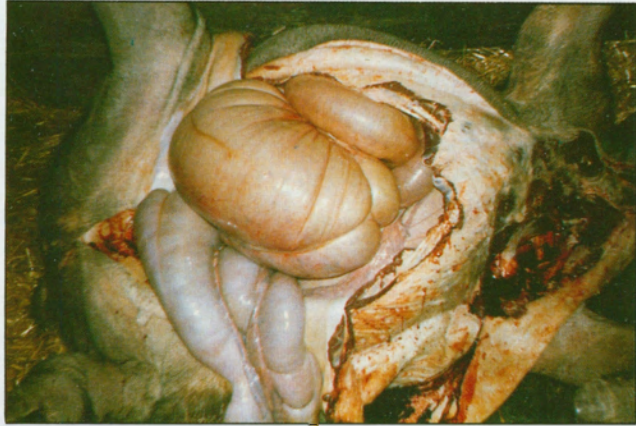


# The Death of Subur

by Chris Furley



The nightmare of every zoo is to conduct an expensive captive breeding project using a limited number of animals from a rare species, only to see one of these participants die. Unfortunately, we can lay claim to one such experience.

A female Sumatran rhino, 'Subur', was caught in the Sumatran forest on 22nd June 1986, kept in a stockade where she became tame, and then shipped by air to Port Lympne on 26th August 1986. She was intended as a mate for our male 'Torgamba'.

We had trouble persuading her to eat properly during the weeks that followed. She consumed only a few twigs, lucerne hay and fruit each day, though Torgamba had settled in well on the same diet after his arrival. After five weeks her appetite suddenly increased, and she began to eat a wider variety of browse and fruit. Then she stopped eating altogether for five days, only to begin again. Progress was made for two and a half weeks until, unexpectedly, on the morning of Wednesday, 29th October, she was found in great discomfort, constantly lying down and getting up.

At the time there happened to be three veterinary surgeons present: myself; Dr. John Lewis of the Zoological Society of London and David Taylor of the International Zoo Veterinary Group.

The consensus of opinion was a diagnosis of

acute colic. Despite treatment during the day, she deteriorated rapidly and died during the evening, about 12 hours after first becoming ill. An immediate post-mortem examination revealed massive inflammatory changes in the large intestine, almost allergic in nature. The whole intestine had filled with gas.

However, several other features helped to complete the picture. She was much older than any of us had suspected, judging by her worn teeth. The big surprise was her uterus. It appeared never to have been pregnant, and both ovaries were apparently dormant. Furthermore, a tumour was found on the uterus.

Laboratory tests on various tissues showed that the bacteria *Klebsiella pneumoniae* was present in the gut in huge numbers. This is an unusual feature in this type of animal. There was also evidence of mild chronic muscle disease. The precise cause of death remains elusive. It was probably a combination of several factors — the short period of time in captivity in Sumatra, the stress of the journey to Britain, and the unfamiliar browse and environment — which, together, contributed to a situation where a major change in the intestinal flora occurred with fatal results. However, the animal had certainly never bred, and would have been of no use for captive breeding. A full report on her clinical history and pathology is available to specialists.

*Preliminary view of the intestinal coils in the abdomen of Subur's carcass*

*(Photograph Berry White)*