

Neglect, deaths mark failure of Sabah rhino conservation programme

The death of Gelugob, the world's oldest Sumatran rhino in captivity, reveals disturbing revelations about the rhinoceros conservation programme.

By Evangeline Majawat | Yahoo News Malaysia – Wed, Jun 18, 2014



The death of Gelugob - the world's oldest rhino in captivity - raised disturbing questions.

KOTA KINABALU: A series of untimely rhino deaths in captivity and not a single offspring produced.

Over the past 30 years, this is the outcome of the ambitious Sumatran rhinoceros conservation programme in Sabah, meant to reverse the decline of this endangered animal.

Environmentalists have unanimously deemed it an utter failure.

Two key environmentalists - Green NGOs Borneo Rhino Alliance (BORA) executive Datuk Dr Junaidi Payne and Land Empowerment Animals People executive director Cynthia Ong – agree that the programme has fallen apart despite years of research, multiple programmes and extensive pumped into the effort.

Even the Sabah Wildlife Department (SWD) openly admitted this shortcoming.

“[Our] whole rhino programme in Sabah, I mean you can put it that it’s a failure. We haven’t bred any rhinos. We have rhinos dying in captivity. Really it is a failure,” said Assistant Director Dr Sen Nathan.

Survival of the Sumatran rhino hinges heavily upon the success of captive breeding programmes ever since rampant destruction of rainforests made conservation in its natural habitat near impossible. The only success stories in captive breeding so far have come from the Cincinnati Zoo in America and the Way Kambas Rhino Sanctuary in Indonesia.

Out of the 13 rhinos captured in Sabah between 1985 and March this year only three – Kretam, Puntung and Iman- have survived.

The death of Gelugob, the world’s oldest Sumatran rhino in captivity, 10 months after she was sent to a state-run zoo, was the final straw for Ong.

The situation was made worse when Suci, a young rhino that was one of the four success stories for captive birth, also died in Cincinnati Zoo in April.

The Death Of A Matriarch

Gelugob, a female rhino estimated to be 37 years old, died at the Lok Kawi Wildlife Park (LKWP), Sabah on January 11. Two previously unpublished veterinarian reports have revealed that she had died from poor care.



Gelugob was estimated to be about 37 years old when she died.

Gelugob was dehydrated and emaciated with abrasions and sores on her body. She was also malnourished, severely constipated with more than 4kgs of sand and stones discovered in her digestive tract post mortem.

The leaked documents, which were prepared by BORA for SWD, clearly indicated that poor husbandry by SWD had aggravated Gelugob's frail condition and age-related sicknesses. BORA works closely with SWD to protect and monitor the Sumatran rhinos in Sabah.

It is understood that these documents – pre-death medical and necropsy reports- were sent to SWD for their input. But SWD has declined to publish the official veterinarian reports, saying they were classified.

Ong has no doubts that Gelugob could have lived a longer and more comfortable life with better care, despite her advanced age.

Ong resigned as BORA board member soon after Gelugob's death as an act of protest against SWD's official statement that the rhino "died peacefully". She said, based on the reports, Gelugob had suffered for some time.

"Here is the reality and here is the spin that was going to go out to the public...and to your international partners, and it shocked me. It shocked me that we would intentionally spin. The blatant action of duping the public, that...really upset me," she explained.

She also cited her "ineffectiveness" as a BORA board member to prevent Gelugob's death for her reasons to quit. "There is an ethical incongruence that I felt between myself and ultimately (the) position (which the) BORA board took," said Ong.

Closest living relative to Ice Age woolly rhinos

The Sumatran rhino (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) is the smallest of the five species of rhinos found worldwide. With a keen sense of smell and hearing, the Sumatran rhinos are solitary and extremely shy animals. They are the closest living relative to the famous woolly rhinos that roamed Europe and northern Asia during the last Ice Age.



Rhinos are the closest living relative of the woolly rhinos from the Ice Age.

Poaching for their horns and habitat destruction has reduced the Sumatran rhino population to near extinction. Experts believe there are fewer than 100 individuals left in the wild today, living in pockets of fragmented forests in Malaysia and Sumatra, Indonesia.

Gelugob was one of the 10 remaining Sumatran rhinos in captivity worldwide. She was first captured in 1994 and sent to Sandakan as part of the state government's rhino breeding programme.

When the Sandakan facility was shut down, Gelugob was sent to LKWP in 2007 where she stayed for three years. Yet again she was transferred to aid a rhino breeding programme, this time at Tabin Wildlife Reserve.

But after three years of trying and ruling her as unfit to breed, Bora sent her back to LKWP in March last year to be under SWD's care. Deemed infertile, she was designated as 'ambassador' to raise public awareness about the plight of her species.

But questions arose about SWD's readiness to accommodate Gelugob. According to Ong, SWD had promised a completed enclosure before the move but failed to deliver on it.

SWD: We did our best

SWD vehemently denied all allegations of poor care although they failed to address the key points highlighted in the veterinary reports.

SWD Assistant Director Dr Sen Nathan, SWD veterinarians Dr Rosa Sipangkui and Dr Diana Ramirez maintained that they and Gelugob's keepers gave their best.

"I beg to differ. She did get good care. She was well...I'm just a bit curious what do you mean by better care?" Sen asked. "Bad husbandry is debatable. If it was a matter of bad husbandry, it has to be across the board, animals (would be) dying left, right and centre," he said.

He attributed Gelugob's malnourishment, dehydration and emaciation to her lack of appetite during the 10 days leading to her death.

