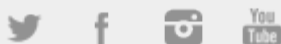


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The Red Rhino Blogs (Part IV): A Very Special Birthday

By [Michael Dee](#)

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 Conservation



Sumatran rhino Harapan (Photo Courtesy of Stephen Meeks, White Oaks Conservation Center)

THE RED RHINO BLOGS

The announcement in August 2015 that [Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden](#) would send the last Sumatran rhinoceros, 8-year-old Harapan, 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's a 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 start a new legacy at his ancestral home. For the staff members at the L.A. Zoo who were fortunate enough to work with Harapan and other Sumatran rhinos, it's been an occasion to reflect on these magical creatures.

(UPDATE: Harapan's journey to Indonesia took place at the end of October and he arrived safely on November 2, 2015.)

A Very Special Birthday

In 1984, parties interested in establishing a captive breeding program to save the Sumatran rhino (including the John Aspinall Foundation) met in Singapore. Four American zoos (Los Angeles, San Diego, Cincinnati, and Bronx) put together a proposal to start the Sumatran Rhino Trust, with each zoo contributing funds to the project. During that Singapore meeting, the appropriate Indonesian authorities gave the Aspinall Foundation's capture effort their blessings, and no time was wasted in setting up a field operation. Part of the agreement stated that a number of animals would remain in Indonesia to set up a captive program there. Aspinall wanted two pairs and the others would be divided between the Jakarta and Surabaya zoos and Taman Safari Park outside of Jakarta.

We stayed with Torgamba—the name given to one of the rhinos captured from the Torgamba district in Sumatra—one last day before our trip back to the States.



Torgamba at Riau, Sumatra in Indonesia (Photo by Steve Romo)

Driving out of the jungle, it took more than six hours before we hit pavement. After a hot shower and warm food I went contentedly to sleep thinking of what I had witnessed during the week. For a wild-caught rhino, Torgamba seemed remarkably calm; allowing us to hand feed him the day after his capture. I was floating all the way home—not only had I seen a Sumatran rhino, but I was involved with the conservation efforts of one.

The Aspinall Foundation spared no expense in making certain their precious cargo, Torgamba, was given VIP treatment, as he headed for England. (Little did I know, at that time, I would see him again during a 1994 trip to England.)

Another pair of rhinos went to each of the Indonesian facilities. The first female destined for England did not live very long. Shortly after one more female was captured and sent to England, the Aspinall operation was shut down. Unfortunately, none of the pairs produced offspring in either country.



Mahatu transferred from Los Angeles to Cincinnati in the spring of 1985 (Photo by Steve Romo)

Meanwhile, the four zoos that made up the Sumatran Rhino Trust hired the capture crew to start another operation from which each zoo would receive a pair of rhinos. The

decision as to which zoo would be the first in line was simple—we drew straws. Cincinnati drew first, followed by the Bronx, San Diego, and finally Los Angeles. Needless to say, I was disappointed that we would be the last zoo to receive a pair, as I was eager to have them reproduce in L.A. That being said, the first rhino sent to the States and destined for Cincinnati Zoo arrived in L.A. in late November 1984, and since temperatures were deemed too cold in Cincinnati, Mahatu, a female, stayed in Los Angeles until spring before she was transferred. The following year, two more animals were captured, a male destined for San Diego and another female (Rapunzel) for the Bronx Zoo. Again, it was cold in the east so Rapunzel stayed in L.A. until the following spring.

Once the weather warmed up in New York, Rapunzel left for the Bronx. At that point, three of the four zoos had rhinos and L.A. was still waiting. We received word that another male (Ipuh) had been captured and would be going to Cincinnati to pair up with Mahatu, the first female captured. The next captured female was destined for Los Angeles! I was elated.

Her name was Embam (Emi for short) and she turned out to be a real sweetheart. The Zoo sent Senior Keeper Jeff Briscoe to Indonesia to escort her back.



Rapunzel arrived in 1985 and spent winter in L.A. before transferring to the Bronx Zoo in New York (Photo by Steve Romo)

After her arrival, she was placed in quarantine in the old Malayan tapir yard.

The original female that went to Cincinnati turned out to be much older than anybody realized and was unfortunately post-reproductive. Mahatu died at Cincinnati and Rapunzel was sent to pair with Ipuh. It was then discovered that Rapunzel was also post-reproductive, leaving Emi as the only possibly viable female. Rapunzel was transferred back to the Bronx and Emi was sent to pair up with Ipuh.

At this point, many zoos, including Los Angeles, had been relatively successful in breeding Indian, black, and white rhinos. Both our black (1970) and Indian (1982) rhinos had produced calves at the zoo, and the whites bred when they were sent to a facility in Texas. Sumatrans were a little different and it took staff at Cincinnati Zoo time to figure out the process.



Young Andalas enjoys a mud bath with mother Embam (Photo by Steve Romo)

Finally, in 2001, after many attempts, Emi and Ipuh became the parents of Andalas, the first Sumatran rhino captive-born in 112 years. In order to reproduce again, due to space constraints, Andalas was sent to L.A., allowing Emi and Ipuh to breed again. This time the pair produced a female named Suci. When Suci got older, Cincinnati built an enclosure to house her, so her parents could again reproduce. The last Sumatran rhino born to the successful Emi and Ipuh was a male named Harapan. Shortly after the birth, Ipuh—one of the oldest Sumatran rhinos in

captivity—died, leaving the program with no adult male unrelated to the current animals.

Andalas, the first male born to Emi and Ipuh, was sent back to Sumatra to Way Kambas National Park in the hope he could breed with three captive females. Originally, the Aspinall Foundation had sent Torgamba there from England, and he had failed to reproduce with any

of the three.

In 2006, I visited the site and was very impressed with the setup and the staff. The International Rhino Foundation funds this facility and provides armed guards to insure that poaching in the surrounding forest is kept to a minimum. To date, there has been no poaching in the area since the facility was established in the 1990s.



Embam with baby Harapan by her side (Photo by Steve Romo)

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

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

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

[First Encounter of a Red Rhino Kind](#)

[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](#)



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