



Glass eye of stuffed Sumatran rhino reproves visitors to Malaysia's National Museum

ASIA'S VANISHING WILDLIFE

Many Species Are Threatened with Extinction

By JOHN B. KOFFEND

FROM behind a whitewashed wooden barricade in Malaysia's National Museum, the limpid brown eyes stared, seeing nothing. They were of glass, but so artfully made that they endowed with various life the creature in whose stuffed body the taxidermist had mounted them. Returning their sightless gaze, I could imagine that they cast upon me a reproachful look. This was a specimen of the Sumatran rhinoceros, a shy and gentle animal that once ranged in uncounted numbers through Southeast Asia and beyond, and that man in his infinite cruelty and greed has brought to the lip of extinction.

Of the world's five species of rhinoceros, two in Africa and three in Asia, the Sumatran (*Didermoceros sumatrensis*) is the smallest, and the only one in Asia with two horns. The second horn is scarcely more than a knob, which the Malay, with unconscious affection, call the "cooking pot lid." A full-grown animal stands some 4½ feet at the shoulder, is eight feet long and weighs less than a ton.

In contrast, the Indian rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) is twice as heavy, measures six feet or more at the shoulder and 14 feet in length; the two African varieties, both double-horned, are about as large. The Sumatran rhino's buff-grey skin is smooth and covered with coarse brown hair — the only hairy rhinoceros — with a conspicuous fold behind the shoulder.

There are no Sumatran rhinos in captivity. Sixteen years ago, a Dutch expedition to Java captured five specimens, but three died before they could be shipped to zoos. The last of the two caged survivors died in Copenhagen in 1972. No one knows how many animals survive in the wild. There may be 30 left in the Malaysian peninsula. In the late 1960s, David L. Strickland, a biologist from the University of California, spent 10 months in the Sungei Dusun Game Preserve, an 11,000-acre tract in the state of Selangor, five miles from the Perak border, without sighting a single animal. From tracks and spoor and other signs, however, he confirmed the presence of two and possibly

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Bengal tiger, this one resident of New Delhi Zoo, faces extinction within 25 years

three rhinos — which could or could not have been Sumatran.

In its imperiled existence, the Sumatran rhino is not alone. Another of the Asian species, the Javan (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*), has been described by the World Wildlife Fund as "probably the largest rare animal in the world." This one-horned animal, 5½ feet at the shoulder, 10 feet long, weighing about a ton, is found today only in East Java's 100,000-acre Kulong Game Preserve. Once it was common to Malaysia as well, but no Javan rhino has been seen there since a specimen was killed in Perak for the British Museum in January 1932 — 42 years ago. Thanks to careful patrolling of the Kulong Preserve, however, the Javan rhino may be "retreating from the brink of extinction," as the Wildlife Fund reports in its Red Data Book on the world's endangered species. In the last five years, the number has nearly doubled, from 24 to 44.

The Indian rhino has a somewhat firmer grasp on life. There are known to be some 750 wild specimens and 39 others in the world's zoos, 10 of which were born in captivity. However one may feel about imprisoning wild animals in zoos for the entertainment of the public, it is one way to preserve a species; the same ap-

plies to both African varieties, which are popular zoo animals around the world and which also breed in captivity. The giant Indian rhino is like no other. Blackish-grey in color, its skin is profusely studded with large round tubercles, a characteristic to be found in no other species. Like all rhinos, which have a wholly undeserved reputation for ferocity, it is shy and harmless unless provoked. And, like all its kind, it is a vegetarian.

Human superstition and cupidity, more than any other factor, are responsible for the Asian rhino's decline. For centuries the peoples of the region, particularly the Chinese, have attributed aphrodisiac qualities to the rhino horn, which is pulverized and made into a potion. It is believed that when the animal is angry, blood rushes to the horn, thereby enhancing its potency as a medicine and sexual stimulant. None of this is so, but the truth has not prevented wholesale slaughter of the rhino for its horn.

Only 30 years ago, a genuine rhino horn was worth £100 Sterling (then about US\$450) on the market. Even today, scraps of horn, which are sold as rhino horn but may come from any corniculate animal, even the carabao, will cost

the buyer the price of a new suit. As the rhino population dwindled, prices rose. Quite recently in Burma, authentic rhino horn sold for as much as US\$200 per inch, fresh rhino blood for US\$30 a pound, scraps of hide for US\$6 a pound. Even the urine and dung are traded briskly; one can be forgiven for wondering to what use they are put. Penalties for shooting rhino have not markedly affected the demand. In Malaysia, a convicted rhino poacher can be fined up to M\$3,000 (US\$1,230) and sentenced to two years in prison, or both. The only true deterrent is the animal's scarcity.

