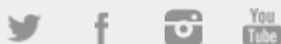


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Los Angeles Zoo &  
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## L.A. Zoo Blog

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### The Red Rhino Blogs (Part III): First Encounter of a Red Rhino Kind

By [Michael Dee](#)

 October 28, 2015

 Conservation



A 1986 photo of Sumatran rhino Torgamba at Port Lympne Reserve in England.

## First Encounter of a Red Rhino Kind

By Michael Dee

In 1985, I saw my first Sumatran rhino in person at the Malacca Zoo in Malaysia. From there, we traveled to the state of Sabah and met with officials to see if it would be feasible to establish a

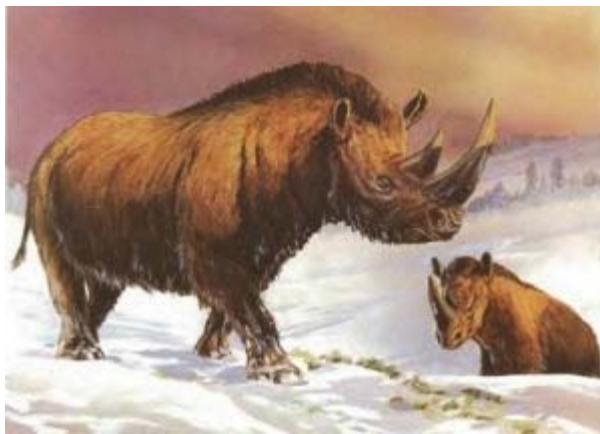
Sumatran rhino program there. They were very kind, but told us they would set up a program on their own. We then traveled to Indonesia to look at the John Aspinall Foundation operation and shortly after we arrived in Jakarta, we received word that a rhino had fallen into one of the pit traps that were constructed on one of the many game trails in



Sumatran rhinos are most closely related to the woolly rhinoceros that vanished after the last ice age. Woolly rhinoceros are among the animals painted by prehistoric people in the caves at Lascaux in France.

an area that was due to be clear-cut. With us was Francesco Nardelli, who was in charge of the Aspinall operation. We lucked out and found a helicopter that was flying into the area we needed to go to and the pilot dropped us off onto a dirt road in the middle of nowhere. There, we were met by a Jeep that took us to the base camp. As we drove down the road, I marveled at the plethora and diversity of butterflies that we saw.

We dropped our gear at the camp and immediately went to the trap site. In the four-foot-deep trap was an adult rhino that was as calm an animal as I had ever seen. The first thing we did was to dig a small trench around the area that would serve as a boma (enclosure) for the rhino. We then cut saplings and buried them in the trench in order to create a barrier that the rhino could not crash through—it looked somewhat like a solid fence. After the boma was built, we then proceeded to get the rhino out of the trap. We did this by filling one end of the trap to create a walkway straight into the boma. We worked all day and into the night and the rhino stayed very calm the entire time. Around 2 a.m., the rhino walked up the ramp and into the enclosure. I remember thinking that this animal looked like it came from a scene out of the Pleistocene era. We left a couple of the crew to stay with the rhino and the rest of us went back to camp for a much needed rest. I still could not believe that I was actually in the jungles of Sumatra and helped remove a Sumatran rhino from the trap.



Artist Michael Long's recreation of the extinct woolly rhino, the closest relative of the Sumatran rhino.

This was the first rhino for the Aspinall program and turned out to be a male. He was named Torgamba after the area where he was captured. The rhino was eating out of our hands a

few hours after exiting the trap. While we were working on the boma, we could hear the calls of the siamang, the largest member of the gibbon family and one that I was very familiar with—I took care of two pairs of them when I was a keeper. We also saw red giant flying squirrels gliding from tree to tree just before dusk. Did I mention that I

was in the jungles of Sumatra?

## 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.

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

[Zooscape "Full Circle" \(April 2007\)](#) 

[Zooscape "Andalas Summer" \(Aug/Sept 2003\)](#) 

[Remembering the Red Rhinos](#)

[Magical Creatures](#)

To learn how you can help in saving these wonderful creatures from extinction, visit:

[Cincinnati Zoo blog](#)

[International Rhino Foundation](#)

*All photos (except author image) courtesy of [www.rhinosourcecenter.com](http://www.rhinosourcecenter.com)*

animal conservation

Sumatran rhino



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