

# SUMATRAN RHINO

OF

SABAH

*"A Bitter & Sweet Story"*



*DR EDWIN J BOSI D.V.M*

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Dr Edwin @ Jack Bosi  
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Email: [dreibosi@gmail.com](mailto:dreibosi@gmail.com)

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Note to users of the Rhino Resource Center

The scans provided here cover only a small part of the contents of this book.

There is much more of interest.

The original of the book is one of the many volumes in the library of the Rhino Resource Center, which is most probably the largest collection on the Rhinocerotidae ever assembled.

[www.rhinoresourcecenter.com](http://www.rhinoresourcecenter.com)

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## *A horn that invites death*

The Sumatran rhinoceroses were roaming the jungle of Borneo when the earth was created. To many this ancient species, the smallest among the five that inhabit the earth is the last prehistoric link to our past. In Sabah, the Sumatran rhino is a subspecies called *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis harrissoni*. They have survived where others such as the dinosaurs had perished. Naturalists who came to Borneo in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in search of adventure claimed that rhinos were to be found everywhere. There were incidents where people were attacked by these animals while gathering forest products or while trekking inside the forest, even at its periphery.

There were many rhinos that were killed for their horns while others had their specimens taken for study and collection for museums. The rhino horn is a valuable commodity and for that they are persecuted, killed and their horns torn off from their head. They are used to make handles of daggers for the kings and sultans and into cups for drinking with the belief that it can neutralize any poison. Rhino horns are very expensive commodity despite the fact that it is not much difference to our finger nails. In Asia, especially in China, the rhino horn is an ingredient in traditional medicine. When scraped, the fine thin pieces are put into a cup of hot water and drunk. It is believed to have the ability to reduce fever. The so-called "rhino drinking water" is so popular and is openly



## *The Rhino controversy*

A year after my graduation, Sabah saw a political upheaval in 1985. The Berjaya government was challenged by a new political party, Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS). Berjaya lost and in the first year of PBS in power saw the beginning of the controversy surrounding the Sumatran rhino. I had lost a golden opportunity in my working career. The then Chief Minister, Harris Salleh, had personally sent me to study veterinary medicine as he was not happy to note the absence of qualified veterinarians within the local or indigenous community. In 1984 I was the first, "Kadazan Anak Negeri", and a native to qualify as a veterinary surgeon. I was in the seventh batch. Datuk Harris was so pleased that he wanted me to further my studies in the same field.

I had no idea that the Sumatran rhino existed in Sabah. The zoos in the United States had made plans to capture the rhinos and then relocate them to the United States for breeding. I later learned that they were already rearing a few rhinos in their zoos. I must say the Americans had already done their homework and they even knew where exactly the rhinos were living. Their proposal elicited strong sentiments from the public that made the PBS government decide that the capture and breeding of the Sumatran rhinos would be done *in situ*, in other words, to be done in Sabah. At that moment in time I cannot make out who was right, the Americans or the government. A Steering Committee called the

Sumatran Rhino and Wildlife Conservation Committee (SRWCC) was established in September 1985 under the Chief Minister's Department co-chaired by two Ministers, Tan Kit Sher and Aariah Tengku Ahmad. I was a member of this committee representing the Veterinary Department. There were many sub-committees under SRWCC. SRWCC was keen to conduct surveys to obtain more accurate estimates of rhino numbers and to locate isolated animals threatened by land clearing and logging.

The committee was also aiming to capture threatened animals which were to be relocated or retained for captive breeding. It wanted to promote conservation consciousness through public education and step up enforcement against poachers. A powerful Technical Sub-Committee was established and I was also roped in to provide veterinary support. I knew very little about this species and started to read up anything and everything about the rhino especially the Sumatran rhino.

The others in the Technical Sub-Committee were Chairman Lamri Ali (Director, Sabah Parks), the late Patrick Mahedi Andau (Chief, Game Unit, Forestry Department), Dr. Ghazali Ismail, Dr. Murtedza Mohamad, Dr. Rob Stuebing and Dr. Ridzuan Hashim (National University, Sabah Branch), Mr Mohd Khan Momin Khan (Director-General of Perhilitan), Dr. Mustaffa Babjee (Director-General of Veterinary Services Malaysia), Prof M. R. Jainuddin (UPM), Dr. John Payne (WWF) and Joseph

Gasis (Yayasan Sabah). The executive secretary was Sue Jayasuria.

