

THE ASIAN RHINOS ARE ALSO UNDER THREAT

All three Asian species of rhino are endangered. Nowhere is there a large *continuous* population. This fragmentation puts surviving populations at greater risk—both from man-made disturbance and from the heightened chance of genetic degeneration and failing reproduction.

Sumatran rhinoceros — *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis* Population: under 300

The Sumatran rhino is a forest dweller adapted to mountainous areas. For intrinsic behavioural reasons it has the lowest population density of any rhino — one per 4000 hectares. Habitat protection must therefore be scaled accordingly.

In Peninsular Malaysia a few Sumatran rhinos still exist in Taman Negara National Park, in Sungei Dusun game reserve and in Endau Rompin a proposed national park. Deforestation has so reduced numbers that in some cases there may no longer be a viable breeding population. A core area of Endau Rompin, previously part of the rhino range, was logged in 1977/78. A census in March 1979 found that rhinos now avoided this area—and there were no signs of breeding. In Sabah (Borneo) rhino tracks have been reported and a survey is needed.

In Thailand expanding human population, armed poachers, political unrest and trade in rhino parts have combined to reduce the Sumatran rhino population to perhaps no more than 10 animals scattered throughout five different regions. Only immediate and intensive conservation measures can hope to avert extinction.

In Sumatra (Indonesia) the Gunung Leuser complex of reserves is known to have a viable rhino population. Kerinci-Seblat, a forest area of about 1,000,000 hectares in central Sumatra, might be of similar importance. A survey here is urgent.

Javan rhinoceros — *Rhinoceros sondaicus* Population: c. 50

The Javan rhino is better adapted to the forested plains and hills than to the higher mountain ranges. For this reason it has everywhere been wiped out except in Ujong Kulon nature reserve, a semi-island on the western tip of Java. Here under close protection backed by IUCN/WWF, the species has during the last 10 years doubled in numbers—to about 50.

But survival based upon a single population is precarious. Once rhino numbers have become too large for this reserve, a breeding nucleus should be transferred to a second area — preferably in Sumatra.

Great Indian rhinoceros — *Rhinoceros unicornis* Population: 1100–1500

The Great Indian rhinoceros lives in fairly open country in India and Nepal. Confined to two largish populations and five smaller ones, local overcrowding is sometimes a problem as habitat is eroded by increased seasonal flooding caused by deforestation at higher altitudes. Kaziranga National Park is a case in point. A pilot translocation project could here help to relieve overcrowding.

Other dangers to these populations include contact with domestic buffaloes (bringing heightened risk of epidemics) and the loss of food supplies through the spread of two exotic plants, *Eichornia crassipes* and *Mikania scandens*. There is also a problem of poaching. Indian rhino horn is more highly prized than African because it is rarer. In early 1978 Bengal wholesalers were paying \$875 a kilo.

This brief account of the status of Asian rhinos is largely based upon the August 1979 report of the Asian Rhino Specialist Group. The report was prepared by Professor R. Schenkel and Dr. L. Schenkel.

from IUCN Bulletin Jan./Feb. 1980



(Photo: R. Walter, issued by FAO)