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Sumatran Rhinos Go to U.S. Zoos for the First Time in 80 Years

Two rare Sumatran rhinos from Indonesia arrived in Los Angeles in late November as part of an effort to establish captive breeding populations of this highly endangered species in U.S. zoos. Of the 0.2 specimens, one will take up residence at the San Diego Zoo while the other is ultimately bound for the Cincinnati Zoo after 'wintering over' at the Los Angeles Zoo.

This is the first time in more than 80 years that this endangered species will reside in a North American zoo. The two female rhinos are the first of ten (5.5) of their species which will establish breeding groups in four U.S. zoos: San Diego, Cincinnati, Bronx, and Los Angeles. This captive breeding population will serve as a safeguard against total destruction of the Sumatran rhino in its natural habitat and as a reservoir to draw upon for their future reintroduction to protected areas in the wild.

The Sumatran rhino effort is one of 46 Species Survival Plan (SSP) programs conducted by the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums (AAZPA) to help preserve certain endangered species through cooperative breeding programs in zoos and aquariums in the U.S. and Canada. Without these programs, many species face certain extinction.

The Sumatran rhino was selected for this special captive breeding program because there is little hope for the survival of much of the remaining wild population. Although it is impossible to definitely determine the number of animals alive in the wild, biologists estimate that there are 500-700 Sumatran rhinos remaining. The animals inhabit isolated pockets of the tropical rain forests of Southeast Asia (North Burma, Peninsular Malaysia, and the Indonesian islands of Borneo and Sumatra). The wild rhinos have been forced into reduced areas which are already too small to sustain them. The rhino's forest habitat has been systematically stripped of lumber and cleared for cultivation. Deforestation in combination with the continual poaching of rhinos, primarily for their horn, renders their future in the wild bleak.

Dr. Tom Foose, AAZPA Conservation Coordinator, and L.A. Zoo Director Dr. Warren Thomas who heads the Sumatran Rhino Trust and coordinates the SSP program, have made six visits to Indonesia to negotiate with the government and assist in setting up the field capture operation. More than a year ago, a formal final agreement with the Government of Indonesia was officially signed. The terms stipulate that a field capture operation would be established in Sumatra (which has the highest known wild population) to capture seven pairs of Sumatran rhinos; five pairs would go to U.S. zoos and two pairs to Indonesian zoos. All animals will remain the property of Indonesia. Only animals that are considered "doomed" (i.e., no chance of survival in the wild) are candidates for capture.

The Sumatran, or two-horned Asian rhinoceros, represents one of five living species of rhinos, all of which are critically endangered. The Sumatran rhino is a vegetarian, browsing on a variety of plant material and weighs about 2,000 pounds. Of all the rhinos, it is the most primitive and the least changed from the ancient rhinos that reigned more than 30 millions years ago. The Sumatran rhino's most outstanding characteristic is the reddish-brown hair covering its body. They are solitary animals, only coming together for breeding. A single calf is born after a gestation of over a year. Unlike the other two species of Asian rhinos which have only one horn, the Sumatran has two like its African relatives.

(Editor's note: the above article contains information excerpted from new releases from the San Diego Zoo and the AAZPA's Executive Offices.)

