

# THE SUMATRAN RHINO

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## comment

Of the world's five species of rhino, the Sumatran has the dubious distinction of being the most endangered. At the end of the 2nd World War it was still widely distributed from eastern India throughout South East Asia and down through Borneo and Sumatra. This little rhino is both the smallest and the most primitive of the rhino family and is the animal most closely related to the extinct woolly rhino of Eurasia. It is the only Asian rhino with two horns and the only rhino with hair on its body. An inhabitant of dense forest, both swamp and montane, it is by far the most solitary of the rhinos and has proved totally impossible to breed in captivity. Like all rhinos it has three toes, but leaves a track totally different from all other rhinos as its toes are protuberant, enabling it to move on very steep slopes. Being a browser it has a prehensile upper lip like the black rhino, but has a smaller and narrower head for its size. For fighting, like the Indian rhino, it uses its tushes rather than its horn. Because of the value of its horn both in traditional Chinese medicine and as speculators commodity in the financial markets of the Far East, this lovely little rhino is in serious trouble. Some 300 to 400 animals may still exist in small, widely scattered populations, but for many their breeding potential is nil. Pockets of less than ten animals are generally not viable and their numbers are considered to have declined by 50% since 1990. As well as being poached for its horn, the Sumatran rhino is more at risk also from habitat degradation than are its African cousins. The hardwood forests of Sumatra, where some of the last viable populations exist, are being harvested at a wholly unsustainable rate as is the case throughout South East Asia.

In Sumatra there are four populations of these rhino which, if protected, might ensure the species' survival. Kerenci Seblat on the mountains' west side, had a population of between 250 - 500 in the 1980's. It is believed that currently only 9 - 11 remain. Gunning Leuser in the north may still have as many as 60. Burkit Barasan in the south west may have approximately 30, but this very long and narrow park will be very difficult to provide with effective protection both because it has such long borders

and such difficult habitat. The best hope of the survival for this rhino may lie in the Way Kambas National Park in the south west. This is an area of 120 000 hectares of lowland swamp forest that was heavily logged in the 1960's, but has been protected since and is now old secondary growth forest providing excellent rhino habitat and believed to contain between 20 and 30 animals.

Between 1984 and 1994 some 40 Sumatran rhinos were captured for a captive breeding project in Europe and the United States of America, which proved to be not only exceedingly costly, but totally disastrous for the animals concerned. Most died and none bred. Now a totally different attempt is being made to save these animals. A sanctuary is being constructed for them in the middle of the Way Kambas National Park. I was so fortunate to visit this Park for nine days in June 1997 in company with Dr Tom Foose of the International Rhino Foundation, Dr Nico van Strien, one of the very few people who have studied this animal in the field, Fred Bagley of the US Fish and Wildlife, Philip Wells, a young Englishman who has spent the past few years searching the wilder parts of Sumatra for evidence of the rhino's existence and Peter Lichfield of Port Lympne, in the United Kingdom, where there is a single male Sumatran rhino. This sanctuary is different in concept to the African sanctuaries - it is a lot smaller and will be managed a lot more intensively. A roughly circular area has been enclosed by an electric fence and this will be divided into sections all opening into a circular central area. It is hoped to put into these sections those wild captured animals that are still alive in zoos in the United Kingdom, the States and a few zoos in South East Asia. The total area enclosed is only 100 hectares but the vegetation is dense and the rainfall very high, thus the carrying capacity is considerable. The problem with Sumatran rhinos is that they are much more solitary than other rhinos and therefore, more aggressive towards each other in captive situations. It is envisioned that the females will be allowed into the central area when in oestrus, as well as a male. It is hoped that he will follow one of the females back into

her section and, being in her territory, this would reduce his aggressive tendencies. If the programme succeeds and the animals adjust to a semi wild situation and consequently breed successfully, some could be used as a breeding nucleus for other sanctuaries or to make other small populations viable. An alternative is that the fence could just be removed and the animals become part of the Way Kambas populations.

It must be remembered that this is very much a last ditch operation to save one of the world's most endangered animals, which because of its nature and habitat, is virtually impossible to study in the wild.

