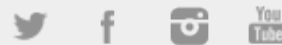


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The Red Rhino Blogs: Part II



October 21, 2015



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Sumatran rhino Andalus was the first of his species born in a zoo setting in 112 years
(PHOTO CREDIT: Tad Motoyama)

THE RED RHINO BLOGS

The announcement in August that Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden will send the last Sumatran rhinoceros in North America to the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary in Indonesia's Way Kambas National Park was bittersweet news. For those who have had the rare opportunity to work with these animals, it is sad parting of ways, but it is also a reason for hope. Thanks to valuable knowledge gained in North American zoos about the science of Sumatran rhino husbandry and reproduction, Harapan will hopefully be starting a new legacy when he goes to his ancestral home next month. For the staff members at the L.A. Zoo who were fortunate enough to work with Sumatran rhinos, it's an occasion to reflect on these magical creatures.

Remembering the Red Rhinos

By **Michael Dee**

In 1970, I was the keeper for a group of Asian animals that included a male and two female Indian rhinos. At that point, I had already worked with the Zoo's black and white rhinos, which I found to be interesting—they had personalities, but were a little standoffish. For the Indians, it was love at first sight. They were so unusual looking and very rare—there were fewer than 60 animals in captivity worldwide. I had hoped to someday see them breed and produce offspring, which they did—but that's another

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story.

About that time, some friends went on a tour of several European zoos and after they returned, they gave a talk with slides showing the different zoos they had seen. The presentation included one slide of a Sumatran rhino in the Copenhagen Zoo. I was excited to see that photo and asked if they had taken any more. The answer, "It's just another rhino," floored me. Subur, the Copenhagen rhino, was the only one in captivity! She was captured along with several others (most of whom escaped into the jungle prior to being shipped out) in a joint venture with the Basel Zoo in Switzerland. Basel's female didn't live very long, but Subur had been at Copenhagen since 1959. No other Sumatrans were captured after those initial two.

Subur passed away in 1972 and there went my hopes of seeing a live Sumatran rhino. Little did I know that 10 years later, I would be involved in another attempt to bring this unique species into a captive breeding program. In 1982, the Sumatran rhino population was losing ground fast. Its habitat was being clear-cut and there was some



Sumatran rhino Subur at Copenhagen Zoo in 1963

poaching going on. This was the smallest and most ancient of the five rhino species. From the U.S., zoos in New York, Miami, Los Angeles, Cincinnati, San Diego, and the National Zoo in Washington, DC, were very interested in this species, as was the John Aspinall Foundation in England. In 1982, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) gave its approval to look into what it would take to bring a potential breeding group to the States. Dr. Tom Foose from the AZA and Bill Ziegler, general curator of the Miami Metrozoo, flew to Malaysia and Indonesia to see if it would be feasible. After their return, representatives from the interested zoos met to determine what could be done to see the project through. Unfortunately, the National Zoo and Miami dropped out due to lack of funds. The four others decided to give it a shot.

In 1984, representatives from all interested parties (including the Aspinall Foundation) met in Singapore. The Americans put together a proposal and started the Sumatran Rhino Trust with each zoo putting in funds to start up the project. After the Singapore meeting, Aspinall hired a crew under the leadership of Tony Parkinson to find rhinos in areas that were going to be clear-cut and remove animals that were considered "doomed." Meanwhile, I was chomping at the bit to see a live Sumatran rhino. I got my chance in 1985 when I attended a meeting in Sabah (Malaysian state in Borneo). On the way there we stopped in Malaysia and went to the Malacca Zoo. They had two

females that had walked into villages and the Department of Wildlife felt it was too risky to translocate them, so they were moved to the zoo. When we arrived and I saw my first living Sumatran, I asked the person next to me, “Pinch me—I’m not sure I’m really here.” Well, I was and I felt I was the luckiest person in the world.

Read more about the history of Sumatran rhinos at the L.A. Zoo:

Zooscape “Full Circle” (April 2007) 

Zooscape “Andalus Summer” (Aug/Sept 2003) 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Former General Curator Michael Dee worked at the Los Angeles Zoo for 40 years before retiring in 2008. Except for a brief excursion at Der Wienerschnitzel before his zoo career and a tour in Vietnam from 1969–70 shortly after he started working as an animal keeper, his entire professional life was devoted to the Zoo. Even retirement didn’t lure him away for long and he currently serves as a docent in the volunteer corps. During his long tenure at the Zoo, he worked with countless species, but Sumatran rhinos have a special place in his heart. In the mid-’80s, Dee was part of the group of zoo professionals who brought this rare and endangered species into the U.S. to establish a breeding population. He currently serves on the boards of directors for the International Rhino Foundation, the California Wildlife Center, and the Bighorn Institute.



Retired General Curator Michael Dee

animal conservation

Sumatran rhino

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