

THE MISUNDERSTOOD ONE-HORNED RHINO

The popularity of the one-horned rhinoceros as a symbol of nature conservation in Indonesia has perhaps made laymen come to regard Ujung Kulon on the island of Java as the only place left in the world where the animal survives.

Few are aware that even at present, two different one-horned rhino species exist: *Rhinoceros sondaicus*, the Javan rhinoceros, and *Rhinoceros unicornis*, which is native to the Indian subcontinent. Of the first, at least 54 were counted in 1954 in the Ujung Kulon National Park in West Java, while according to reliable sources 10 to 15 of them were reported to exist in Vietnam last year. The Indian one-horned rhino is at present found in Kaziranga National Park, Assam (India) and in the Chitwan National Park in Nepal.

Laymen also often believe that all one-horned rhinos look the same. (Proof? The one-horned rhino pictured on the nature conservation brochures and on the credit cards issued by Bank Internasional Indonesia in Jakarta does not belong to Java, but to India.) In general appearance, the Indian rhino looks more robust than its Javan cousin, and the folds and protrusions on its skin are more noticeable. In both species, only the male sports a prominent horn, while the female, even when fully grown, usually displays only a lump about the size of half a coconut.

In both the Kaziranga and the Chitwan National Parks the rhino population is about five to ten times that of Ujung Kulon, and are, therefore, much easier to watch. Indian rhinos are often seen wandering in groups of two to six animals. Two of them are now kept at the Basel Zoo in Switzerland. For these reasons the

Indian rhino may be better known worldwide than the Javan.

For both the Indian and the Javan rhino, the horn, which nature endowed to them as a weapon and tool, has been a source of great misfortune due to the whims of man. The Javan variety, in particular, has been relentlessly hunted by people who seek to profit from his fellow-man's delusions. On the South Chinese and Southeast Asian mainlands from the Mekong River basin down to Songkoi, India, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Peninsular Malaysia and even Sumatra, there is reason to believe that the species has totally ceased to exist, although Schaller, Nguyen Xuan Dang and Le Dinh Thuy in 1989 reported that remnants of a Javan rhinoceros population are still found in Vietnam. In Java itself, poachers were reported to have been caught red-handed in as recently as 1987.

In India and Nepal the situation does not seem to be much better for the indigenous rhinoceros population. There, between August 1989 and July 1990, at least 12 rhinos were found killed inside the Chitwan National Park in Nepal.

Nepal, with the help of its army and the Fauna Preservation Society, has actually been quite successful in its efforts to protect not only the one-horned rhino, but also other indigenous wildlife such as the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) and the Indian tiger (*Panthera tigris*). From 1974 on, no cases of the actual hunting of rhinos has been reported, so it appears that political disturbances occurring in 1989 and 1990 gave poachers the chance to try to resume their old trade.

In Ujung Kulon, rhinos have been hunted for





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A one-horned Indian rhino in Chitwan National Park, Nepal.

their horns since the colonial days before World War II and much earlier. By 1960 the animal had almost become extinct. Then, in 1964, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) initiated its project to save the Javan rhino.

In that year, WWF — which was at that time known as the World Wildlife Fund — dispatched Prof. Rudolf Schenkel to Indonesia to assist the Indonesian government in its conservation efforts. One of his key assistants at that time was Widodo Sukohadi Ramono, of the Ujung Kulon reserve. Poaching was controlled, and two of the most notorious poachers of that time, Sarman and Murdjai, were even persuaded, together with their respective gangs, to cooperate. They turned in their weapons.

At the end of 1968, there were about 25 rhinos left in the Ujung Kulon Park. By the end of 1990 the population had increased to at least 50 a 100 percent increase within a span of about 20 years. This, however, means that half the number of rhinos living in the Ujung Kulon National Park are now more than 20 years old, beyond the age of optimal reproduction.

This situation explains the importance of the ongoing efforts to isolate the park from the

mainland in order to stop, or at least minimize, the population pressures coming from the densely populated adjoining areas of West Java. Like man, rhinos, after all, also need space in which to roam and reproduce.

Perhaps the example presented by Nepal's Chitwan National Park is worth greater attention. There the Indian rhinos are preserved *in situ*, in their own native habitat. In 1975, about 80 Indian one-horned rhinos were estimated to be left in Nepal. At present, at least 600 have been counted. On about 20 of the animals, radio-telemetry gadgets have been fastened to make it easier to keep track of them. Tourists can easily see and photograph the animals, not only because there are many open spaces inside the park, but because the sufficiently large rhino population inside the park makes it possible.

Perhaps unique to the Chitwan National Park is the fact that about 60,000 local villagers are allowed to live inside the park's boundaries. In summer, the villagers are allowed to come inside the reserve area proper to cut the long stems of the sugar cane (*Sacharum* sp.) that grows there. The fibrous stems are mixed with mud and cow dung to build walls for houses.

Because the animals are protected by park wardens and auxiliary army personnel, the rhinos wander freely about — sometimes even into the villages — without fear of being shot or otherwise maltreated. There is a Smithsonian research station inside the park which is well equipped with the tools needed for a proper study of the park's wildlife.

The park authorities are helped in their work by the King Mahendra Trust for Nature, which is a non-governmental organization for nature conservation, as well as by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and WWF. With the help of funds and experts provided by these groups the villagers inside the park are taught to farm on plots that have been denuded of forests. The purpose is to make them less dependent on cattle breeding as a source of both nutrition and income, which tends to destroy the vegetation unless controlled.

Thus, it seems that at present there are only hundreds of one-horned rhinos left in the world, although in India and Nepal their numbers seem to be increasing. Considering the reported intentions to preserve the Javan rhinoceros *ex situ* in Indonesia, it is rather disheartening to learn that so far not a single instance is known of the successful breeding and rearing of the one-horned rhinos outside their native habitat. □ HAERUDIN R. SADJUDIN