

Sabah mourns the loss of one of the last Sumatran rhinos

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Gelugob, one of only ten Sumatran rhinoceros in captivity worldwide, succumbed to age-related illness and has died peacefully here at the Lok Kawi Wildlife Park, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah. Her age was estimated at 37 years. There are probably less than 150 Sumatran rhinos left in the wild today, in Sumatra and Borneo.

According to Park veterinarian, Dr Rosa Sipangkui "On the 30th December Gelugob appeared to be moving slower and was not eating as well as she used to. Since these symptoms are quite normal in aging animals, it was noted and was further monitored. In early January her condition suddenly went downhill; she refused to drink and ate very little. Despite the best efforts of our Veterinary team her condition continued to deteriorate and on the evening of 11th January she laid down and died shortly after".

"The lifespan of a Sumatran rhino is unknown, Gelugob is believed to have been the oldest prior to her death. The last Sumatran rhino to die in captivity was a 33 year old male in Cincinnati Zoo, USA. Gelugob was rescued from Bulud Napa, Kinabatangan in 1994. Her age at that time of capture was estimated at around 16-17 years old," said Dr Sen Nathan, Assistant Director of the Sabah Wildlife Department.

"Gelugob was immediately included into our Sumatran rhino captive programme, that was then located in Sepilok near Sandakan. For the following 19 years, local and foreign experts from around the world tried to breed and study her reproductive behaviour extensively, until 2011 when she was found to be unable to produce eggs, even with hormone treatment, due to her old age," added Sen.

"On the 24th March 2013, Gelugob returned to Lok Kawi Wildlife Park from facilities in Tabin Wildlife Reserve, where it had been hoped she might contribute to saving the species. She was returned to Lok Kawi to play her part as an ambassador for Sumatran rhino conservation, creating awareness to the general public" said Sen.

Borneo Rhino Alliance (BORA) executive director Datuk Dr Junaidi Payne said, "BORA staff looked after Gelugob for two and a half years in Tabin between 2010 and 2013, and we are very saddened to learn of her death. A bond develops between individual humans and animals that they care for, which goes above the basic purpose of trying to save the species from extinction."

"Though the death of Gelugob is a great loss, this only furthers our determination to do whatever we can to save this species from extinction," said Datuk Dr Laurentius Ambu, Director of the Sabah Wildlife Department.

“Sabah now seems to be the only state in Malaysia that has wild rhinos. Rhino numbers are too low and the wild rhinos too fragmented, if we do not intervene and rescue all of them and consolidate them into a managed breeding programme, propagation of new generations of baby rhinos will be impossible,” added Ambu. He further mentioned that if this (managed breeding programme) is not done, then all the remaining rhinos would meet the same fate as Gelugob; growing old and dying without producing any more young rhinos, thus causing extinction of this species in Sabah.

Picture legends



Photo 1: Gelugob in her paddock at Lok Kawi Wildlife Park.



Photo 2:

Gelugob in her paddock at Lok Kawi Wildlife Park



Photo 3: Daily attention was paid to all aspects of Gelugob's health, including application of antiseptic to any skin lesions, in Tabin Wildlife Reserve night stall facilities.



Photo 4:

Gelugob about to be moved in a crate from Lok Kawi to Tabin in 2010.



Photo 5: In dry weather, a wallow was maintained for Gelugob by mixing kaolin clay soil and water, in October 2012 at Tabin Wildlife Reserve.