

The Sumatran Rhino in Peninsular Malaysia

The Sumatran rhino is Malaysia's rarest large mammal and is dangerously near extinction. MNS considers it to be among the ten most endangered animal species in Peninsular Malaysia¹. Worldwide there are estimated to be between 100 and 170 Sumatran rhino located in forests in Borneo, Sumatra, Peninsular Malaysia, Thailand and Burma. The Peninsular Malaysia population is estimated at between 52 and 80. However, only two areas contain large contiguous populations which could comprise breeding units. These are: Endau-Rompin (with between 20 and 25 animals) and Taman Negara (with between 8 and 13)².

Rhinos are found in primary undisturbed forest in hilly areas about 250m above sea level, where there are stretches of relatively flat stream beds. They are solitary (except for mothers with young) and range over a wide area. A female's home range covers between 3 and 9.5 km, while males wanders more widely. The home range may overlap but the Sumatran rhino is found in very low densities. Rhinos eat the shoots of saplings as well as wild fruits which fall to the ground.

Rhinos have a slow rate of reproduction and a low replacement rate. A single young is produced at between two and four yearly intervals. Sexual maturity is reached after five to eight years.

The Effect of Disturbance

In the Endau-Rompin area logging for the Bukit Selanchar FELDA scheme and the Pahang State logging concession caused the immediate exit of rhinos from the areas of disturbance (see maps). Even after logging stopped, rhinos only very rarely moved just 200m into the logged area.³

This indicates how sensitive the Sumatran rhino is to disturbance and interference to its habitat, the primary forest. An additional sign of this is seen from its breeding behaviour. After logging occurred in 1977, no tracks of new young rhino were found in the following year.

The effect of logging this area is particular severe as it has divided the rhino population into two separate smaller populations, which has reduced its viability as a breeding unit.

Threats to Survival

The Sumatran rhino is totally protected under the Wildlife Act of 1972. This means that a maximum fine of MS3,000 and/or a two years' imprisonment can be imposed for the capture, keeping or killing of a rhino. Unfortunately, poaching is still not totally wiped out as reports from Johore indicate that one, or possibly two, rhino have been shot in Johore in the last year.

Malaysia is a members of CITES and all rhino species are listed in Appendix I, which means that neither the animal nor any of its parts may be exported from or imported into countries signatory to CITES. And yet there is a scheme afoot in Sabah to capture and export Sumatran rhino to U.S.A. to attempt captive breeding.⁴

Apart from poaching, habitat destruction is also threatening the Sumatran rhino. It only lives in primary lowland forest and it needs a large area of forest to support a viable breeding population. It is for this reason that the proposed Endau-Rompin National Park is vital for the survival of the Sumatran rhino in Peninsular Malaysia. In 1932, the Javan rhino became extinct in Peninsular Malaysia. It will only be a matter of time before the same fate overtakes the Sumatran rhino, unless it is given a sufficiently large "involute sanctuary" to live.

1. Kiew *et al* 1985 Peninsular Malaysia's ten most endangered animals, plants and places. *Malayan Naturalist* 38(4)2-6.
2. Mohd Khan *et al* 1983 Species Conservation Priorities in Peninsular Malaysia. *Malayan Naturalist* 36(4) 2-8.
3. Flynn, R. 1978 The Sumatran Rhinoceros in the Endau-Rompin National Park of Peninsular Malaysia. *Malayan Naturalist* 4(2) 5-12.
4. Conservation in Malaysia 1985 *Malayan Naturalist* 38(4) 8-10 and this issue.

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