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CONSERVATION HOTLINE

Cunningham? BERGER

Bad News for Sumatran Rhinos

A SURVEY OF THE GREATER DANUM Valley Conservation Area in Sabah, Malaysia, has revealed shockingly little evidence of Sumatran rhinos. The Sumatran, or hairy, rhino is the smallest of the five rhinoceros species and it is one of the rarest and most threatened large mammals in the world.

ENDANGERED

New York Zoological Society scientist Alan Rabinowitz coordinated the survey with the Sabah Wildlife Department and WWF-Malaysia. Seven teams spent 500 man-days searching an area of 400 square miles. Danum was thought to contain one of the two best sites for breeding populations of Sumatran rhinos in Sabah, but Rabinowitz reports that though the region is incredibly rich in wildlife, including Asian elephants, banteng, sun bears, and clouded leopards, extremely few signs of rhinos were found. Team members did discover a remote camp of 25 hunters—possibly rhino poachers—who apparently fled, leaving their food, machetes, and clothes behind. Without the survey, the poachers' presence would have remained undetected. Datuk Wilfred Lingham, with the Sabah ministry for tourism and environmental development, warned of stern action for poachers caught in the Danum Valley conservation site.

Deborah A. Behler

BILL MEDIG/NEW YORK ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY

A Sumatran rhino, one of only 500 to 800 remaining on Earth

The De-horning Dilemma

GROG IS A RHINO WITHOUT A HORN. IT'S FOR HIS OWN good. Perhaps this extreme measure will keep him, and other African black rhinoceroses, alive. De-horning rhinos is part of a dramatic anti-poaching strategy started in Namibia in 1989 and in Zimbabwe in 1991. It's a desperate attempt to save the region's remaining rhinos. No one is sure what effect it will have on the animals' behavior and whether it is an economically feasible solution.

FIELD NOTE

With funding from the New York Zoological Society, we set out in 1991 to look at de-horned black rhinos in Namibia's Kunene River Province. Our first major question: How fast do the horns grow back? Very quickly, we discovered—approximately three and a half inches in a year. That may not sound like much, but this amount of rhino horn can fetch $1,775 to $7,750 on the black market. Yearly horn removal would seem to be the only way to combat such inducement; but at $1,400 per rhino per year, is this procedure cost effective? Balanced against cost is the risk of having rhinos poached and whether that danger is constant or subject to market whim. We do know that where there is poaching, rhinos that have horns of any size are killed.

CAROL CUNNINGHAM

In the de-horning procedure, a special tar is painted on the stump to seal and protect it.

Media coverage of the de-horning project has been positive, and the policy has been credited with saving Namibia's rhinos. But there is no way to substantiate the claim because horned rhinos are not now being poached there. It's possible that past poaching was a factor of political unrest. Now that the South African Defense Forces have left and Namibia has gained independence, tensions have eased with Angola and South Africa.

We have also learned that when female black rhinos go to find water, they tend to leave behind youngsters less than six months old. Thus, females may be being counted twice in censuses—once with and once without young—inflating population figures.

We are continuing our study of Grog and other de-horned black rhinos in Namibia and hope soon to compare our results with those from a similar project recently begun by our colleague, Janet Rachlow, in Zimbabwe.

Carol Cunningham and Joel Berger

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