"For (the) 10 days that she was sick and when we were trying to treat her, she wasn't eating at all, not drinking at all. Of course, she would look (like) that," said Sen even though both reports clearly outlined that such drastic weight loss would happen over an extended period of time.

He said that the stones and sands found in Gelugob's gut was a result of a stereotypic behavior, which he believed was induced by a combination of old age, stress and boredom. Sen asserted that Gelugob "most probably" started consuming stones and sand back in Tabin. But he was not able to provide any evidence of this.

Her keepers, he said, had provided enrichment from food and experience to stimulate and entice Gelugob to reduce the problem.

Sen was open in his criticism of BORA because SWD was reluctant to accept Gelugob into LKWP in the first place, saying it was the NGO that insisted the rhino be moved to make space for Kretam and Puntung, which had higher chances of breeding.

Sen also stood by SWD's account that Gelugob's death was tranquil. "I personally stand by (the fact) that she died peacefully because she died sedated and she was on painkillers," he said. He defended the department's service saying they went beyond the basic duty of care towards Gelugob.

"We could have euthanised her [based] on my personal experience with large mammals," he said.

"And you know what (most) zoos do? They euthanise the animals peacefully...Animals [are] euthanised knowing the prognosis is bad. This was discussed amongst us three vets but we mutually agreed that we're putting her on painkillers [and] heavy sedation [so] let's try our best," he said.

The Direness of the Rhino's Situation

Since 1985 when the first rhino was captured, rhino conservation programmes in Sabah have been partly funded by national and state governments, and private organisations.

Ong was bluntly skeptical about any programme that could not even get the basics of animal husbandry right.

"Here is a matriarch, an elder, a grandmother of a species so highly endangered and we say that our job is to protect them from extinction. And here is an individual that has served multiple programmes.

"If we cannot ensure those last years are (the) most comfortable that we can humanly give, why do we think we can save an entire species from extinction?" a frustrated Ong asked.

"The thing that was most painful for me was that (Gelugob's) death didn't have to be that painful and...lonely."

Hopes were high for Kretam and Puntung to produce offspring. Sadly, Puntung the three-legged rhino's reproductive organs were riddled with cysts. Female rhinos need to breed consistently to keep their reproductive organs from developing cysts which eventually make them infertile.

Iman's capture in the Danum Valley Conservation Area in early March this year brings fresh hope to the Sumatran rhino's survival. In a twist of fate, Iman has also been diagnosed with cysts. All efforts

are now concentrated to help Iman and Kretam breed via invitro-fertilisation. Hopes are high that the cells will develop into embryos that will be implanted into surrogate mothers.

Ong is critical of SWD's incompetence and lamented their lack of transparency. She said SWD and their partners need to be accountable and more open to criticism.

"I think there is a code. There is a code of behaviour, a code of conduct and within that is a code of silence that is inherent in the system. ..we keep on doing the same thing within the same system, do we not see that it's the process that is leading us to the same results over and over again?" said Ong. Instead of being defensive, she said it would be a welcome and refreshing if SWD and everyone concerned with rhino conservation were honest about their mistakes. Ong said visitors to LKWP could have played their part and spoken up about Gelogob's ramshackle pen.

"I see a collective responsibility amongst everyone who knew," she said. "There was always this thing. What do you do when you know? What did you do when you knew? What did you do when you become aware?"

"If the answer is "nothing" then I think that all those people who knew something and did nothing are part of the system," she said.

In Payne's opinion, highly endangered species, such as rhinos, should not be cared for by governmental institutions, but rather by NGOs (non-government organisations).

"It shows that putting Sumatran rhinos in zoos controlled by government is the kiss of death. That is the importance of Gelugob's death. Sumatran rhinos should be under the care of agencies that are not part of a governmental bureaucracy, and are staffed by people of extraordinary competence and extraordinary passion.

"Sumatran rhinos are likely to die prematurely in government care," he concluded.

Yahoo Malaysia rang and sent numerous text messages to Sabah Wildlife Department director Datuk Laurentius Ambu. All calls went unanswered. Datuk Laurentius texted to say he would return our calls but failed to do so.

Report findings: Pre-death medical report

1. *Severe weight loss of 100kgs in 10 months. (SWD claimed that Gelugob lost 87kg over the period).* If her weight loss had been discovered much earlier, she could be treated accordingly. She is emaciated with very poor body score of ≤ 1.0 . Her rib cage, pelvis and vertebra were protruding. Such condition will take time to occur and would be obvious.
2. *Inappropriate food and feeding regime.* Her age, blindness and worn out teeth warranted her being hand fed. She only consumed the more palatable plant parts. Despite that, all foliage were hung in the night stall.
3. *Unsuitable pen conditions such as hard concrete flooring.* Many of the ulcers and wounds on Gelugob were due to the hard cemented flooring.
4. *Absence of a wallow while renovation was on-going.* The Sumatran rhinoceros requires wallowing, many hours in a day, without which they would be highly stressed.
5. *Absence of shade.* A black shade netting should have been provided to cool her night stall in the late morning and afternoon.

Autopsy report:

1. Cause of death is kidney failure “exacerbated by chronic emaciation and dehydration”.
2. Constipation and foreign bodies (more than 4kgs of sand and stones) found in Gelugob’s digestive tract is “reflective of poor husbandry and nutrition”.
3. Abscesses in her organs, primarily her lungs, kidney and lymph nodes, were indicative of Melioidosis, an infectious diseases caused by bacteria living in the ground.
4. Gelugob is old and has been blind since 2009.
5. Gelugob showed signs of inappetance, depression, dehydration and emaciation with poor muscle and body mass.