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# Malaysia's last male rhino is fading fast, officials say

by **Mongabay.com** on 24 May 2019

- *Malaysia's last male Sumatran rhino, Tam, has experienced an abrupt decline in health due to old age, authorities say.*
- *Veterinarians and rhino keepers at the Tabin Wildlife Reserve in Sabah state are providing round-the-clock palliative care, but say Tam appears to have suffered multiple organ failure.*
- *If he dies, Malaysia would be left with one last Sumatran rhino, a female, Iman, whose own health has weakened due to a ruptured tumor in her uterus.*
- *Conservationists say stakeholders, including the government of Indonesia, home to most of the remaining Sumatran rhinos on Earth, have been far too slow to work together on efforts to save the species.*

The last male Sumatran rhino in Malaysia may be on the verge of dying, leaving a lone female as the last of the species there, authorities reported.

The rhino known affectionately as Tam, captured by a wildlife team in August 2008 when he was roughly 20 years old, has showed an abrupt decline in appetite and alertness since late April this year, according to the wildlife department in the Malaysian Bornean state of Sabah.

"It is now well into old age for a Sumatran rhino," Augustine Tuuga, the department's director, said in a statement on May 19. Tuuga added there were indications Tam had suffered multiple organ failure.



Kretam, or Tam for short, was captured in a palm oil plantation in Sabah, Malaysia, by a team of wildlife experts in 2008. Image courtesy of the Borneo Rhino Alliance (BORA).

Veterinarians and rhino keepers have been providing round-the-clock medical treatment, according to the department.

Tam, named after the Kretam palm oil plantation in Sabah where he was caught more than a decade ago, is a favorite with researchers and visitors to the Tabin Wildlife Reserve where he lives, due to his calm and steady manner, Tuuga said.

His death would leave Iman, a female, as the last surviving Sumatran rhino (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) in Malaysia. [Captured in 2014](#) for a captive-breeding program, Iman has never borne offspring. She has also showed signs of poor health, suffering a [ruptured tumor](#) in her uterus in December 2017.

That incident occurred less than six months after the death of Puntung, Malaysia's only other female Sumatran rhino at the time. Puntung, captured in 2011, was [euthanized](#) on June 4 after suffering for three months from skin cancer.

The earlier discovery of multiple cysts throughout Puntung's uterus and massive uterine fibroids in Iman dashed hopes among conservationists of finding a viable mate for Tam.

Experts say these illnesses are a reflection of too few rhinos and insufficient breeding success during the last decades of the 20th century.

John Payne, head of the wildlife conservation group Borneo Rhino Alliance (BORA), which is involved in the treatment of the rhinos, said he was angry at the lack of interest from parties that had agreed to pursue collaborative efforts in ensuring the survival of the rhino population in Malaysia.

In March 2012, the government of Indonesia, the Indonesian Rhino Foundation, the International Rhino Foundation, WWF and the International Union for Conservation

of Nature (IUCN) signed a letter of intent for collaboration, exchange of information, and exchange of rhinos and their biological materials.

Yet “despite endless attempts from Malaysia, not one of those intentions has been pursued either by Indonesia or its international supporters,” Payne said in an email to Mongabay.

In April 2018, Indonesia [signaled](#) it might advance a long-anticipated cross-border program to attempt to fertilize Malaysia’s Iman with sperm from a proven breeder at a rhino facility in Sumatra.

Six months later, however, the Indonesian government decided to [postpone](#) the program, citing the lack of viable eggs from Iman. The news was the latest setback in the years-long saga between the two countries, with some conservationists in Malaysia blaming the Indonesian government’s inaction for the dwindling odds of a successful artificial insemination attempt.

No more than 100 Sumatran rhinos remain in the world (some estimates put the number [as low as 30](#)), scattered on the islands of Sumatra and Borneo. The critically endangered species was decimated by poaching and habitat loss in the past, but today observers say the small and fragmented nature of their populations is their biggest threat to their survival. This has led to the establishment of semi-wild sanctuaries in both Sabah and Sumatra in a last-ditch effort to bring together male and female rhinos, which are naturally solitary animals, [for breeding purposes](#).

“The numerous missed opportunities to conduct actions to save the world’s most endangered terrestrial mammal genus from extinction is nothing short of irresponsible,” Payne said



Tam is the last male Sumatran rhino in Malaysia. Image courtesy of Borneo Rhino Alliance (BORA).

Correction: A reference to female rhino Iman not having viable eggs was removed from this article on May 27. Indonesia has cited a lack of viable eggs as a reason to postpone an artificial insemination attempt, but the team caring for Iman in Malaysia says that while Iman is unable to reproduce without assistance, she does produce viable oocytes.

*Banner image of Tam under general anesthesia undergoing an electro-ejaculation procedure in Malaysian Borneo to collect his sperm. Image courtesy of BORA.*