy and self-sustaining population of captive Indian rhinos, CREW scientists are developing a transcervical artificial insemination (AI) procedure in this species (see CREW article, page 16). Furthermore, CREW recently

The population of white rhinos has recovered to about 11,670.



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