

EDITORIAL

In 1985, in a mood of cautious optimism, two projects were launched each of which aimed at establishing a captive breeding population of the Sumatran rhinoceros. The Indonesian government was a partner in both schemes, linked in one case with the Howletts and Port Lympne Foundation and in the other with a group of U.S. zoos (New York, Cincinnati, San Diego and Los Angeles). Captures from the wild started the same year. Malaysia, which operated its own separate scheme, had already caught three animals, one of which survived for only a month. In all, between 1984 and 1992 (when efforts to capture more rhinos seem to have been effectively abandoned), at least 34 animals were taken into captivity and only one was born, at Melaka (Malacca) Zoo, Malaysia, in May 1987. As far as I know, there have been no more captive births since then. There have, though, been many deaths – according to the most recent figures I have seen, the captive population now numbers only 21.

There are, of course, several causes which have contributed to this lack of success. The least excusable has been the reluctance of some holders to pool their stock in order to form the maximum possible number of breeding pairs. But another factor has been sheer bad luck – the abnormally high death rate does not in general seem to be attributable to any lack of care. In particular, it is not known how many of the rhinos were already old animals at the time of their capture. Port Lympne's experience seems relevant: both the females brought there, Subur and Meranti, subsequently died, and in each case there were grounds for suspecting that old age was the underlying cause of death. The research by Andrew Kitchener reported in this issue establishes that Meranti was most probably in her mid-thirties at the time of her death, which would represent a good average life-span for any species of rhinoceros. The research is important as the first move towards establishing objective criteria for assessing the age of Sumatran rhinos. The AZA Rhinoceros Advisory Group drew attention two years ago to the fact that 'little is known of the . . . ages of most of the [Sumatran] rhinos in captivity' (*AZA Annual Report on Conservation and Science 1993-1994*, p. 150). Dr Kitchener's findings should help to remedy this, and I hope the holders of living rhinos, and anyone who knows of the whereabouts of preserved specimens, will help him to pursue his research further. Moreover, his work – in which an academic zoologist has enlisted the help of museum specimens and historical zoo records to solve a contemporary problem of practical importance – shows the value to zoos of an interdisciplinary approach.

For Port Lympne the proof of Meranti's advanced age must have come as something of a relief. The zoo staff endured six years of frustration while she and the male, Torgamba, lived together without the longed-for breeding. At first all the omens seemed favourable: both animals sur-

prised everyone by the speed with which they adapted to captivity (when I met them a few years ago I found them amazingly friendly and well-adjusted), and they greatly enjoyed one another's company and the use of their large, wooded enclosure (as the photo on the cover of this issue clearly demonstrates). It is now evident that no action by the zoo could have prevented either Meranti's infertility or her death.

As far as can be judged from earlier zoo experience, the Sumatran rhino is not an intrinsically difficult species to maintain in captivity – in the period between 1872 and 1910 two specimens at London Zoo survived for 28 and 24 years respectively. (Such evidence as exists on the captive history of this and the other Asian rhino species up to 1961 was assembled by Richard J. Reynolds in *International Zoo Yearbook* Vol. 2, pp. 17–42.) A combination of *in situ* and *ex situ* efforts probably still offers the best hope for the survival of the species; in particular, the small, scattered non-viable populations need to be translocated either to protected reserves or to captive collections. While I was writing this editorial I received news of the captive-breeding centre now under construction within the Way Kambas National Park, one of the most important strongholds of wild Sumatran rhinos. It is hoped that Torgamba, together with 2.3 rhinos from Indonesian zoos, will be the first animals to be transferred here; later some of those in the U.S.A. may follow. This imaginative project seems to have a good chance of success; so captive breeding may still have a part to play in saving this most distinctive of all the living species of rhinoceros.

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