

Tam may head for Cincinnatti as experts wept!

Part 2 of a series
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It is not easy to make a man cry. But a slew of macho Malaysian and Indonesia Sumatran rhino men broke down and wept at the final session designed to give space for everyone to utter their personal last words, at the final Closing Circle session, at the March 31 to April 4 Sumatran Rhino Crisis Summit at the top notch Singapore Zoo.

That emotional scene surprised me a lot. I wasn't sure whether it was for real.

Leading the tear shedding was biologist Ramono Widodo, Executive Director of the Indonesian Sumatran Rhino Foundation – “the man who knows everything about the animal in Indonesia,” according to Datuk Dr. John Payne.

Similarly, Dr Dedi Candra – Chief Vet of the Indonesian Sumatran Rhino Foundation, cried openly.

Dr Zainal Zahari Zainuddin – a man who has worked with Sumatran rhinos all his life and now a Bora Field Manager based in Tabin Wildlife Reserve, Sabah, was a man of sorrows!

He, too, broke down and cried.

There was one more slim Indonesian guy who lost control of himself when he stepped towards the centre of the circle, where a poster size picture of Tam the Sabah male rhino was placed on the floor.

Feeling a bit awkward, a song I always found aspiring and moving entitled ‘Don't Cry For Me Argentina’ by Madonna, somehow flashed across my mind, as though to provide an immediate antidote to an incon-solable situation.

But why did these macho insiders cry?

Either because of personal attachment or they know the gravity of the situation.

Like admitted to an emergency ward

I happened to sit next to Prof Dr Abdul Hamid Ahmad on a Silk Air flight to Singapore and I mentioned the crisis summit.

He corrected: “For Sabah, it's more than a crisis, it's an emergency!”

“Since the capture of Puntung, there has been no sign of any more rhino from camera traps in Tabin,” Hamid cited.

Oh!

Probably for self comfort, people had bandied around a 40 estimate in the Sabah range going back to the 20 heads in the 120,000ha Tabin citing a 1989 survey but that wild herd had apparently gone extinct, pending another survey, as Wildlife Department Director, Datuk Dr. Laurentius Ambu assured this writer.

What's left is a probably just single population of 10 to 14 left in Danum Valley, Payne believed.

If they are not all captured for proven natural breeding experts from outside Sabah to sire babies fast track in captivity, Payne reckoned they'll all die of old age – a complete loss of genes and Sabah declares Sumatran rhino extinction.

The best part of the crisis summit was it brought together a band of the most competent rhino experts in the world.

There was the famous Dr Terri Roth, the Vet who helped sire four Sumatran rhino babies via natural breeding in captivity and a slew of experts on the African Black, White and Indian rhinos.

Need to ignite hope

It was truly like a most serious emergency case where the best specialist doctors came to the bedside to attend to the ‘patient’ immediately.

This is why amidst the sobbing groom and doom situation, we must ignite a sure sense of future survival.

I decided to step to the centre at the closing session to say: “Tam, (symbol of the species), don't worry. We know you (species) has been admitted to the emergency ward (verge of extinction) but the best doctors (rhino specialists) in the world are attending to you (species). You (Sumatran rhino) won't die (go extinct).”

Faith in wild populations waning

There was a time when the loud voice in the wilderness reigned supreme: protect rhinos in the wild and breed them in captivity to boost the species, they argued.

Now, even die-hard Sumatran rhino conservationist, Dr Nan Schaefer, founder of SOS Rhino, says she doesn't have a lot of faith in the wild population any more.

Payne echoed the same sentiment.

Alarm over how quickly rhinos die

The rhino crisis summit awoke me to a startling fact just how quickly the Sumatran rhinos die off, although they look utterly awesome and invincible!

For example, Emi and Ipuh – the famous ‘mother’ and ‘father’ that Dr Terri L. Roth used to sire three babies (Andalas, Suci and Harapan) naturally in captivity

in Cincinnatti Zoo and Botanical Gardens between 2001 and 2008, are both dead!

Emi died on 6 September 2009 while Ipuh died in mid-February 2013, less than two months to the Rhino Crisis Summit!

Very sad for Terri's team but the deep satisfaction is they died leaving behind rather quickly too a grandson – Andatu, bred and born in Way Kambas National Park, Indonesia, using Andalas as the ‘father’ – a product of a close partnership between Widodo, his chief Vet Dr Dedi Candra and none other than Dr Terri Roth.

