

## Looking for Sumatran Rhino in the Malaysian Jungle

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You can't get to one of the oldest jungles in the world by road. You have to take a boat. The 37-mile river trip is a stimulating mixture of shooting rapids and quiet gliding between the walls of hanging green, past buffaloes wallowing by the banks, occasional human life – Malay children laughing and splashing, women washing sarongs. Large lizards, yellow and black, crawl up the bank..

At journey's end, Kuala Tahan, high above the banks of the river, is the bougainvillea-clad headquarters of Taman Negara, the 1,500 square miles remaining of the primeval forest that once covered the Malay Peninsula, now Malaysia's National Park.

It is the starting point for any sort of jungle trek you'd like: day-long strolls along the trails with a bird book in your pocket, ten day treks to Gunung Tahan, the peninsula's highest mountain; or, if your constitution can stand it, weeks wandering beyond the marked trails with an aboriginal guide, a large supply of rice, and a fishing rod to keep you alive.

I was here to track the Sumatran rhinoceros, a strange and rare beast whose bodily parts are widely credited in Southeast Asia and beyond with almost magical powers. These include the supposed ability of its horn to act as antidote to poison. There are very few left in the world and only a handful survive in Taman Negara.

From antiquity the rhino horn has been revered for its magical powers. Philostratus, narrating the travels to India of Appollonius in the first century AD, describes how a cup made of rhino horn can protect against poisoned drinks. The cup is supposed to discolor, to smoke, and bubble, to slowly disintegrate or suddenly shatter when the drink is poured in. An alternative version says the process simply renders the drink harmless. These beliefs, which still survive in Southeast Asia, were once common in Europe too. Until the end of the 18th century, kings and popes kept rhino-horn cups to test suspicious libations.

Professor Oldham a British adventurer reporting from Burma, described how his camp was attacked in 1862 by a rhino and how the animal was particularly attracted to the campfire. The Burmese Karens have long told of rhinos drawn to campfires and smoke. They describe how the rhino sees the fire, runs up and tramples and devours it, causing much panic and damage in the camp. There are numerous native legends of fire-eating rhinos elsewhere, which do seem to have some basis in fact.

Known facts however, about the Sumatran Rhino are thin on the ground. The most basic information about it, such as the nature of its mating habits, or its gestation period is unknown.

If the legends are turned to, a much greater fund of information is available. Malayan fables tell us the rhinoceros horn is hollow and that the beast can breathe and squirt water through it.

It also sheds its horn each year and buries it. If carefully dug up and replaced with wooden imitations three times, the rhino will continue to plant its horn there, year after year.

In Sumatra, rhinos like to lean on fences. So a rotten one can be rigged up which causes the rhino to fall to the ground, from where it cannot get up, and so is easily killed.

Today the rhino horn is most commonly ascribed aphrodisiac properties. But the demand for it to concoct other sorts of medicine is greater. In Sumatra, mixtures containing horn shavings are drunk as purgatives, and elsewhere as protection against all kinds of diseases, devils, miasmas, hallucinations, nightmares, dysentery, tuberculosis, cancer, typhoid, leprosy, headaches, bewitching, colds, fever, carbuncles, delirium, vomiting, food poisoning, arthritis, melancholia, voice loss, haemathosis, and small pox.

Rhino blood has almost the reputation of the redeeming mixtures peddled as the blood of saints and martyrs in medieval Europe. In Nepal, it is administered to the dying to give the soul a peaceful departure and a happy release on the other side.

In Burma in 1952, an ailing potentate was prescribed a bath in rhinoceros blood as the only remedy that would heal him. So a rhino was taken from a local game sanctuary and slaughtered to allow him to do just that.

Uses have been found for almost every part of the animal's anatomy, its bones, hairs, nails, and teeth. Even its dried dung is boiled and the mixture drunk in Indonesia to cool fever, and its urine, too, for rheumatism and to reduce bad dropsy swelling. The urine is used as an antiseptic in Nepal and is hung in gourds inside doorways as a charm against ghosts, evil spirits, and disease.

In Kalimantan, a rhino tail hung in a room where a woman is in labor and is said to ensure a painless birth.

In Sumatra, a piece of horn put on a snake bite is supposed to extract the venom and to have the power of removing deeply embedded thorns, if rubbed on the surface of the wound.

A forest hunter is sure to live for many months or even years from the revenue of one dead rhinoceros. These are some of the prices that have been paid for rhino products around Southeast Asia: in Laos in the early years of this century a rhino horn was exchanged for its equivalent weight in gold; Burma, 1933, the dried blood of a rhino valued at its own weight in silver; Saigon, 1960, a large horn fetched US\$2,000; Palembang, 1960, a new American car offered in exchange for a dead rhinoceros; Malaysia, 1968, rhino horn sold for \$350 an ounce; Malaysia, 1969, horn priced at \$210 an inch; Bangkok, 1972, rhino teeth sold for \$25 each.

