



Side view of a Vietnamese Javan rhino.



Interesting video clip - two Javan rhino in Vietnam filmed together.



A wallowing Vietnamese Javan rhino before it went extinct.

Will Sabah be the next Vietnam?

● Fifth of a series

Kan Yaw Chong

REMEMBER Vietnam celebrated when they found a surprise herd of 8 Javan rhinos in early 2000. But by April 2010, all died! Will Sabah's herd of 10-14 all be gone forever too in 10 years? How do we avert this disaster?

When the international community pressured US President Barack Obama to act against the Syrian government for the alleged use of banned chemical weapons against the rebels?

Obama invoked his difficulties with the "chain of custody" when he spoke on TV broadcast live on CNN.

Yes, he said there was evidence of chemical weapons in terms of typical effects but he didn't have all the facts on the 'who? When? How? Which? Why? What? Where?' etc to decide on an immediate response.

These are basic chain of custody questions to trace the path to the original source or cause of all events or outcomes to give us all the important facts and truths.

Smart guy - he just made very sure he didn't get misled to conclusions drawn from incomplete, or erroneous or even contrived information.

Because intelligence analysts are acutely aware they can get or a diversity of items of evidence coming from equally diverse sources some of which are human, others are sensing devices of all kinds and the great concern is: can you believe it or how much can you believe it or how much can you believe it.

There is always the possibility that the information is deliberately contrived to mislead as a human source may have any number of reasons to fabricate evidence in order to deceive.

But it is also possible that both human and sensing devices are simply wrong in their detective work and so there is always the possibility of a President or Government being misled on the conclusions.

Chain of custody vital to extract facts for right decision

What has this remote looking 'chain of custody' idea got to do with this 'chain' of reports on the Sumatran Rhino Crisis Summit' held at the Singapore Zoo 31 March to 4 April, 2013?

Everything! Journalists know the guide to their work is a very simple dichotomy:

'Everything is either a fact or a non-fact.' And which journalist can claim they have never got facts wrong or even completely wrong and suffer the bud of joke that "journalists print their mistakes for the whole world to see!"

So we have learnt from hard knocks that we must ensure getting all the facts right, check and double check what we write contain most of the key facts or as close to the truth as possible with this chain of custody check list questions:

What? Why? Who? When? Where? How? Which?

Why on why Vietnam?

So why was Vietnam there at a Sumatran rhino crisis summit, represented by Sarah Brook of Flora and Fauna International of Cambodia - a British based NGO?

Young Sarah spoke on 'Vietnam rhino extinction' in Panel 3 entitled 'Other Large Mammal Stories' on April 1, together with other big guns in conservation like Mark Stanley Price, Susie Ellis, Barney Long and Samuel Turvey.

So people may not have paid huge attention to her. So I asked why Vietnam? Why Sarah Brook?

When I tried to interview Sarah, she managed only one rushed line, because she was in huge rush to the Changi Airport to catch a flight back to Cambodia: "Understand why the Javan rhino went extinct in Vietnam and why you need to improve to make sure it doesn't happen in Sabah (Malaysia) and Indonesia!" she warned.

So, in effect, Sarah was planted in the Summit to issue a towering warning to Sabah and Indonesia: You could be next very soon!

Sabah missed gentle Sarah Brook's sobering message?

But Young Sarah was so gentle may be most Malaysian and Indonesia delegates missed her sobering message.

And of course, being foreign, they have to be very diplomatic in what they say and how they say it.

But Cynthia Ong, founder of Leap which is one of



Carcass of Vietnam's last Javan rhino which was shot dead in April 2010.

the pillar co-organizers, said the Summit was designed for serious work with no time for niceties. So I asked why Vietnam, in order to trace the path to the epi center of facts, the most profound reason behind the summit that summoned the most competent experts in the world to look at the plight of the Sumatran rhino.

So, I traced the passage to Vietnam via the Internet.

There, this blaring banner headline in a 25 October 2011 Guardian UK report, reads: Last Known Javan Rhino in Vietnam Has Died!

Vietnam mourned!

Vietnam mourned, especially Tran Thi Minh Hien - WWF-Vietnam Country Director.

"It is so painful that despite significant investment in Vietnam, rhino population conservation efforts failed!" a shocked Tran mourned.

"Gone forever from Vietnam, reintroducing the rhino not feasible," Christy Williams of WWF-Nepal lamented.

It's "painful" because until a hunter had killed an individual in Cat Tien in 1988, every body thought the Javan rhino had long gone extinct in mainland Asia.

But all of a sudden, this 1988 killing proved that tacit assumption dead wrong and it ignited a euphoric search to confirm the existence of more rhinos.

Too excited, they didn't wait for camera traps, rhino diehards went in to do the physical search.

And they found evidence of an estimated maximum 10-15 individuals based on footprints and dung samples.