The rhino is also threatened by human encroachment on its habitat. Except for the Indian rhino, which roams the grassy plains of Nepal, Bengal and Assam, the Asian species are forest dwellers, favoring the dense tropical jungle and seldom leaving it except to forage. As man's machines shave the jungle clean and replace it with agricultural and industrial development, the rhinoceros is forced into ever-diminishing domain — too small to support the sizeable herds that once fed there. In this respect, the rhino is an innocent victim of civilization, which has already eliminated hundreds of species from the face of the earth.

THE rhino is perhaps the most spectacular of civilization's victims. But the list of vanishing Asian species does not end with this beast. It also includes the tiger, which evolution has split into eight subspecies, all indigenous to Asia: the Indian (or Bengal), Chinese, Indochinese, Sumatran, Balinese, Caspian, Javan and Siberian — the last being the largest of the tigers, a huge and tawny animal with black stripes. Of these, the Bali tiger is already extinct, the Javan very nearly so; four more, the Sumatran, Caspian, Chinese and Indochinese, are seriously threatened. Only six or seven Javan tigers remain, all within the Beteri Reserve in East Java. No one can say how many Indochinese tigers survive, as the animal has never been seriously studied by zoologists, nor has any reliable census been taken. There is a specimen in Kuala Lumpur's Zoo Negara, caught in a trap nearly 24 years ago. The method of capture cost the animal a leg, so it is not on display.

Unless a rescue campaign is mounted, predicts the World Wildlife Fund, the magnificent Indian tiger will be gone within the next 25 years. Its number has declined to 2,000 from some 40,000 in 1930. Two years ago, the Wildlife Fund opened a campaign to raise US\$1 million for Operation Tiger: an eleventh-hour effort to save this doomed species. "The

nations of the world rightly gave generously to save those great monuments to human skill, the Abu Simbel temples*," said Crown Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands and president of the Fund. "The Tiger is of equal importance as one of the marvels of evolution of life on earth. And what is more, once wiped out, it can never be re-created."

For the world's endangered species, the Wildlife Fund constitutes a vitally important ally. Formed in 1961 by an international group of scientists and businessmen concerned with the degradation of the world's wilderness areas and the fauna which inhabit it, it has joined hands with the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), an agency of UNICEF that has struggled along since 1948 with insufficient funds and staff. Each year it publishes what is called the Red Data Book, which registers and keeps up to date the animal species facing extinction or the threat of extinction. Among the Asian entries:

- The gaur (in Malay, *seladang*), or wild horned ox. Largest of the bovines, this animal measures six feet at the shoulder, which is humped, and weighs more than a ton. It is killed both for its flesh and for its big curved horns — which are frequently palmed off as rhinoceros horns.

- The estuarine crocodile, found throughout Southeast Asia wherever rivers meet the sea. Mature specimens attain

a length of 14 feet or more, but this amphibian has been so systematically hunted over the last 20 to 30 years that few estuarine crocodiles live long enough to reach maturity. Poachers — again, principally Chinese — prey upon the helpless hatchlings, which are kept in concrete tanks for three or four years until four feet in length, then sold for their hides, which make handsome belts, purses and footwear. The estuarine crocodile has been known to breed in captivity, most successfully on a crocodile farm outside Bangkok, whose proprietor now possesses the world's largest breeding stock — and who reportedly refuses to share with anyone the secret of successful breeding.

- The orang-utan, the "old man of the forest", found only in Brunei and Sumatra. Like the other species listed here, the orang-utan is protected, but its popula-

tion declines anyway, due to forest clearance: this great ape is a highly excitable simian which prefers solitude and flees from any disturbance. Estimated population today: 5,000, including those in zoos.

- The Malaysian gharial, a small fish-eating crocodile with a pointed snout, resembling an alligator and inhabiting only fresh-water rivers. The gharial is hunted for its meat, which is sold even in Kuala Lumpur. No one knows how many exist; no census has even been taken.

- The Asian bony-tongued fish, found only in fresh-water Malaysian lakes.

WHETHER any of these threatened species survives depends entirely on the concern of their common enemy: Man. The prospect can only be described as bleak. Neither Russia nor Japan, for example, recognizes an international agreement protecting the whale, the largest animal ever to inhabit earth. In America, callous hunters continue to bag the whooping crane on its annual flight from its winter home in the Canadian Arctic to its breeding grounds in the marshes of Southern Louisiana. The whooping crane seems to be slowly winning its fight for survival: in the last generation, its number has increased from a mere handful to more than 50; captive specimens have been successfully bred.

In the judgment of Kenneth W. Scriven, a Briton who represents the World Wildlife Fund in Kuala Lumpur, the gentle Sumatran rhinoceros can survive in peninsular Malaysia only if all the animals now at large are captured and transported to the country's national game park, Taman Negara, 1,677 square miles of virgin rain forest lying mostly in the state of Pahang. Such a measure would cost millions — and would also demand eternal vigilance once the rhino has adapted to its new home. Only man can decide whether the effort is worth the price. ■



Portraits of Asia's 3 rhinoceros species, as seen by Wildlife Fund artist: Indian (above), Javan (lower left) and Sumatran (lower right), each fighting for survival.

