

Sumatran Rhinos: Teetering on the Edge of Extinction by Jill Hedgecock

By **GUEST BLOGGER** - December 4, 2018



Rhinos also risk overheating under the hot tropical sun, and they lack sweat glands that would help them cool off. So, whether they live out on the plains, in marshes or in dense jungles, they routinely seek out water to help rid themselves of excess heat. Photo by IRF.

While around 100 different rhino species have roamed the planet over the course of the earth's history, only 5 types of rhinos remain today: two on the African continent (white and black), one in South Asia (greater one-horned) and two in southeast Asia (Javan and Sumatran). Both Javan and Sumatran rhinos are teetering on the edge of extinction. But it's the smallest and oldest of the rhinos, the Sumatrans, that have been described as the most critically endangered. But scientists working hard to prevent the species from going extinct received spot of good news on November 25th, 2018 when one of the world's last remaining female Sumatran rhinos walked into a pit trap on the Indonesian section on the island of Borneo. The capture of this individual and transfer to a breeding sanctuary provides much needed genetic diversity for the species.

Sumatran rhinos are truly unique. More than any other of the living rhino species, Sumatrans are the closest relative to woolly rhinos. Babies emerge into this world with a dense coat of hair, which thins as they age. Full-grown animals, which are considered small in the realm of rhinos, measure up to 4.5 feet (1.4 meters) in height and up to 8 feet (2.4 meters) long and weigh around 2000 pounds (about 900 kilograms). Their upper lip is highly flexible, much like a shortened version of an elephant's trunk and because they cannot sweat, they wallow in mud.

Perhaps one of the most fascinating aspects of this species is that it is the most vocal of all the remaining rhino species. It makes three distinct noises: eeps, whales, and two-second long whistle-blows. The "whales" resemble vocalizations made by humpback whales. This adaptation may be a result of their solitary existence in dense forest habitat. In addition to vocalizations, the rhinos leave scent trails to announce their presence. And while they may peacefully co-inhabit salt lick areas, the longest time individuals will spend with fellow rhinos is during the mother-calf phase of their life.

While these shy, forest-dwellers once roamed northeast India and southeast Asia, the Sumatran rhino was declared extinct in the wild in Malaysia in 2015. According to the International Rhino Foundation (<https://rhinos.org/species/sumatran-rhino/>), over the last twenty years, the world has lost about 70% of its Sumatran rhinos with the only viable population now in Indonesia. The estimates vary, but about 80 individuals are said to remain in the wild in three separate parks in Indonesia.

Population declines are largely the product of poaching for their horn which began in the 1930s. However, deforestation, mostly due to logging, agriculture, and human encroachment, have significantly contributed to the problem. Rhino horn has been used by Asian doctors for centuries under the misguided belief that the material can cure everything from aging, arthritis, asthma, malaria, fevers, impotence, and many more ailments. Western medicine has failed to confirm that the powdered horn, which is the same material as fingernails, has any curative powers. The Sumatran horn is also coveted as an ornamental dagger handle in the Middle East and North Africa.

Mining and deforestation have also taken its toll on this beleaguered species. Add in contentious politics and the recipe for the decimation of this species is complete. To date, the governments of Indonesia and Malaysia have not cooperated to develop a comprehensive

management plan that includes both captive breeding and habitat protection. Currently, in Indonesia, it's illegal to catch Sumatran rhinos and move them across internal state borders. Thus, isolated individuals cannot breed, which creates a situation of low genetic diversity.

Rhino experts from around the world and Indonesian government officials agree that the only way to bring the Sumatran rhino back from the brink is to relocate them to managed breeding facilities, making the recent capture of a wild female a huge accomplishment. While attempts to breed the historic 45 rhinos in captivity that began in 1985 were unsuccessful until a female became pregnant in 2011. Renewed hope for the species emerged when on June 23, 2012, Andatu, a male rhino, was born at the International Rhino Foundation's (IRF) Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary in Indonesia. But old age and deaths have reduced the number of female rhinos in breeding condition. Also, the long pregnancy (15 to 16 months) coupled with a birth rate of one calf about every 3 years, means any hope of creating a robust population at the sanctuary will be a long process. To make matters worse, if female rhinos go for too long without being pregnant, cysts and tumors develop in their ovaries and they may become sterile.

The new addition to IRF's breeding program provides new opportunities for the long-term survival of this unique and fascinating species that have shared our planet since the Pleistocene era. But the possibility of any offspring born in breeding facilities being introduced back into the wild will depend on humans coming together in Malaysia and Indonesia with a common goal of habitat preservation and solving the poaching crisis. Meanwhile, more rhino babies are needed to bring these magnificent creatures back from the edge of extinction.

Image Credits: International Rhino Foundation.

More about Jill Hedgecock:



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Award-winning and internationally-published author **Jill Hedgecock** is dedicated to taking readers on high-stakes adventures. Her short stories, personal essays, and nonfiction have appeared in multiple anthologies and magazines. *Rhino in the Room* is her debut novel. She lives in California with her husband and three adorable dogs.

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