Short-lived celebration

It was time to celebrate, the Vietnamese Government took precautions to ensure security.

More forays in search found very fresh foot prints. Searchers reported how they got out into the bushes and walked parallel with it for 200 metres.

Then the mother of encounters in the nether gloom - they saw a rhino standing in the middle of the path, one of them shouted: guys, run, it's a rhino!

And they ran in the opposite direction of the rhino.

A final survey in 2007 showed that there was perhaps a small population of eight animals!

Some of the video grabs showed the presence of two individuals!

Were they mating?

Which prompted a slew of NGO conservation organizations to help set up habitat protection efforts to safeguard the rhino's food sources and that private effort eventually led to the establishment of the 728,756-hectre Cat Tien National Park of which 30,635 hectares were made the Cat Loc Rhinoceros Sanctuary in 1992 150km north of Ho Chi Minh City.

Vietnam's fatal mistake - utter faith in protected area

The fatal mistake was every body had imagined that a conventional national park status would keep the small herd of Javan rhino safe.

But what happened?

In 2009-10, to determine the population status, WWF conducted a field survey using highly trained sniffer dogs from the US in search rhino dung.

DNA analysis of the dung found that all the poops came from the same rhino, meaning implicitly that there was only one rhino left by then.

Shortly after the survey, local people reported discovery of a rhino carcass and immediately, a patrol team was deployed to the site and confirmed that the

dead animal was that of a Javan rhino, with a bullet in the leg and the horn removed!

So it's clear that poaching killed the last Javan rhino left in Vietnam in 2010.

So, it's official - there are no more Javan rhino in Vietnam. It has gone extinct!

Will Sabah be the next Vietnam?

Will Sabah make the same fatal mistake like Vietnam, by thinking that the mighty Danum Valley Conservation Area provide a safe haven?

Probably not likely,

Disturbing similarities between Vietnam and Sabah

There are disturbing similarities between Vietnam and Sabah.

The discovery of rhinos is the huge reason why Sabah gazetted the 120,000-hectre Tabin Wildlife Reserve in 1984 and the big reason why Vietnam created the Cat Tien National Park.

In 1983, in a venture into Tabin which was then actively logged, Dr John Payne, then Director of WWF-Malaysia Senior Scientific Officer in Sabah and Sabah Forestry Department rangers found foot prints, including baby rhino foot prints of Sumatran rhinos.

"So, it means there were breeding pairs and Tabin was the only place definitely known to have rhinos then," Payne recalled.

"It was an estimate of 12 Sumatran rhinos in 1983 which led to the establishment of the Tabin Wildlife Reserve quickly in 1984," Payne said.

How politicians of yesteryears ruined a strategic breeding plan

The strategic plan then was to keep the herd in Tabin or individuals in Danum Valley as wild populations and capture individuals outside forest reserves in Sabah, West Malaysia and Indonesia for an international breeding programme in captivity

Every body - the Sabah Forestry Department, The State Government and WWF-Malaysia agreed with the wisdom of that strategic, double safety net approach to protect the species.

Subsequently, an agreement for the Conservation of Sumatran rhino was drawn up between the Sumatran Rhino Trust of the American Association of Zoological Parks, the State Forestry Department of Sabah and the Wildlife and National Parks of Peninsular Malaysia.

An IUCN Species Survival Commission ad hoc meeting held in Singapore on 3-4 October 1984 approved what they considered a very rational plan.

However, the Berjaya Government under Datuk Harris lost the State election and the new PBS State Government under Chief Minister Datuk Joseph Pairin Kitingan refused to sign the agreement, apparently under heavy objection from Datuk Aariah Tengku Ahmad, who became the then Minister of Social Services and allegedly some UKM Sabah campus academics like Rob Steuben and Prof Dr Murteza Mohd and others.

Sabah didn't make it, Indonesia did

Sabah then decided to do its own captive breeding program in Sepilok, captured 10 rhinos for that purpose but failed to produce any baby.

Indonesia meanwhile, signed their separate agreement with the US, sent some eight rhinos to America out of which Dr Terri Roth of Cincinnati Zoo was able to use Ipuh and Emi to sire three babies from natural breeding in captivity - Andalas (2001), female Suci (2004) and Harapan (2008).

Andalas was sent back to the Way Kambas National Park, Sumatra and sired male baby Andatu in 2012, through close partnership with Dr Terri.

Sabah fast becoming another Vietnam?

Now, we look at some foreboding similarities between the current Sumatran rhino situation in Sabah and Vietnam's Javan rhino a decade ago.

Payne said there was an estimated 12 Sumatran rhino in Tabin in 1983.

But camera traps set up in Tabin Wildlife Reserve since 1st October 2011 have recorded no sign of any rhino!

Urgent question: Has the Tabin population gone extinct? Has the last individual there has indeed died out, who caused it?

