

# NEW HOPE FOR BULLIED "WOOLLIES"

by Peter Jackson

**F**or years conservationists have been anxious about the fate of the elusive Sumatran rhino — sometimes known as the "woolly" rhino. The estimated 850 of these unique creatures left in the world face extinction because of hunting and human population pressure in their native Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. But their day may now have been saved by a bold conservation plan, a joint effort of government agencies and professionals in management of species in captivity.

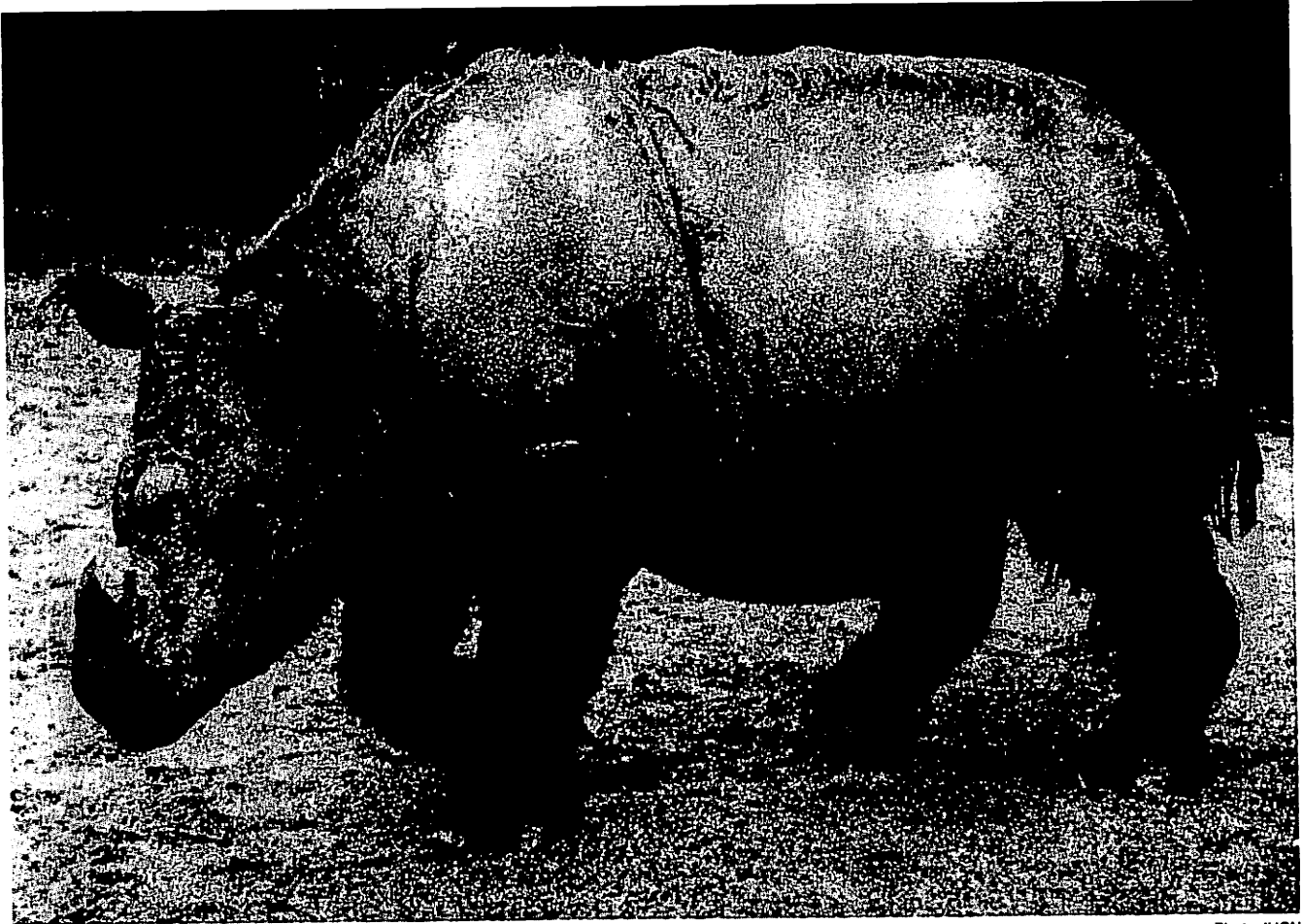


Photo: IUCN

The Indonesian and Malaysian governments, together with selected zoos in Britain and the United States, have undertaken a major long-term programme to save these rarely-seen rhinos from extinction.

Under the programme, the rhino will receive better protection in sufficiently large areas of its natural habitat. There will be a captive breeding programme to preserve its genetic diversity in its home countries, as well as in North America and Europe. In addition an education programme will be launched to enhance public awareness of the rhino's plight and to generate support for its conservation.

## Numbers declining fast

Concern about this secretive forest

animal grew recently as a series of studies revealed that its numbers were declining fast. Late last year in Singapore the Species Survival Commission of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) convened a meeting of those interested in remedial action. Out of that meeting came the estimate that not more than 850 survive, and perhaps fewer than 500. At last November's IUCN General Assembly in Madrid, the Sumatran rhino was named among the world's Top Twelve most threatened animal species.

Now agreement on launching the conservation programme that may radically change this state of affairs has been provisionally reached be-

tween representatives of the Indonesian and Malaysian governments, the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquaria (AAZPA), and Howlett's and Port Lympne Zoo Parks in Britain. In America, it is hoped to have rhinos at San Diego, Los Angeles, Cincinnati and New York, where zoos have an established record of breeding success with other rare animals.

