

REPORT ON SURVEY OF THE SUMATRAN RHINOCEROS

IN MID-SUMATRA. MAY-JUNE, 1963

World Wildlife Fund Project No.35

by

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## INTRODUCTION

Phase I of the current orang-utan and rhinoceros survey was carried out earlier this year in North Sumatra and Atjeh - areas which I hope to visit again to continue investigations. During Phase II of the survey an attempt was made to study the status of the Sumatran rhinoceros in an area of Central Sumatra near Pekanbaru. As this is the area in which the specimens for the Basel and Copenhagen zoos were captured I hoped to obtain some positive information but at the end of a month, when I had to terminate my field work as I all but cut off the tips of two fingers on some bamboo, I had collected a lot of negative information which, of course, is valuable.

In this introductory paragraph I must therefore state that I can make no estimate of the possible numbers of rhinoceros in the area covered; I can say however that there were no indications that this vanishing species is either plentiful or presently existing in its former habitats.

Pekanbaru is a small isolated tidal town (pop. about 70,000) approximately 110 miles south west of the mouth of the Siak river. About 3 miles away is Rumbai which is the local headquarters of the Caltex Pacific Oil Company. When Dr. Coolidge visited Djakarta in April 1963 he very kindly obtained for me certain letters of introduction which enabled me to leave Singapore on 11 May aboard the M.V. Pulau Kitjang - a Caltex chartered 200 ton vessel that plies weekly between Singapore and Pekanbaru. I arrived in Rumbai on 13 May where I was met by a Caltex representative and driven to very fine quarters in their 'hotel'. On the same afternoon I contacted Mr. Gunawan of the Forest Department and on the following morning I met Mr. Bintang, also of the Forest Department and more directly concerned with my project. In the afternoon Mr. Gunawan took me to meet the local Acting Governor who, after I had explained my mission, assured me of all possible assistance.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to Dr. Coolidge for the letters of introduction he obtained for me from the Forest Department in Bogor and the Council of Sciences of Indonesia (M.I.P.I.). These were of great help when I went to get my Indonesia visa and, of course, when I arrived in Sumatra. In addition a letter to the Caltex representative in Singapore enabled me to travel to Pekanbaru by their chartered steamer and avail myself of their hospitality on arrival in Rumbai. I am also therefore very grateful to the Caltex representative in Singapore and members of the staff in Rumbai for all they did to help me during my stay there.

Finally my thanks go to M.I.P.I. and members of the Forest Department in Bogor and Pekanbaru for without their cooperation my field work would not have been possible.

### ITINERARY

After discussing the matter with Mr. Bintang I decided to start my field work several miles to the east of Pekanbaru on the Tanaijan river as this is the place where traps had been set up by Ryhiner, Skafte and others when they were trapping rhinoceros for the Basel, Bogor and Copenhagen zoos. To reach this area I was taken by the Forest Department launch (D.K.6) for 3 hours down the Siak river to some huts near the mouth of the Tanaijan river. Here I picked up a guide, Wali Sijin, and together with one Forest Department assistant and four porters we went up the Tanaijan river for half an hour in very small and unstable dugouts each of which had a freeboard of about 3 inches. After camping for the night we walked the next day for 5 hours before arriving at a small jungle clearing (cultivated) where we made camp in a native hut. Nearby was one of Skafte's traps ... still standing but unuseable. From here we made daily excursions into the surrounding jungle in all directions (walking for about 7 hours each day). We then moved camp to another small hut near the source of the river. After 9 days, during which time the very heavy rain had flooded the river and minor tributaries so that it was virtually impossible to move through the swamp forest, we walked northwards to Okura village where a boat took us back to Rumbai.

On the second trip the Forest Department launch took us to Buatan, 7 hours down the Siak river, and from here, which is the riverine station of the Standard Vacuum Oil Company, we took a local truck to Kerentji, 17 miles to the south. We collected the local headman who agreed to act as our guide and then continued south to Uka'i (100 miles from Buatan) which is a few miles north of the Kuantan river. The guide was at somewhat of a loss, however, when we found that most of the former rhinoceros habitat - which he had known - had been completely denuded of forests and although we looked over the entire neighbourhood we found no signs of their presence. We then returned north to a small hamlet, Matjang, and from here visited the jungle. It was on one of these trips that I cut my fingers and had to return to the Caltex hospital at Rumbai for treatment.

### DESCRIPTION OF COUNTRY

Most of the eastern section of Central Sumatra is low lying land except for a few stretches of undulating hills about 300 - 400 feet above sea level. Apart from the cultivated areas much

of the land is covered by swamp forest; a large portion of this is tidal.

The higher land is covered by thick jungle but in many places this is in the process of being cut down so that more land is made available for cultivation. That agriculture had taken place some 50 years ago is apparent by large areas of secondary growth forest.

