

Malaysia bids to save Borneo Sumatran rhino from extinction

*Wildlife authorities hope a rare young female captured
in the wild will mate with a rescued male*



Tam, the male Borneo Sumatran rhino rescued in 2008, is to get a new mate.
Photograph: AP

Malaysian wildlife authorities say they have captured a female Borneo Sumatran rhino, who will be paired with a new mate in a breeding programme meant to save their species from extinction.

The plan is the cornerstone of efforts to preserve the bristly, snub-nosed animal, whose numbers have fallen to fewer than 40 in the jungles of Borneo.

Officials have spent more than three years seeking a suitable mate for a middle-aged male rhino named Tam, who was rescued in Sabah state in 2008 while wandering in an oil palm plantation with an infected leg, probably caused by a poacher's trap.

The Sabah wildlife department said rangers captured a young female rhino nicknamed Puntung, who they had been monitoring for years.

"This is a fantastic gift for our uphill battle in ensuring the survival of this truly unique species," said the department's director, Laurentius Ambu. "This is now the very last chance to save this species, one of the most ancient forms of mammal."

No other rhino had been observed near Puntung in years, underscoring that there were so few left in the wild that they had few opportunities to meet and reproduce, said Junaidi Payne, executive director of the Borneo Rhino Alliance, an NGO working with Sabah's government on rhino protection.

Borneo Sumatran rhinos are a subspecies of the Sumatran rhino, which is the world's smallest rhino species, standing little more than 4ft (120cm) at the shoulder.

The Borneo subspecies is found only in Malaysia's corner of the island of Borneo. Their numbers have dwindled from about 200 a half century ago as logging, plantations and other development encroached increasingly on their habitat, while poachers also hunt the animals for their horns and other body parts used in traditional medicines.