Profitable solutions self replicate

In view of the rapid decline and limited population left, the Crisis Summit concluded that siring more rhino babies is the most urgent immediate strategy and action to prevent the extinction of the species.

Well, Cincinnatti Zoo already has proven success three times over in less than 10 years.

In other words, the world already has a profitable to mark his territory in the forest at Tabin solution, in the sense that it works, in reproducing Sumatran rhino babies naturally in captivity, three times over.

And profitable solutions self replicate. Indonesia replicated that success when they worked in partnership with Cincinnatti Zoo.



Dr Zainal: Wept for Sumatran rhino, a dying species.



Alan Lieberman: People the root cause of extinction.

No more self interest

No matter how attached or how possessive they might feel about Andalas, in the interest of the species, the Zoo sent it to Indonesia where Widodo Ramono and Dr. Chandra replicated the Cincinnatti Zoo success, working with Dr Terri of course.

“We persevered through five years of intensive efforts and endured many setbacks before finally producing Andalas – so it's hard to see him go, yet we want nothing more than to help this species from extinction so if it means giving up the first born, we rejoice at the opportunity,” said Terri the chief Vet – Vice President of Conservation, Science and Living Collections at Cincinnatti, who is likely to be remembered in history for her breakthrough techniques.

What an inner struggle between the heart and the head.

But in this dire situation, the head prevailed.

How Sabah missed the boat and Indonesia did not

One must capture that lesson especially Sabah which was actually all set to send some animals to US zoos for captive breeding in the early 1980's after former Chief Minister Datuk Harris had agreed to do it.

But Harris lost the State election, new Chief Minister Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan declared Sabah would not allow the export of rhinos to the US, a *Daily Express* news clipping dated 6 August 1985 reported, although the specific zoo wasn't identified yet then.

A man named Tom Foose who has since died, visited Sabah in April 1983 with the view of securing rhinos for a global captive breeding program and the Berjaya Government agreed but the PBS Government overturned it.

On hind sight, it turned out to be on a very the wrong side of political will.

Between 1987 and 1994, Sabah captured 10 wild rhinos to do its own captive breeding, none worked and all died.

That's not a program to replicate. Cincinnatti Zoo finally got Emi and Ipuh from Sumatra and produced the spectacular captive breeding results.

On hind sight again, Sabah missed the boat, Indonesia won, this writer actually told Dr Terri.

Dr Schaefer: Send Tam to Cincinnatti Zoo

Still, Sabah too, can replicate that Cincinnatti Zoo success.

But how?

“Send Tam to Cincinnatti Zoo – the best place for the utilisation of Tam, the best place for him to contribute to the population and that's absolutely vital,” Dr Nan Schaefer, a Sumatran Rhino reproduction physiologist and founder of SOS Rhino, who flew to Sabah straight after the Summit, with Karen Dixon, a practising lawyer and current Chairman of SOS Rhino, and met Minister of Culture, Tourism and Environment, Datuk Masidi Manjun.

Why is Cincinnatti the best place for Tam to go? “Because they have not only proven natural breeding method but they can collect genetic materials and potentially use it so they have the best combination of two to be able to help the genetic transfer of Sabah's genes which are different to the general population,” Dr Schaefer said.



Tam, the Sabah male rhino, rejected by Puntung, is tipped to go to Cincinnatti Zoo to mate with Suci. Here, he is caught spraying urine.



An African delegate at the Sumatran Rhino Crisis Summit says his last words to Tam the Sabah male rhino.

But even at Cincinnatti Zoo, assisted insemination on the Sumatran rhino is not yet a management tool at the point, Dr Schaefer noted.

And it is probably true in Berlin too.

Understanding parallelness

What does it mean when discussion on the draft action plan changed the word ‘priority’ assigned to natural breeding over assisted insemination and replaced it with the word ‘parallel’?

“What they mean by parallel is while you are doing your natural breeding, there is semen that becomes available,” Dr Schaefer said.

“When Dr Terri bred Emi with Ipuh, there was excess semen that came out of the vagina that she collected and she got that frozen. That's the allowable parallelness – the opportunity that avails itself without interfering with and distracting the proven success of natural breeding (an already proven method) that needs to be pursued,” Dr Schaefer explained.

Tam's expected role in America

What will they do with Tam in Cincinnatti Zoo?

