

HOPE FOR THE HAIRY RHINOCEROS



BY TERRI L. ROTH, PH.D., ROBIN W. RADCLIFFE, DVM, AND NICO J. VAN STRIEN, PH.D.

Those of us working with critically endangered species live in constant fear that we may see the last of that species in our lifetime. The passenger pigeon memorial at the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden is a constant reminder of what can happen if we do too little too late, and motivates us even when circumstances appear dire. For the critically endangered Sumatran rhino, a living descendant of the woolly rhino, the future remains uncertain. However, recent developments have shifted the Sumatran rhino conservation program from one many believed a long shot to one of hope, vitality and opportunity. The program's transformation can be attributed to the three "Ps" of species conservation: propagation, partnerships and protection, and zoos have played critical roles in each of these areas.

PROPAGATION

The captive breeding program for Sumatran rhinos has long been considered an essential component of securing this species' future. Unfortunately, the program has been riddled with unforeseen challenges. Insufficient knowledge about nutritional needs led to early mortalities, and information regarding this species' unusual reproductive physiology didn't exist. Therefore, early attempts to breed these rhinos resulted, at best, in failure and, at worst, in severely injured rhinos following aggressive encounters.

By 1997, three of the original seven imported rhinos remained in U.S. zoos. In the true spirit of cooperation, the Bronx and LA Zoos sent their female rhinos to the only male rhino at the Cincinnati Zoo for one last effort to breed. Through years of extensive research, the mysteries of Sumatran rhino reproduction were unraveled and success was achieved. The first Sumatran rhino calf bred and born in captivity in over a century occurred in 2001, and was quickly followed by a second calf in 2004. A third calf is expected at the Cincinnati Zoo in April 2007.

Meanwhile in Malaysia and Indonesia, tremendous progress was achieved with rhinos at the regional breeding centers. Information flowed and expertise was exchanged between U.S. zoos and the breeding centers, and many matings were reported. However, after years in captivity without reproducing, many of the rhinos appeared to be infertile, pregnancies were not achieved, and disease outbreaks further reduced the population. Fortunately, the recent rescue of two young, female rhinos that had wandered out of their protected forests in Sumatra provides tremendous opportunity for the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary (SRS) in Way Kambas, Sumatra. The addition of these rhinos has revitalized the breeding program in Indonesia. However, the SRS lacks a healthy, fertile male needed to produce calves. Here again, zoos are stepping in to play a crucial role in the struggle to save Sumatran rhinos.

PARTNERSHIPS

The Sumatran Rhino Program depends on partnerships. Currently, the only healthy, male Sumatran rhino available to mate with the two new female rhinos in Sumatra is the first calf produced in Cincinnati and maintained at the LA Zoo. In a truly altruistic and forward thinking gesture, the LA Zoo is sending the male calf to Sumatra where he is so desperately needed. That U.S. zoos have agreed to send the first Sumatran rhino produced in captivity in over 100 years back to its species' homeland to facilitate the breeding program in-country exemplifies the mission oriented mind set of modern-day zoos. The cohesive partnership between U.S. zoos and Indonesia is strong and essential, not only for the captive breeding program, but for all aspects of the Sumatran rhino conservation effort.

Through the International Rhino Foundation (IRF), many AZA members (notably White Oak Conservation Center, Disney's Animal Kingdom, Cincinnati and LA Zoos) provide financial support for Rhino Protection Units (RPUs) and in-country breeding centers, offer staff expertise/assistance, and facilitate education outreach activities in the local communities, all critical components of the overall effort. On

the forefront of Sumatran rhino conservation, IRF works with numerous NGOs, governments, individuals, zoos and international rhino conservation organizations like SOS Rhino, the Asian Rhino Project of Australia and Save the Rhino International, that pour resources and effort into saving this rhino species. Partners are reflected in the representation of the recently formed Global Management and Propagation Board (GMPB). GMPB's mission is to make management recommendations that maximize the chance for successful reproduction and long-term viability of the captive population. GMPB recently recommended the exchange of rhinos between Indonesia and the United States.

PROTECTION

RPUs are heroes of the forest – the most important component of the Sumatran rhino conservation effort. RPUs are four-to-five man teams that conduct intensive patrols, destroying snares and traps, and apprehending poachers. The wild Sumatran rhino population of an estimated 300 animals would be likely half or less without RPUs. Financial support from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, World Wildlife Fund, AAZK Bowling for Rhinos and numerous zoos, has been essential to keep the RPU program functioning at the level necessary to protect viable populations with a goal of doubling the number of wild rhinos in 10 years.

Despite outstanding efforts of RPUs, survival of wildlife ultimately is dependent upon local communities learning to value and respect their regional natural resources and biodiversity. When wildlife protection becomes a part of the culture, plants, animals and people all benefit. However, people can hardly be expected to protect something they don't even know exists. Although those living in communities on the edge of the forests in Sumatra are keenly aware of tigers and elephants, most know nothing about a secretive forest rhino. The effort to educate local people about Sumatran rhinos and instill in them the desire to save these harmless animals should be applauded in Sabah, Malaysia, where SOS Rhino has spearheaded the grassroots effort. More recently in Sumatra, Fossil Rim Wildlife Center has partnered with SRS staff on a creative rhino awareness campaign that utilizes a rhino costume and dance to educate and excite local communities about saving rhinos. Hopefully these encouraging developments will swing that pendulum of rhino protection in a positive direction and add to the RPUs a second tier of support.

THE FUTURE

The diversified and multifaceted *in-situ* and *ex-situ* Sumatran rhino conservation effort is a program that has faced many challenges, experienced failure, and is now witnessing some success and new opportunities. Zoos have been integral to this program from the onset – and provide hope for the future by supplying animals for the breeding program in Sumatra, technical assistance for the breeding centers and educational outreach activities in-country, and financial resources for the RPUs. Though it remains on the brink of extinction, the Sumatran rhino may finally be strategically poised for a comeback. Instead of memorializing another "passenger pigeon" in our lifetime, we may be witnessing a historical turning point for this small hairy rhino whose shaggy coat reflects a primitive link to its past.

TERRI L. ROTH, PHD,
IS THE VICE PRESIDENT OF CONSERVATION, SCIENCE AND LIVING
COLLECTIONS, CINCINNATI ZOO & BOTANICAL GARDEN

ROBIN W. RADCLIFFE, DVM,
IS THE DIRECTOR OF ANIMAL HEALTH, FOSSIL RIM WILDLIFE CENTER

NICO J. VAN STRIEN, PHD,
IS THE SOUTHEAST ASIA FIELD PROGRAM COORDINATOR,
INTERNATIONAL RHINO FOUNDATION,
AND CO-CHAIR, IUCN/SSCASIAN RHINO SPECIALIST GROUP