As might be expected, the largest population of the Sumatran rhino *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis* is found in Sumatra, with 250 — 400 in the vast Kerinci-Seblat mountains on the west coast, and between 130 and 200 in Gunung Leuser in the north. There may be up to 60 rhinos in the Barisan-Selatan reserve in the extreme south-

Peninsular Malaysia probably at least 35 in Taman Negara (Nasir) (Nasir Park), and there may be 12 or 13 in the border of Sabah and Pahang states.

There are only small clusters of rhinos. Southeastern Sabah has between 15 and 30, and there may be some in Kalimantan — the western part of the island of Borneo. There may still be a few, but it is not clear whether any survive in Thailand.

### Sumatran rhino

The Sumatran rhino is the smallest of the surviving rhino species — the African rhino in Africa is about five times as heavy. The Sumatran rhino is like the two African rhinos, the Indian and Javan rhinos, in many ways. The skin along its back is thick, rather like a buffalo's and many believe it is closely related to the Woolly Rhino which became extinct in prehistory and which, in a way, owns "copyright" in the name.

The Sumatran rhino lives only in the tropical forests, unlike other rhino species which favour open areas or riverside areas. A century ago Sumatran rhinos still roamed the foothills in India, and through vast undisturbed forests in Southeast Asia and to the islands of Sumatra and Borneo. The greatest threat to the species comes from hunting for its horn and other parts (which are highly prized in traditional medicine in China and other parts) and from erosion of its habitat by human settlement.

The Sumatran rhino is an extremely difficult animal to study. Dr Nico Van Strien, a Dutch mammologist who has been appointed Coordinator of the Sumatran Rhino Conservation Programme, had to rely on tracks, feed signs, and other evidence during his search in Gunung Leuser. He has a world record of sightings — 11 in four years.

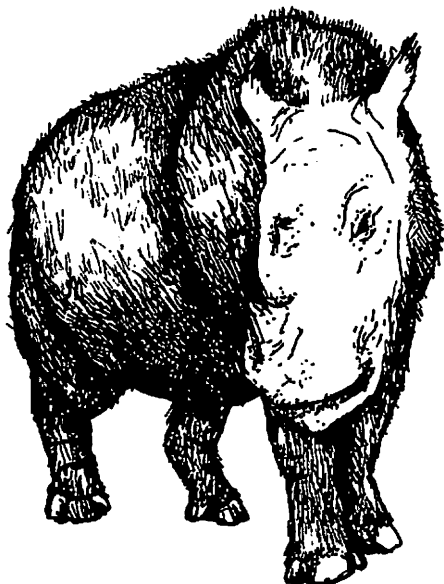
"I had a really good view of a Sumatran rhino with a young calf. The other sightings were just glimpses in the distance," he says. "Swiss biologist Hans Boller saw only one during his search in Gunung Leuser, while Dr Lynn, an American specialist, saw one or two in Malaysia."

The circumstances trapping the Sumatran rhino in captivity are likely to be difficult. It has now been many years since any specimens were captured and the exercise never had any breeding success.

"It is easy to put the traps in a rhino area, but then it is just a matter of waiting to see whether a rhino decides to fall into the trap. That could take a long time," declares Dr Van Strien.

### Risks

Because the aim, above all, is to conserve the rhino in the wild, trapping will be confined to "doomed" animals — those occurring as small isolated populations with no future because their habitat cannot be preserved. There are risks in the captive breeding programme, for there is very little experience of handling Sumatran rhinos in zoos, although Indian and both kinds of African rhinos have been successfully bred.



"We shall have to learn a lot," says Dr Van Strien. "But the rhinos we capture will be those subject to greater risks in the wild than in captivity. We shall decide on a case-by-case basis. If there is good chance for an animal to contribute to breeding in the wild, we shall leave it there."

The last captive Sumatran rhino in captivity died in Copenhagen Zoo ten years ago. It was one of three which survived a capture operation in Riau, Sumatra, in 1958 to start captive breeding. At that time six females were caught, while a male escaped. However, recently a young female rhino wandered far from the reserve of Sungai-Dusum in Malaysia and was captured by villagers. The Game Department was able to save it and it is now in the Malacca Zoo, where a captive breeding centre is to be established.

The organisers of the new programme are determined to succeed. Dr Van Strien has the task of drawing up the Master Plan, which will be multinational and will include collaboration with Western zoos. They will provide support for conservation in the wild and technical assistance in field capture and transfer operations. Bilateral agreements will provide for captive breeding in the countries of the rhinos' origin, as well as in Britain and the United States. All the captive animals and their offspring will be managed cooperatively as a "World Population".

Three subspecies of the Sumatran rhino coexist with the true form in some areas. Until further studies have been carried out, care will be taken not to mix the subspecies with the species, either in captive breeding or in translocations in the wild.

### Poachers turn conservationists

Because rhino horn is fetching higher and higher prices as it becomes rarer, there is still hunting for the Sumatran rhino. But Dr Van Strien says the art is dying out. And in a rather strange twist, some former poachers may be employed in the coming programme because they have the stamina to remain in the forest for the long periods necessary to locate rhinos.

Captive breeding as a conservation measure has had some signal successes in recent years — the rehabilitation of the Arabian Oryx is the example that springs soonest to mind. But many zoologists remain unconvinced of its worth. The efforts to rehabilitate the Sumatran rhino provide an intriguing new arena for this debate.

Some would argue that such costly and elaborate manoeuvres to save "basket case" species run counter to natural selection and distract attention and resources from higher conservation priorities, such as the deflection of human pressure from habitats and species still in reasonably good shape. Education campaigns to discourage the medical use of animal parts like rhino horn, may be another longer-term answer. But the planners of the rehabilitation programme are mainly concerned with keeping conservation options open by sheltering at least some breeding animals from further harm.

And their problem is not so much a matter of principle, more a matter of finding the publicity-shy star of the show.