“They will try to breed him with Suci which is a representative of the animals that are in Indonesia, so Suci is already of the other genetic line and Tam is another genetic line from Sabah and if they breed together then you will get hybrid figure which is a revitalised version of the animal of much, much stronger genetic makeup and that animal can start and restart the population and this is so important to the contribution to be made and those animals can come back to Sabah and also go on to Indonesia and contribute genes there,” Dr Nan said.

So, should we fly Tam to Cincinnatti? *Daily Express* asked jokingly.

“Yes, tomorrow!” Dr Schaefer and Karen replied in unison.

Karen: Time is critical

Time is a critical factor, Karen hammered on the point. She cited the long, three-year pregnancy.

So, even if Tam get sent to Cincinnatti next year, it won't be until 2017 when the world will see the first rhino baby born in captivity, sired by a Sabah ‘father’, Karen said. “In terms of goals, the idea is to get as many Sumatran rhinos on the ground as we can and as fast as we can,” Karen said.

“Right now, we need to get the best animals for natural breeding,” Karen said.



Emi, the amiable mother rhino turns the grim tide of extinction around after giving three calves Andalas, Suci and Harapan in captivity and sparks a global belief that it can be done!

Laurentius: Sending Tam to Cincinnatti zoo would be ‘ideal’

Is Sabah amiable to the idea of sending Tam to Cincinnatti Zoo, since his hopeful soul mate – Puntung, has repeatedly rejected him?

“Yes, that would be the ideal decision. I will need an approval from the Cabinet (Sabah) after the General Election,” said Director of Sabah Wildlife Department, Datuk Dr Laurentius Ambu.

“I am committed to the continued survival of the Sumatran rhino,” Ambu asserted.

“Whatever happens, I will work very hard to convince the Government of the day,” Ambu promised, when asked about what if...

Datuk Dr John Payne, similarly endorsed the Cincinnatti move.

“Malaysians live all over the world. No reason why a Sabah rhino shouldn't spend a couple of years in the USA,” he said.

People the root cause of crisis

So it looks like Sabahans must abandon scope insensitivity, learn to drop the heavy ‘Sabah for Sabahan’ sentiment or ‘Sabah rhino for Sabah’ mantra of yesteryears and come to terms with the dire reality.

I asked Alan Lieberman, former Director of San Diego Zoo's Hawaii Program at the Maui Bird Conservation Center, what's the main cause of the Sumatran rhino crisis.

He blamed one Chief Culprit: “People!”

In the case of the Sumatran rhino which is mainly a rainforest dweller, people who destroy the rain forest for timber, and then clear it for large scale agriculture.

But even without removing the forest, selling rhino horns for Chinese medicine has done a lot to get rid of this charismatic, oldest living mammal!

Experts forced into captive breeding and technology

This tsunami of humanity has forced researchers and events like the crisis summit to create the captive breeding programs as well as technology such as vitro fertilisation, embryonic transfer and cryogenics in order to preserve the reproductive materials including components that allow for genetic diversity within genes, to ensure long term survival of species.

However, the intrinsic trait of the Sumatran rhino which is very solitary by nature and very aggressive towards one another except at the tiny moment when a female is intransigent or caring for babies, also proves a factor in its demise, says Dr Terri.

However, an amiable mother rhino Emi is sparking a decisive reversal of the grim spectre of extinction. It is extremely interesting to read that the temperament of Emi – the mother which did more to save the species than any other animal in captivity by producing three calves at Cincinnatti, contrasts sharply with the norm. She was very amiable, playful, menacing, has sense of humour, strong spirit of mateship and in the end, turned out to be a caring mother.

Dr Terri said it was Emi's unusually friendly, pleasant, agreeable, good natured, likable, cordial and sociable disposition which allowed scientists like herself at the Centre for Conservation and Research of Endangered Wildlife (CREW) at the Zoo to study her in depth and unraveled the mysteries of Sumatran rhino reproduction which led to the successful breeding program.

Well, seriously, Sabah may need to learn from a beast like Emi how to be amiable towards sending out best rhinos abroad for the sake of the species and not let acidic local pride and all the resident human pitfalls derail its future survival.



Profitable working solution self replicates – Partnership between Cincinnatti Zoo (represented by Dr Terri Roth) and Indonesia (represented by Widodo Ramono (left) and Dr Dedi Candra sired Andatu through Andalas and Ratu in Way Kambas National Park.



Andalus (right), the first born in captivity in Cincinnatti Zoo, is seen here chasing a female rhino Ratu in Way Kambas National Park Indonesia and later became the father of Andatu.