

BFR Trip: Way Kambas Edition by Charlie Hyde

On the 22nd of April 2018, I left my home in Southern California to embark on an adventure that would change my life. Myself and fellow Zookeeper, Mandi, headed to Indonesia where we would meet up with 8 more people all interested in saving the world's most endangered rhinos. CeCe, Kelly and Inov represented International Rhino Foundation. Angie, Christine, Melissa, Toni, Wanda, Mandi and I represented Bowling for Rhinos. We would be referred to by everyone as "the bowlers" for the entire trip. For 10 days we travelled through Java and Sumatra hoping to get a glimpse of either species of rhino. However, anyone who has travelled in the jungle can tell you, wildlife viewing there is extremely difficult. In short, we saw none. But we all knew we had an ace-in-the-hole because one of our last stops was the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary (referred to as the SRS), home to seven Sumatran Rhinoceros.



01 May 2018, 7:30pm: We had been traveling in our van for over 7 hours. It was dark. I felt like a rhino crashing through the jungle (for real, wait until you see our sweet ride). The road was bumpy and unpaved. The only thing visible were the trees flying by at high speed. Occasionally, I could make out the moon. It was almost full and a beautiful shade of pink, presumably from the large amount of smoke from the rice paddies. The anticipation was exhausting in itself, let alone we had just done a significant amount of traveling in less than two days. But we all rallied for the destination to come. We were in Way Kambas National Park on the island of Sumatra and about to enter the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary. Folks, we were gonna see some rhinos!

02 May 2018, 7am: Breakfast was quick and then "the bowlers" loaded into a pick-up. First on our list to see was male Sumatran rhino Harapan. I had the pleasure of meeting Harapan when he lived in the States, as did some of the other bowlers. I never thought I would get the chance to see him again. The excitement in his little paddock area was so charged I think we could have lit up the entire island. I have never been happier for an animal. Clearly, he was thriving! His color was changed, and his demeanor was enthusiastic. Next stop was the miracle rhino, Andatu. This little male rhino was the first captive born Sumatran rhino in Indonesia. In fact, the last Sumatran born in captivity in Asia was almost 124 years ago in Calcutta, India. He is the posterchild of hope for his species. After Andatu was Bina. I refer to her as the queen. Between 1988-1992 a program was conducted to save the Sumatran rhino. 18 rhinos were captured, and Bina is the last surviving rhino from that program. Unaware of her place in history, she happily ate her fruit salad prepared by her keepers. Lastly, we met Ratu and Delilah, the mother/daughter pair. But don't be fooled, at two years of age, Delilah is much larger than her mother. These two were a riot! Their keepers were taking them out of the paddock area and into the jungle but Ratu didn't want to leave her admirers. You could hear Delilah calling for her mom in the jungle. Ratu turned a deaf ear. If only Delilah had any idea the role she is playing in the survival of her species.

After we came down from our "rhino high" we were given a presentation from the Rhino Protection Unit. They explained their role and goals moving forward. Way Kambas is protected by nine RPUs. Because of them, there have been no known poaching incidents in almost 10 years. They shared stories of the rhinos under their protection and they are grateful for our support. We got a quick tour of the expansion project that is currently under construction. It holds a lot of opportunity for the Sumatran rhino.

That afternoon we travelled by boat up Way Kanan river for a jungle hike. We were given a demonstration on snares from the RPUs. First, they set up a snare and asked if we could find it. It was a great example of the challenges they face while on patrol. They showed us how the snares were constructed and dismantled. We made our way back to the boat for the return trip to the SRS. The river was lined with exotic birds, primates, crocs and even a few Sambar deer! That night Dr. Zulfi, one of the veterinarians on staff, gave us a presentation on the work they are doing to care for this critically endangered species. Footcare, ultrasounds and bloodwork are always a topic among professionals no matter the location.

03 May 2018, 8am: It's our last day at this amazing facility. We were able to squeeze in some more rhino viewing this morning before we departed the island for good. There were two rhinos we didn't get to meet the day before because they were being introduced for breeding. As rhino keepers, we fully understood the importance of their task at hand and had no problems giving them their privacy. However, with the deed done, that allowed us for a quick visit. First up was Andalas, the proud papa. His name is the original name for the island of his species, Sumatra. Son of Ipuh and Emi, Andalas was born at the Cincinnati Zoo days after the fall of the World Trade Center. He is a proven ray of light in a time of darkness, that he has proven. He is the sire both Andatu and Delilah. We joked that he was too tired to be spunky because of the previous day's activities. He happily chowed down on his browse while we all stared in admiration. Keepers cut browse daily for all the rhinos, even though they spend their days foraging in the jungle.

After Andalas we headed to Rosa. If Bina is the queen, then Rosa is certainly the diva. The story of her arrival to the facility is a spectacular one. RPU's were contacted from a village near Bukit Barisan National Park on the western side of the island. They said they had a rhino that was eating all of their fruit and disrupting their quiet life. RPU's convinced Rosa to walk with them for 4 days up a mountain to Camp50 so she could be transported to the SRS. Full of character and charisma she charmed us all and we gave her positive vibes of a successful pregnancy. We were on a limited time schedule, so we swung by one last time to see Ratu and Delilah. It's always a thrill to witness a success story and they are the start of it. My heart was full as we loaded up in the van to depart the SRS for Jakarta, our exit from this amazing country full of wonderful people doing extraordinary work to save the Indonesian rhino.

Huge thanks goes out to Bowling for Rhinos and AAZK. Because of them I was able to participate in this once in a lifetime experience. Another huge thank you goes out to the International Rhino Foundation and Yayasan Badak Indonesia (YABI, Rhino Foundation of Indonesia). They are fully committed to saving the Indonesian rhino and without their hospitality this trip would not be possible. They have charged my drive and shown me that we, as rhino keepers, can make a difference. Sumatran rhinos are in great need and we must deliver. A species is depending on us.