When rhinos were abundant the trade no doubt had economic importance. There was even a special customs duty on horns coming into Thailand until 1928. The trade is also a very old one. There is ample evidence that Borneo had a huge export of horns to the mainland more than 1,000 years ago. But the time is long gone for dealings in rhino products to provide any

significant number of livelihoods and is getting very late in the day for the Sumatran rhino. If it survives at all it will be through its own stealth and cunning, rather than by the well-meaning but inadequate legislation now in force to protect it.

Accommodation at Kuala Tahan is of the fan-in-the-ceiling, armchair-on-the-veranda type or a bunk bed in a dormitory. Provisions for jungle treks can be bought from a small store, cooking and camping equipment hired, and there are a kedai kop (coffee shop) and restaurant at headquarters.

Strolling through the forest, beside the dark, mineral laden river and its spectacular riot of vegetation, I come upon an Orang Asli village. Here they are toasting perfectly aerodynamic wood and bark pith darts with poisonous, sticky, black resinous ooze. These are mainly used to hunt birds and small mammals.

At the park headquarters plans are being laid for the great rhino hunt. Thirty or so Malay trackers gather under the tutelage of Khairiah Mohammed-Sharif, the woman in charge of the Game Department's Rhino Unit, to be split into four groups, each assigned an aboriginal guide, to look for signs of the beast in places it is known to have been seen by the Orang Asli, the aboriginal inhabitants of the Malay Peninsula. My group is led by a young Malay called Hassan. Neither he nor Khairiah have ever seen the Sumatran rhino, although some of the trackers have. She knows, however what there is to know about the animal.

It is small, standing little over four-and-a-half feet tall, plump, round and patchily hairy and has folds of skin at knees and shoulders, giving it an armored appearance. Its skin is usually the color of the mud in which it took its last bath. The mud bath is a daily ritual for the rhino and an important one. Without regular wallowing its skin inflames and cracks, and the beast dies. It makes a curious sound to itself when bathing, a subdued humming, rumbling or buzzing which has been likened to the beat of the hornbill's wings. When feeding and undisturbed, it squeaks and snuffles continually to itself through mouth and nose. It is a solitary animal and is only seen in pairs when mating or when a mother is with its calf.

In forests seldom visited by humans, it is easy to approach. But in most of its known habitats, those in Thailand, Malaysia East and West, Burma, Laos, Kampuchea, Vietnam and China, it is only outdone in elusiveness by the ghost tribes or the abominable snowman. It is extremely thinly scattered in these places and is already presumed extinct in India and Bangladesh. Estimates of its numbers are impossible to make with any accuracy, but there are perhaps no more than 150 left in the world.

Because the animal is so difficult to follow, being surprisingly agile over steep gradients and through thick undergrowth, it has never been intensively hunted by men with rifles.

But the legendary properties of nearly all its bodily parts, from its horn to its toenails, and the high prices that are paid for them, have made it an attractive target for forest hunters through the centuries. It is these who have brought it nearly to extinction.

And so the Game Department in Kuala Lumpur, cutting a swathe of rationalism through the mystic haze, has us marching out of Kuala Tahan one fine morning armed with notebooks, cameras, and a week's provision. We are in pursuit of the rhino not for its magical powers, but to establish where each of Taman Negara's suspected half dozen or so rhino lives, so that that area can be protected from human encroachment, and possibly, at a future experimental stage, have improvements made to it, such as the replenishment of salt-licks whose sulfur has dried up, or the planting of saplings the rhino likes.

The pace is fast and we quickly leave the marked trails. One of our number starts to hack 'kumbangs' or lumps of bark from trees, as marks, every few yards. He also breaks saplings in half beside the trail and bisects overhead creepers, even those not blocking our way. He is extraordinarily diligent about the whole process. "It can't be that easy to get lost," I think in my innocence, surveying the ceaseless hacking and slicing.

Of more immediate concern are the lurking leeches, thin waving and tentacle like, unlike on the tourist trail, in every trickling stream and muddy hollow. They attach themselves to any piece of exposed flesh and are very good at worming their way through apparently protected places like the eyeholes of boots.

The six rangers are swathed from head to foot in gray denim. Only Abdullah, the aboriginal guide and I wear shorts. Whenever we reach a suitable river bank, around the middle of each morning and afternoon, the rangers call a halt, fill a kettle from the river, make a fire and brew tea.

I usually take advantage of this twice daily ritual, to plunge fully clothed into the water. The rangers register faint amusement at this eccentric behavior but show no inclination to follow me in when I tell them how refreshing it is. They are generally blasé about their surroundings. Veterans of a hundred expeditions like this, there's not much in the forest that can arouse their interest.

It is interesting, however, to watch them. Their forest craft is masterful, the casual ease with which they make a fire, getting the thick branches to burn almost immediately, the way saplings are cut in exactly the right proportions for putting up canvas or supporting cooking utensils over the fire, all accomplished with a total economy of effort.

Our first night's rest is at Lobok Tapah, a crooked bend of creek, named after an aborigine who drowned there 37 years ago by swallowing a piece of wood and choking as he was swimming across. We stop walking unexpectedly soon. But it is explained that the next river is three hours march away and we need to camp by water, as we don't carry it.