One conservationist who has trekked through Tabin said he had seen literally hundreds of animals snare traps and apparently one of those traps caught and damaged a leg of Puntung which was lucky to have set herself free.

Did hunters for other animals also decimated the Sumatran rhino in Tabin?

Dr Panye thinks it is more due to the death rate from old age outstripping the birth rate.

Datuk Dr Laurentius thinks the camera traps in Tabin may have missed other individuals in areas with no cameras.

So, he says he wants to comb the entire Tabin reserve soon for a conclusive answer.

Christy Williams: Sabah's population 'ecologically extinct!'

Assuming that the Tabin population has indeed died out, it means Sabah is left with only one population in the wild - a low 10 in Danum Valley Conservation Area.

Christy Williams of WWF-Nepal told this writer quite a shell-shock statement that he considers this single Sabah population "ecologically extinct!"

It is not clear exactly what he means.

But Laurentius says that the 10-14 herd is a figure from 10 years ago!

Because baby rhino foot prints were found, it was assumed to be a breeding population and therefore his department left them in the wild.

But doesn't the low 10 in Danum Valley sound like another Cat Tien which celebrated a find of eight in 2007, only to see it vanish completely in 2010?

Are the rhinos in Danum Valley still there?

Dr Zainl Bahari, Bora Chief vet in Tabin, said yes: "We still see the foot prints and what we have never surveyed are Danum Valley's buffer zones," he said.

So there might be some hope of more there.

But the mood among the Sumatran rhino experts is clear - they have basically lost faith in the wild population to save the species from extinction, says Dr Nan Schaefer.

Both Tabin and Vietnam proved that it is extremely difficult to defend the species with conventional protected areas.

In Sabah's hope rests on two bold decisions?

But two bold decisions from Sabah may save the day.

One, the State Cabinet agreed in March this year to get all the rhinos in Danum Valley and consolidate them for captive breeding program, Dr Payne noted.

Two, Datuk Laurentius Ambu, Director of Sabah Wildlife Department, told the Sumatran Rhino Crisis Summit that he is willing to send animals abroad for natural breeding in captivity.

"This is very interesting," noted Dr Sharma Dionysius, CEO of WWF-Malaysia.

"For the first time, I am hearing from a Sabah Director saying we have to allow these animals to be transferred and I hope they are exchange with an agreement that these rhinos can come back," Dr Sharma said.

Master breeders' advice to Sabah: Don't wait!

Given this crisis or emergency situation, all the experts on rhinos and other master breeders who have saved other species from the brink have advised range countries of the Sumatran rhino like Sabah and Indonesia don't wait but act immediately to breed as many baby rhinos and as quickly as possible to build up a safeguarding population first for future genetic manipulations.

Reproductive physiologist, Dr Nan Schaefer, former Chairman of SOS Rhino and current Chairman, Karen Dixon have advised Sabah to send Tam "tomorrow" to Cincinnati which has the proven experts and most successful facilities to care for and use Tam.

But what I hear from Dr Sen, Dr Zainal and also Dr Payne is Sabah wants to wait and see whether they can capture a fertile female and if they can't by the end of this year, only then they will send Tam to Cincinnati.

Conflicting use of Tam best answered through chain of custody

The conflicting perspectives on Tam dampens the urgency of the matter which was repeatedly stressed at the Summit.

Keep in mind the most desired immediate objective is baby flow - that is, to produce as many babies as fast as possible and we need to go back to the basic chain of custody questions and ask, who is the most successful expert in siring baby rhino?

The fact is Dr Terri Roth.

Which is the most successful Sumatran rhino breeding facilities in the world?

The fact is Cincinnati Zoo.

Facts point to putting Dr Terri at centre of breeding in captivity

So, if we indeed LISTEN to very successful master breeders like Mike Wallace who reversed the sure extinction of the Californian Condor who said Sabah should tab the knowledge and act on them, then Dr Terri Roth and Cincinnati Zoo should be placed right at the centre of Sabah's natural breeding in captivity program.

The advice at the summit is use the best proven technical expertise, use the most successful facilities.

Who is the best?

The truth is not Sabah

Which is the proven most successful facility?

Again, Sabah is not.

So, why continue to hold Tam back in an unproven facility to try our luck again, in an emergency and desperate situation now?

Bora, SWD, Leap should sort it out before briefing Cabinet

Bora, the Wildlife Department, Leap etc should talk it out and the discussion should involve Dr Terri, Dr Schaefer before they advise the State Cabinet.

Yes, research in Assisted Insemination should move forward in parallel but from all accounts, Assisted Insemination in not yet an option in siring Sumatran baby rhinos, although IZW had successes in other rhinos and elephants.

So, who are the most successful experts in Assisted Insemination is producing baby Sumatran rhinos?

The truth is no body.

Which is the most successful facility in Assisted Insemination on baby Sumatran rhino?

The fact is none.

Yet the experts keep advising us to make the right decisions.