It never crossed my mind that I would be taking charge of the operation to determine the density and where about of the rhinos. I was quickly seconded to SRWCC as the Project Coordinator for six months and that brief time working with the rhino project became a memorable experience. As an incentive, I was promoted to Senior Veterinary Officer during my term as Project Coordinator. After few meetings with the Technical Subcommittee, the plan of action was created. SRWCC had an office at the Likas Expo ground for the Project Coordinator and Executive Secretary.

Together, Sue and I worked fast to establish a strong field team. We personally recruited the members, purchased a 4-wheel drive, knapsacks, camping gears, compasses, maps, satellite phones and all other equipment needed for the operation. We saw the qualifications of Jimli Perijin and David Antonius and appointed them team leaders. I am happy to learn that both of them continue to serve in the wildlife department.

## *Looking for rhinos*

I went out with the survey team and surveyed most of the forests in the east coast including the oil palm plantations that shared boundaries with the forest reserves. We gathered intelligence on the rhinos from the villagers, our own local field team members and oil palm managers. From these expeditions, we managed to confirm the presence of the Sumatran rhinos in Tabin Wildlife Reserve, at Danum Valley, Malua Forest Reserve and Silabukan Forest Reserve. We did not see them physically but their fresh hoof prints and in some cases dung were good enough evidence. In fact, on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1986 we saw fresh hoof prints measuring 24cm on our way out of the camp between the Linbar estate and the main road to the Jerocco/Kretam estate.

The sub-technical committee also visited and recommended a site at Tabin reserve as the operation office or base for SRWCC. A building was put up for the field team and there were rooms specially meant for researchers to conduct their study on plants browsed by the rhinos. It was close to the Lipad river and is presently the office site for the Wildlife Department in Tabin. In early 1986, my survey team almost had an encountered with the rhinos at the south-western part of Tabin reserve. We were scouting the area south of the reserve that was recently logged. We stopped at the top of the hill to look for rhino tracks when we heard peculiar sounds coming from the ravine.





The Technical Sub-Committee members of SRWCC taken at Sabah Parks (HQ) Kundasang. Standing left to right, Joseph Gasis, Lamli Ali, Patrick Mahedi Andau, Datuk Dr. Mustaffa Babjee, Dr. Murtedza Mohamad and Dr. Ridzuan Hashim. At the back from left, Dr. Rob Stuebing, Dr. Junaidi Payne, Dr. Edwin Bosi and Prof Dr. M. R. Jainuddin.

The sounds were familiar and I knew they were rhinos because I had just returned from Malacca Zoo to meet up with Dr. Zainal Azahari who was in-charge of the rhino program in Peninsular Malaysia. It was also an opportunity to familiarize myself with the captive Sumatran rhinos there. It is said that the Sumatran rhinos have the most melodious calls among the five species. As we inched ourselves towards the sounds, our smell must have given our presence away as we heard crashing sounds of broken twigs and shrubs, and a few loud exhalations of air from the rhinos. When we arrived at the site, we realized that we have disturbed them from

enjoying a wallow rest in the mud. The mud was still slimy and reddish. I remember very well that there were three animals based on the size of the hoof prints. One of them was definitely a baby calf.



The first survey team of SRWCC. Standing from right, Godfrey Johniu, Joseph Gasis, Jimli Perijin, Kasturi, Arsid, Lamansah, David Antonius, Paul Gasis, Mohamad, Walter Gusui and Jaafar Mandog. Squatting from right, Joseph Kindingan, Jali Engkong, Mimoh Sipunong and Lai Chi Soi.

