

The Sumatran Rhino Project

by Francesco Nardelli

On 4th April 1986 the first Sumatran rhinoceros to be captured by the Howletts team working with the Indonesian wildlife authorities was sent to the U.K. from Singapore.

The latest stage in the project to establish captive breeding colonies of the Sumatran rhino in Kent and in Sumatra began in August 1985, when a base camp was constructed in a part of Sumatra where the surviving rhinos are doomed by the extension of logging, which will eventually completely destroy their forest habitat. The patch of forest still left, about 20,000 hectares between the villages of Bakambatu and Tanjungmedan, province of Riau, is surrounded by palm-oil plantations, except for a large swamp on its eastern side. Logging roads intersect the forest in all directions, allowing access to illegal settlers and disrupting the rhinos' usual patterns of movement. The base camp includes two wooden houses and two rhino paddocks, each about 400 metres square and partially covered so that any animals kept there will have some shelter.

Once these facilities were ready several rhino trails were selected and in October traps were built on them. Three of the traps were of the stockade type, with an oval palisade of wooden poles broken by one drop door at each end, connected to a trigger mechanism in the centre of the trap. Seasonal rain made it difficult to build pit traps, but a self-draining one was constructed on high ground, with a thick layer of vegetation in the bottom of the pit. Its water level was checked every day, when the trap was inspected for any capture, which would have to be transferred to a holding pen as soon as possible. Stockade traps are checked only every second day, so that human scents have time to disperse and the animals that might be captured are not made too suspicious. There is also less urgency about moving a captured rhino from this type of trap, as the area within the palisade acts as a sort of holding pen.

On 25th November a young male rhino was found in the pit trap. Tony Parkinson and I, who were in Jakarta meeting a delegation from the IUCN and the American zoos which will join in the conservation project, had to rush back to the base camp as soon as possible. Thanks to the generosity and co-operation of the local management of Caltex, a large oil company, we were lent a helicopter and were flown back to the forest in two hours. At midday, when we arrived, the rhino was resting quietly inside the trap and a stockade in front of it was already under construction. Everyone worked frantically during the afternoon and night to get the rhino out of the trap with all possible speed. At last, at five the following morning, Torgamba walked steadily out of the trap into his new pen. Only hours later he had recovered enough to start eating some fruit — wild mangoes — and a few leaves. He also lost no time in locating a mud wallow, in which he spent several hours a day. When Torgamba was captured the hair on his body was hardly visible, but it started growing after a few days and now it is quite long, black in colour, and all over his body.

Soon after we had left the camp to go to the airport with the American delegation we received a radio message that the rhino was limping badly and needed urgent veterinary attention. Dr Tom Begg, the zoos' Director, flew from England within hours and rushed back to camp with us. Fortunately, the problem was not a serious one and cleared up after several days' treatment.

After about eight weeks Torgamba was moved from the pen near the trap to one of the paddocks at the base camp, and in March arrangements were made to send him to England. He travelled by truck from the forest to the port of Dumai, 200 km away, where he was transferred to a ship bound for Singapore.

There Singapore Airlines found room for him in a new Combi Jumbo jet, and the last stage of his journey passed more quickly.

Meanwhile, on the morning of 23rd January a fully grown female rhino was found in one of the stockade traps. She was panic-stricken and almost broke out of the trap before a damaged door was blocked. Thereafter she seemed in good condition, but she died suddenly later the same day, apparently from a cerebral haemorrhage caused by a severe blow on the head in the course of her efforts to break out of the trap. Never before has a trapped Sumatran rhino been known to behave so violently. This incident was a tragic setback to an operation that is not only rescuing doomed rhinos but may well be the last chance of preventing the total extinction of these animals.

A second young male, Jalu, was caught in another pit trap on 25th March. He is about two years old and not nearly full-grown yet, but he is also settling down very well. Experience so far may indicate that pit traps, though more difficult to monitor because of the rain, cause less stress in newly captured animals and are therefore safer.

Three months later the action speeded up with 2 animals being caught in a week. On June 15th an adult male, Napangga, was caught in a pit trap deep in the forest, and on June 22nd an adult female, Subur, was found in a pit trap just a few hundred metres from the made-up road. It was discovered that each had a wire snare embedded in the right foreleg between the foot and the wrist joint. Tom Begg had been urgently summoned to attend to Napangga and he was present at the time of Subur's capture. Treatment was instituted promptly and both animals are progressing well. The snares were not strong enough to hold a rhino, having we think been laid for deer and wild pig, but were capable of inducing gangrene and septicaemia with the loss of the leg and quite likely the animal too.

Both animals were moved to the base camp where treatment could be more effectively carried out and Subur was transported to Port Lympne, arriving on August 26th, only 9 weeks after capture. Normally this period would have been extended, but two factors prompted us to act more quickly. An adult female not lactating and without a calf at foot could well be pregnant and the protracted journey to England was not desirable from mid-pregnancy

onwards. In addition, if we waited too long the leaves would have fallen from the trees, and this natural food would not have been available.

Subur's journey was somewhat shorter than Torgamba's, the first leg from Sumatra to Singapore being in a 41 year old Dakota DC3. This was achieved in just over an hour compared with Torgamba's 31 hours by boat. It was necessary to build her crate with a reinforced adjustable roof to enable it to get into the aircraft. The rest of the journey was uneventful and she is now settled in at Port Lympne.

Jalu (caught in March) is now in Ragunan Zoo, Jakarta, awaiting a female. Negotiations are at present under way with the Malaysian Wildlife officials to exchange Napangga for one of their females in Malacca Zoo and transfer her to Jakarta. Then there will be pairs of animals in three locations.

Now Torgamba and Subur, the first pair of rhinos that will, it is hoped, form the basis of a breeding colony at Port Lympne, have arrived safely and seem to be undisturbed by the change of climate. Permanent quarters, resembling the rhinos' native surroundings as closely as possible, are now being built. If all goes well with the current expedition, the Kent quartet should be on show towards the end of 1987.

My grateful thanks must be given to the following people: the staff of Caltex Pacific Indonesia for their vital help in the field; all the personnel of the Indonesian Wildlife Department; the relevant staff of Singapore and Jakarta zoos; Dr Tom Begg, the Director of Howletts and Port Lympne zoos, who accompanied Torgamba and Subur on their long and exhausting journeys, as well as helping us to cope with emergencies as they arose; Mr. Jimmy Shave, Head Keeper at Port Lympne, who spent several weeks with the rhinos in the jungle and is now looking after them at home; the members of the expedition's field team, especially Tony Parkinson, for his skill in capturing and handling the rhinos; Mr. Foo of Thong Soon Agencies, who provided the ship on which Torgamba travelled from Dumai to Singapore; Airfast of Singapore who provided the DC3 for Subur's journey to Singapore and finally Singapore Airlines and their company's staff who arranged the rhinos' passage to England as precious pieces of freight.

*Various photographs (self explanatory),
of Subur ♀ taken at the base camp in
the Torgamba forest.*

(Photographs by Francesco Nardelli)