We busy ourselves laying groundsheets, stretching tarpaulins (tents that would be too hot), gathering wood and fishing. After tinned curry and rice we stretch out. When it gets dark, Abdullah sets fire to an enormous pile of collapsed wood on the riverbank, to keep wild animals away.

We're up and away before first light the next day, having breakfasted on sardines and leftover rice. We walk longer hours this day and come upon some animal prints which give rise to lively debate: "No, look! It's a tapir. There are four toes."

"But the fourth toe might be the rear foot overlapping the front one."

"Neither of you is looking at the nails. They're not pointed enough to be a rhino."

On we press. There's not much unnecessary discussion among this party. We save energy for hefting our forms along the tracks. One of the rangers twists his knee and has to walk awkwardly stiff-legged for the rest of the expedition. But there is not a word of complaint from him. There are times when we are all exhausted, slumped over our packs, hot and sweaty, unwilling to move when it's time to make tracks again. But everyone knows it's useless to moan, so no one does.

Likewise, when we pitch camp that night on a bed of pebbles by a riverbank and spend a restless, rib-puncturing night, not a word of protest is breathed at our predawn, curried rice breakfast.

This day we do some very steep hill walking. At the top of the last of a series of bamboo-groved hills, we are able to see beyond the densely tangled undergrowth for the first time in three days. The pleasurable shock of gazing upon a distant valley and far mountain peak relieves the hitherto unconscious claustrophobia, and we rest awhile. Mosquitoes bite, but we don't have the energy to slap at them. Abdullah, who reached the top of the hill first, is relaxed. It's an easy jaunt for him. He idly taps the base of a tall tree, watching a hole in the bark for bees to come out.

Later we meet a lone aboriginal hunter with his blowpipe, who shyly accepts a plate of meat and rice from us, but declines to sit with us, going a little way down the path for a confab with Abdullah.

On the way down the hill, two of the men start uprooting saplings with long, dark, pointed leaves. It is explained that they are after the root, pungent and smelling something like ginger. These roots will later be boiled for hours, and the resultant paste mixed into a drink that makes one highly energetic and sexually potent. It's one of nature's own aphrodisiacs and another reason why killing rhino is unnecessary.

Our last camp is by a very broad, sunny stretch of river with gentle rapids and an island with red hot pebbles on which we drape our washing to steam dry. Someone sets up the fishing rod on a forked stick, dug into the beach, and we fall into our familiar routine of making fire and stretching canvas before night comes.

When we set off the next morning, well fed on the good tally of catfish we caught last night, we're at ease, able for the first time to set out without packs. And with no need to begin at the crack of dawn, the morning is already bright.

Walking downstream for a few hundred yards, there is suddenly an excited yell from Hassan. There in the mud, on one of the banks, is a wide, flat, three-toed footprint: surely one made by the Sumatran Rhino. Out come the tape measures, which confirm its correct dimensions, about 20 cm in width. There's no argument about tapirs this time. The track is photographed and each of the 6 rangers jots details of the find in his notebook, for the scrutiny of the exacting Khairiah ba

We cross the river, penetrate the jungle a short distance, and there looms Jenu Segantang, the inaccessible salt-lick beyond which we shall walk no further. It's a cold, dark, gloomy marsh, alive with mosquitoes and green plants thrusting their way through the slime. But there is not much sign of animal life. There are some deer tracks and we squelch around in the gloom, looking for evidence of rhino. Hassan says he thinks no rhino have been here for a year.

That it, then. Mission accomplished. One rhino print to show for days of sweat, toil, and grime. Hassan says it is a good result, as much as we could have expected. Some of the teams are as likely as not to return empty-handed, he says.

On the way back to base four of our party gradually increase their pace and move away from the two rangers I am with. It happens almost imperceptibly and through someone's inattention we are suddenly without anybody in the lead marking the return trail by the marks we had cut on the trees.

The three of us are lost and it is a scary experience. We all know the jungle can very easily swallow us up and snuff us out. We wander around the undergrowth for hours, thorny creepers ripping our clothes, leeches renewing their attacks. There is much discussion and cursing about which way we came and which way we ought to be going, but no sight of the precious kumbangs.

Suddenly I see a tree bole with a strange shape which I had noticed on the outward journey. The relief is overwhelming but before I'm able to shout out, the lead ranger has spotted the cuts on the trees we'd made earlier and we are back on the trail. Before dark we rejoin the other group, sitting with their packs by a bend in the river. There's laughter and commiseration at our luck that could have turned very bad.

We're all glad to finally reach Kuala Tahan. Mundane activities like taking a shower or reading a magazine seem especially pleasurable. Rangers from other parties drift back in dribs and drabs. None of the ones we meet have seen any rhino either. Like our footprint data, theirs too will be collated back in Kuala Lumpur. Meanwhile, it's time to put on clean cotton clothes, and repair to the bar for a cold beer.