

Malaysia's Sumatran Rhino Programme

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As part of an 'aggressive drive' to manage the endangered Sumatran rhino in the early 1970s, the Malaysian Wildlife Department set up a Management Unit which aims, among other objectives, to build up a captive breeding group. The Director of the Unit here describes how they have captured nine animals in areas where they were threatened, all but one of them females.

After 13 years of hard work the conservation and management programme for the Sumatran rhinoceros *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis* has produced outstanding results in terms of research data, capture and translocation techniques, clinical and captive management procedures. It has also trained a team of dedicated and skilful wildlife workers.

The Rhinoceros Research Unit (RRU) was set up in 1974 in the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP) under the direction of Mohd Khan Momin Khan, Director-General of the Department, and Louis C. Ratnam, Head of the Research Division. The main objectives were to:

- determine the Sumatran rhino distribution nationwide;
- estimate the rhino population; and
- study the rhino's ecology.

Several other units were formed in the Taman Negara (the national park) and the states of Selangor, Pahang and Johore, whose main function was to monitor the rhino population and help in the massive data-gathering process by submitting monthly reports on field observations and survey. The results were published in 1984/85 in the DWNP's *Journal of Wildlife and Parks*, the *Malayan Nature Society Journal* and *Biological Conservation*, and theses submitted to the Montana University and West Virginia University.

In late 1985, the DWNP began an aggressive drive to manage the rhinoceros in Malaysia. The Research Unit was renamed the Management Unit (SRMU) under the newly created Division of Wildlife Management, and its major functions adjusted to meet the conservation and management requirements:

- to capture and translocate rhinos in doomed/dangerous habitats;
- to create captive-breeding groups at the Malacca Zoological Park and Sungai Dusun Wildlife Reserve (Selangor);
- to protect the rhino habitat; and
- to create conservation awareness.

In November 1985 an ad hoc Capture Committee was formed to design and formulate safe trapping and handling techniques.

Two areas in Pahang, Bukit Gebok and Kg. Ulu Atok, two in Johore, Kambau and Tenggaraoh, and Sungai Dusun in Selangor were identified as critical areas in which the rhinos are in great danger of extinction due to habitat degradation and loss. Surface traps were used at Kambau, Bukit Gebok and Ulu Atok to capture the free-ranging rhinos. These proved ineffective, but a pitfall trap installed at Ulu Atok captured a rhino within 12 hours. Unfortunately the animal escaped, and a few weeks later another escaped from a pitfall trap at Kambau. This was a major setback and the operation came to a standstill. The pitfall was redesigned, and in February 1986 the hard work of 40 workers was well rewarded when an adult female was captured near Mersing. In May the operation was moved to Sungai Dusun, near the Selangor-Perak boundary, and in July a female was caught north of the Sungai Dusun in Perak. One animal was poached near the trap by a local person, but six days later in September another female was caught, and four more females were captured by February 1987.

The Malacca Zoological Park and Sungai Dusun Wildlife Reserve were selected by the DWNP as the breeding centres for the rhinos, and the park has now handled nine animals, which serve a dual role, as a genetic nucleus and as exhibits for the zoo visitors. A team of researchers is doing management-oriented studies, and providing extremely useful data for both MZP and other breeding facilities throughout the world.

The Government of Malaysia had committed a sum of M\$1.1 million over a five-year period for the captive management of the rhino at Sungai Dusun Reserve. At Malacca Zoo part of the M\$4.8 million government fund will be used for rhino captive management. With good financial support from the government and long-term commitment by the Department, we expect to achieve our goal of restoring the rhino population in Malaysia.