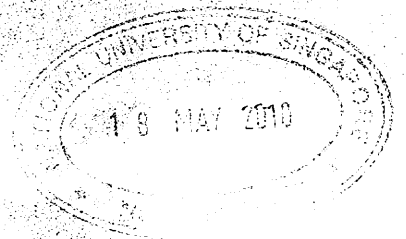


WILD SARAWAK

THE MOUNTAINS AND
OF MALAYSIA



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Photographs by
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Borneo Elephants in the lower Kinabatangan seem to thrive in grassy areas, forest edges and secondary growth. Dr Waidi Sinun, Head of Conservation and Environment for the Sabah Foundation, who has been visiting the Danum Valley repeatedly over a period of more than two decades, notes that the frequency of sightings of elephants along the road through the logged forests of Ulu Segama has increased significantly over the years. Within the primary forests of the Danum Valley and Tabin, wild elephants live and travel alone or in groups of less than 10 individuals, whereas in open areas of the Kinabatangan and Segama catchments, herds of about a hundred elephants may be seen from time to time. It seems as if the Borneo Elephant is not well adapted to Bornean forests. And therein lies a tale.

The origin of the Borneo Elephant has been the subject of debate since the early European exploration of the region. Based on contemporary 19th-century narratives, and on the peculiar distribution of the sub-species in Borneo, where it is restricted to 5 per cent of the island, it was commonly believed that the elephant is not native. Some zoologists felt that the sub-species might be restricted to fertile lowland soils and natural mineral sources, rare throughout the sandy soils and swamps that characterise much of Borneo, and totally absent in the central hill ranges. A scientific paper published in 2003, based on comparison of DNA among elephants throughout Asia, showed that the Borneo Elephant is related to the sub-species occurring in Sumatra and Peninsular Malaysia, but is significantly different, to the extent that the Bornean population might have been isolated for a period of 300,000 years. The Borneo Elephant appears to be slightly smaller than other sub-species of the Asian Elephant, and a high percentage of the individuals seen in Sabah are immature, so they appear rather cute. As a result, it has also been dubbed the Borneo Pygmy Elephant.

An elephant at Kinabatangan takes a snack of Tangkol (*Ficus racemosa*) figs. These riverside fig trees are important food sources for primates, hornbills and fruit bats.

In 2008, a further paper was published on the subject, highlighting the fact that there were feral elephants on the Jolo Islands in the southern Philippines up until the early 19th century, but no fossils of a Borneo Elephant have been found in Borneo. (Bones of an elephant were uncovered in 1987 from a swamp near the city of Banjarmasin at the southern tip of Borneo, but they seem very recent in geological terms, and are the size of a bull Indian Elephant rather than a Borneo Elephant; presumably these represent the remains of an Indian Elephant sent as a gift some centuries ago to the Banjar sultan.) These observations tend to support an old Jolo legend that Borneo's elephants originated as a gift from a ruler of Java in the late 14th century to the sultan of the southern Philippines. If true, the Borneo Elephant would be the the Java Elephant (sometimes known as *Elephas hysudrindicus*), now extinct, and represents the first – albeit unintended – human preservation of an endangered wild species by translocation to a safer habitat. Does this mean that the Borneo Elephant, possibly not native, is of less importance to conserve than definite native species such as the Bornean Rhinoceros? Not at all. Any large, threatened animal species deserves attention, wherever it happens to be. At present, there are over 1,500 elephants in Sabah – almost as many as in all of Indonesia, and more than in Peninsular Malaysia and several of the mainland Southeast Asian countries. Sabah is, in fact, a major stronghold of the Asian Elephant.

Bornean Rhinoceros

The Bornean Rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis harrissoni*) a strict forest-dwelling species that feeds almost entirely on the mature leaves and twigs of a wide variety of woody saplings, seedlings and small trees. Its low ratio of body surface area to volume in Sabah's humid tropical conditions probably means it struggles not to overheat. Unlike elephants, rhinos cannot squirt water over their body to cool off, and they do not have large ears or other organs to flap and release heat into the air. Their sole means of trying to stay cool are to travel and feed mainly at night, to stay under tree cover, and to immerse themselves in mud wallows during the hottest middle hours of the day.

Fossils show that the Bornean Rhinoceros has been on the island for many thousands of years and, towards the end of the last ice age, individuals were up to 40 per cent

Wildlife

larger than they are today. Scientifically, it is considered to be a sub-species of the Sumatran Rhinoceros, also known as the Asian Two-horned Rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*), which was once widespread throughout the forests of Southeast Asia. The species has suffered a never-ending decline in range and numbers over the past few centuries, a trend that continues to the present day. Although habitat loss has played a large role in

this decline, and there is a possibility that only certain forests or soils can sustain breeding populations, the greatest single cause has been relentless hunting for its horns, which are used in traditional Chinese medicine. At the time of writing, the global Sumatran Rhinoceros population was less than 200 individuals, with no more than 40 members of the Bornean sub-species in Sabah and perhaps a few doomed stragglers elsewhere on the



island. The Bornean Rhinoceros is one of the world's most endangered mammals, and possibly now *the* most endangered of all. Without human intervention, this animal will become extinct. The only remaining hope is to promote breeding by actively bringing together into one protected forest site some of the last few fertile females and males. If any Sabah wildlife species needs sustained help to prevent extinction, it is this one.

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