The three large rivers, Siak, Kampar and Kuantan flow eastwards, the first into the Straits of Malacca and the other two into the South China Sea. Each of these rivers is fed by a multitude of small streams that come from the swamp forests.

The swamp forest is dense and very unpleasant. Apart from the taller trees the undergrowth is typified by such flora as Zalacca spp, Licuala spp, Corypha spp, Oncosperma horrida, Arenca spp, Nepenthes spp, and varieties of cane (Calamus spp). Common amongst the riparian cultivated flora is the sago palm (Metroxylon sagus) and many square miles of rubber plantations.

Walking over the submerged portion of the forest is made extremely difficult owing to the countless inverted 'U' shaped roots of the mangroves. Leeches and mosquitoes are myriad and add to the general discomfort.

The forest on the higher ground is quite pleasant as the thick overhead canopy inhibits the development of heavy undergrowth and so one can walk fairly freely in almost any direction. Some parts of the forest are climaxed by bamboo (possibly Cephalostachyus pergracile). In the secondary growth forest much of the floor is covered by mosses, Lycopodium spp and Gleichenia spp.

The primary forest is being cut down and there are many square miles of felled timber (over which one has to scramble very warily) waiting to be burnt before the land can be cultivated. Small saw pits are very common and certain trees are cut into planks for the construction of new houses.

#### FIELD OBSERVATIONS

On both of the two trips I was able to obtain the valuable assistance of people who had accompanied Skafte and his party and was accordingly taken to areas which had been visited by these gentlemen, about 4 years ago. In spite of this and the fact that I walked about 60 miles through the jungle I saw no rhinoceros tracks, droppings or wallows although I did come across one small collection of shrubs, about 5 feet high, which had been browsed on. The guides said they had definitely been eaten by rhinoceros but the lack of any tracks in soil that was

easily impressionable left me unconvinced. Sambhur or tapir might have been responsible. I think that the present incursions being made by the local inhabitants into the jungle have driven the rhinoceros away from their former haunts and they are now seeking refuge in the very remote areas which are well guarded by the extensive swamp forest and places to which the native is very unwilling to go.

Tapir (Tapirus indicus) were common, judging by their tracks, and this led to considerable confusion, such as I had experienced in Malaya. The tapir has four toes, each with a rather long and pointed nail. The rhinoceros has only three nails and these are rounded. If both tracks are compared side by side under good conditions the differences are quite obvious but in the jungle such conditions are by no means always obtainable. Sometimes the impression of the fourth nail is so shallow that it is almost imperceptible and occasionally it is lacking altogether. If the foot should slip slightly to one side or the other so that each nail moves in a small arc, then the imprints become rounded and not too unlike those of the rhinoceros. I examined all such dubious tracks with considerable care and was convinced that all belonged to the tapir.

#### OTHER WILDLIFE.

Elephant tracks and droppings were frequently seen and one morning we got quite close to a small herd. We could hear them moving in the forest as well as some trumpeting.

Tiger seemed to be quite common as I often came across their tracks. At the Caltex headquarters in Rumbai they were becoming a pest. Hardly a day passed without someone seeing one in the vicinity. They entered peoples gardens and just before I left one actually entered someone's house by the front door and walked through the kitchen, where an American lady was peeling potatoes, and then out of the back door. It was apparently in search of a dog which it had been eyeing for several days. (The reaction of the American lady is left to the imagination!)

Gibbons, sambhur, mouse deer, pig and bear were also common and one afternoon I saw a pair of porcupines.

There were no reports or any signs of orang-utan in the areas I covered.

