

DETERMINING THE FATE OF THE JAVAN RHINO

The captive breeding program of the Javan rhinoceros was recently announced. But there are difficulties to be considered before such a program should be undertaken.

1991 is the year of Javan rhino (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*). In November 1990, thanks to the Minister of Tourism, Post and Telecommunications, this one-horned animal was appointed the official national logo of the Visit Indonesia event; so this native of Ujung Kulon National Park will now receive acknowledgement of Indonesian national pride. Though a very small population might live in Vietnam, Ujung Kulon is likely the only remaining original habitat of the Javan rhino. Only several months after the announcement was made, another policy came out concerning the fate of this endangered animal.

After long being a topic of informal discussions among conservationists, on March 19, 1991, Mr. Sutisna Wartaputra, Director General of Forest Protection and Nature Conservation (PHPA), announced a breeding program for the Javan rhino. This program is in coordination with State Ministry of Population and Environment (KLH) and is funded by Bank Internasional Indonesia (BII). BII will contribute toward the project Rp. 25,000 for every bank credit card it issues. In his press conference, Mr. Wartaputra explained that from 50-60 animals remaining in the core area of the Ujung Kulon National Park, several animals will be captured and relocated to other parts of the

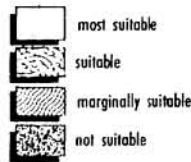


park, Gunung Honje and Panaitan Island. Other rhinos captured for the project will be sent to selected zoos either inside or outside Indonesia. This idea was first proposed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) under its Captive Breeding Specialist Group that met to discuss the issue.

Captive breeding programs are currently being used in conservation efforts, especially for endangered wildlife species. However, the success rate is presently unclear. Many factors must be considered. Animals may be injured while being captured or transported, they may not adapt well to their new surroundings, and there is always the risk that a compatible pair may not be found. The stress to the animal must also be considered. This is a likely area for the project of the captive breeding of Javan rhinos to fail, as they currently live solitarily, very rarely meeting humans. Sumatran rhinos, which are more adaptable to human presence, are currently being bred under a similar program. It is reported that 30% of the animals captured died in this program. Even if the best possible care is taken with the capture of Javan rhinos, it is to be expected that at least the same mortality rate will occur as it did with their Sumatran relatives. Thirty percent of only 50-60 animals left is too many to risk losing. Moreover, there is still a question about how well captive-bred rhinos can survive in the wild. Can these young 'urban' rhinos learn how to



Map indicating the suitability of areas within Ujung Kulon as Javan Rhino habitats (Hommel, 1987)



Another question is the size of the rhino population. A 1967 census revealed an estimated 25 animals in Ujung Kulon. Ten years later the population size had doubled, but the last population estimate found only a 10% increase in the ten-year period. According to many experts the lack of a substantial increase in numbers is not due to breeding failure, but because the population is at a maximum; they have reached the carrying capacity of their present habitat.

Before beginning a breeding program we must have as much data on the behavior of the rhinos as possible. Unlike its African relatives, the Javan rhino lives in very dense and tangled palm-dominated vegetation that makes direct observation of this species very difficult.

Therefore, it will take several more years to understand their population structure, mating habits, spatial utilization and other behavior patterns. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) has been trying to collect these kinds of information at Ujung Kulon, but the results are not yet complete. It would seem to be better, then, if the money collected from credit card applicants were used in improving habitat management by more frequent patrols, building more ranger posts, educating people around the park to participate in conservation efforts, and increasing personnel capabilities and authority.

For now, the safest way to conserve the Javan rhino is to let them to live in their natural habitat, better known as *in situ* conservation. They need no human intervention to increase their population, they just need for Man to protect their habitat so they can live in natural harmony. Since the decision has been made, we should reconsider it, or our "national pride" will vanish even faster than we can anticipate.

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live in the forest, how to search food, what food is suitable, how to avoid predators, and how to overcome seasonal changes?

And what about the new habitat? Gunung Honje, located on northeast side of the park, is the buffer zone for Ujung Kulon National Park. From the information gathered, the rhinos are often seen east of the isthmus of Ujung Kulon but are never found in the proposed area. Unlike in the original habitat, in the Gunung Honje area there is no swamp area, the preferred habitat of the Javan rhino. There is also a very steep hill which takes a considerable effort for a human to climb. It may not be a suitable place for a large animal like the rhino. Moreover, like the other buffer zones, the area is surrounded by human settlements.

Agricultural encroachments can be found easily in most of its periphery, reaching as far as its foothill. According to the plan, the area will be fenced, however, human disturbance will still occur. In addition, this area is also inhabited by *banteng* (*Bos javanicus*) which — though not entirely understood yet — might be a potential major competitor to the rhinos.

Information on Panaitan Island, lying northwest of the peninsula, is scattered, but the main problem there, again, is human disturbance. It is known that illegal hunting of crocodiles and lobsters often occurs, and there is also pumice mining, using explosives, going on there.



The Javan rhino needs a safe and undisturbed place to wallow

(Above) Wallow and dung of the Javan rhino at Ujung Kulon.