#### CONCLUSIONS

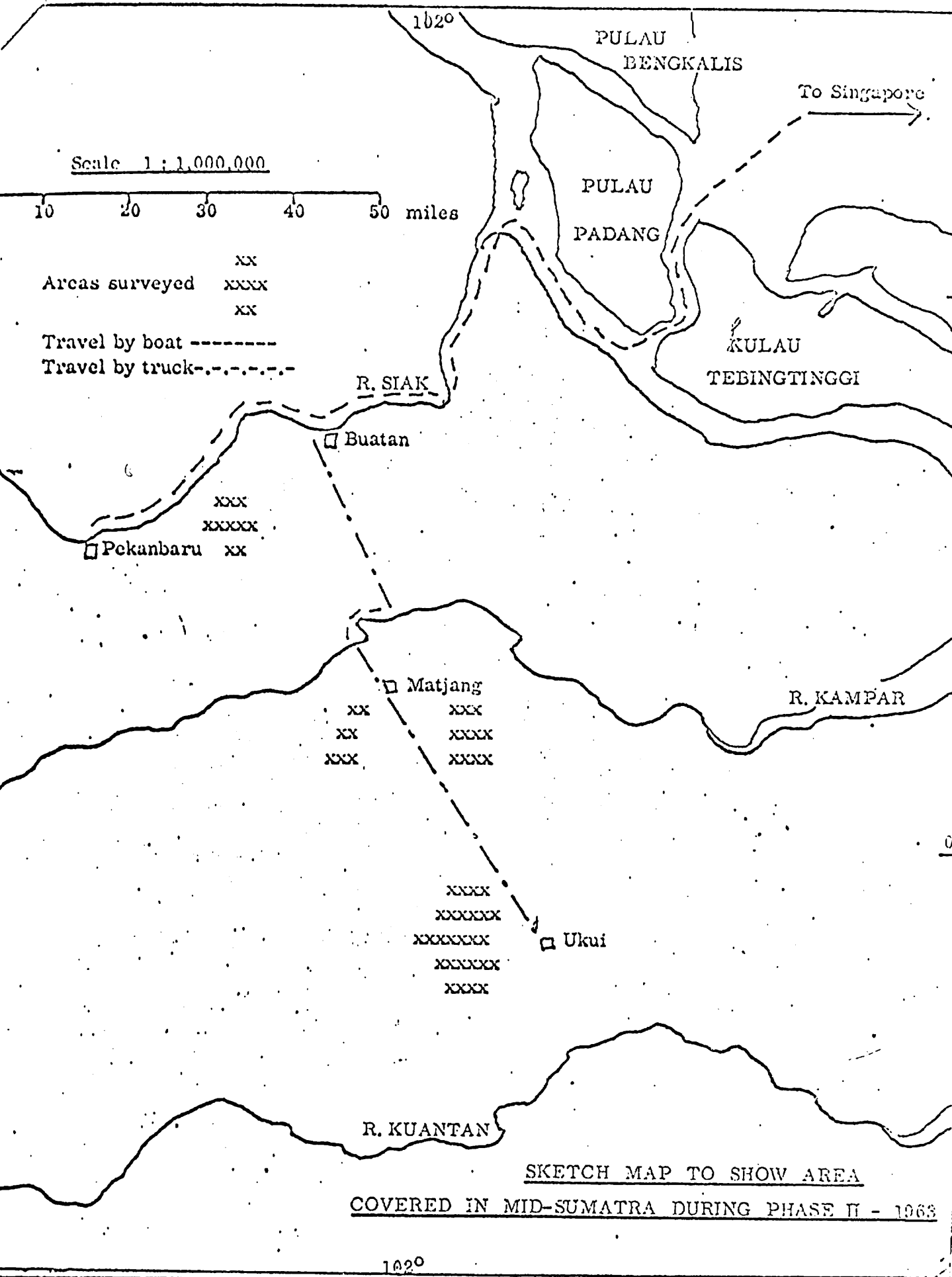
1. I can make no estimate of the number of Sumatran rhinoceros in the country east of Pekanbaru between the Siak and Kuantan rivers.

2. From on the ground investigations it is apparent that the rhinoceros have left many of their former habitats.
3. Extensive felling of primary jungle is denying the rhinoceros the use of former habitats and is forcing them to retreat to remoter areas which are barely accessible.
4. There were no indications of any poaching in any form.
5. From personal observations and information from local inhabitants it appears that no orang-utan live in this part of Central Sumatra.
6. In spite of the timber felling activities there was ample evidence that elephant, tiger, tapir and sambhur were quite common in addition to monkeys and gibbons. There were no siamang (Symphalangus syndactylus).  
Hylodactylus

NOTE: There is an interesting article entitled 'A Contribution to the Preservation of the Sumatran Rhinoceros' written by Mr. Hakon Skaftve in which he describes how he captured the specimens for the zoos. As it deals with the areas mentioned in the above report it is particularly pertinent. It can be found in The Natural History Bulletin of the Siam Society, Vol.20, No.2 of October 1962, on page 85.

## RESUME

1. This short report deals with Phase II of a one-year project in Indonesia to study the status of the Orang-utan and the Sumatran rhinoceros. // Phase I was carried out earlier in the year in North Sumatra and Atjeh. // The period under review was spent in Central Sumatra near Pekanbaru, the area in which specimens of the Sumatran rhinoceros were captured a few years ago for the Basel and Copenhagen zoos.
2. As a result of the short survey it is not possible to give any estimate of the numbers of the Sumatran rhinoceros. One can say however that they are extremely rare.
3. Extensive felling of primary jungle is forcing the rhinoceros to evacuate its former habitats and retreat to remoter areas.
4. There was no evidence of poaching.
5. There were no indications that Orang-utans inhabited the area surveyed.



SKETCH MAP TO SHOW AREA COVERED IN MID-SUMATRA DURING PHASE II - 1968