I took my survey team to Danum Valley after Joseph Gasis informed me that his research staff had encountered two rhinos at their research plot there. Although we failed to see the animals, we were able to take measurements of their relatively fresh hoof prints. Indeed, there were two of them. We also took some time to collect plant samples that were browsed, dung samples and at the same time, extended the surveying areas in Danum Valley to look for more evidence. This



trip to Danum Valley would never be forgotten as upon our return from the one-week surveying, the town of Lahad Datu when we returned from our one week survey we found out that the town of Lahad Datu was attacked by pirates, who also robbed a bank. Just a week prior to the attack, we have stopped by at Lahad Datu for lunch and it was that very same spot where the intense fighting erupted between the intruders and the police. It was sheer luck for us and on hindsight, I am thankful for my guardian angel. I learned that more than 20 people were killed and many injured. I later learned that the pirates paid a heavy price when they were pursued by the security forces out into the Sulu Sea and where they were ultimately killed. There is still evidence of bullet marks on some of the buildings in Lahad Datu, which serves as a good reminder of that fatal incident.

Despite the unwanted but expected tag as "The Wild East", Lahad Datu is the gateway to the known rhino habitat, Tabin reserve and Danum Valley. In order to create a different image for Lahad Datu, the district was proclaimed a rhino district and with that a beautiful statue of a rhino was placed close to the airport. The statue was sponsored by the Lions Club of Lahad Datu and the Lahad Datu District Council. I provided photographs of a Sumatran rhino to the Lions Club. Due to the road construction near the airport the rhino statue had since vanished.

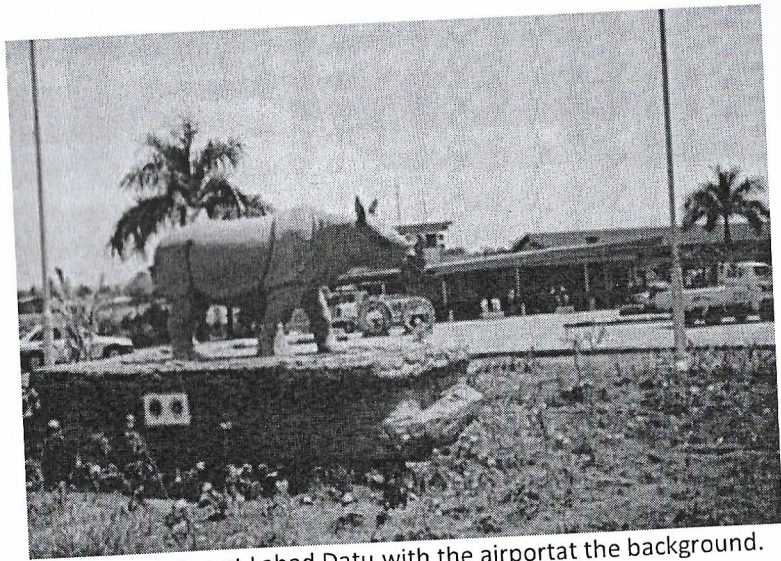
Our next action plan was to train our team in capturing and relocating of the rhinos. This training was done with the assistance from the rangers from the Game office of the Forestry Department. The pit trap method was selected and adopted by SRWCC. Firstly, the team settled on a site along a riparian reserve somewhere in Sukau and constructed the base camp. The rhino highway was mapped out and spots were identified for the pit traps. The traps were made by digging a four by eight feet and six feet deep rectangular hole.

A bamboo raft was made and the team practiced to perfection on moving the rhino-in-the-crate across the crocodile infested river. An empty wooden crate was used during the practice runs. We had to stock up on building materials such as timber, plywood, ropes, nut and bolts. The National Department of Wildlife (Perhilitan) had assigned their officer Mohd Tajuddin Abdullah to SRWCC who later joined Universiti Sarawak Malaysia (Unimas). Tajuddin had a wide range of experience with the Department of Wildlife (Perhilitan) and had been successful in trapping rhinos in Peninsular Malaysia using the pit-trap method. We managed to have cooperation with the Malaysian Armed Forces, especially the Air Force, to be on standby.

Prior to this, I have made arrangements to transport a cow to the Lok Kawi army camp near Kota Kinabalu in a wooden crate. We witnessed how the helicopter lifted the loaded crate over the South China



Sea and back with ease. It was a success. That would be how we would lift the rhino from the middle of the dense jungle! The idea became a reality when a helicopter lifted a rhino out of the jungle in Danum Valley in 2014. It was not a Nuri but a Sikorsky S-64 helicopter.

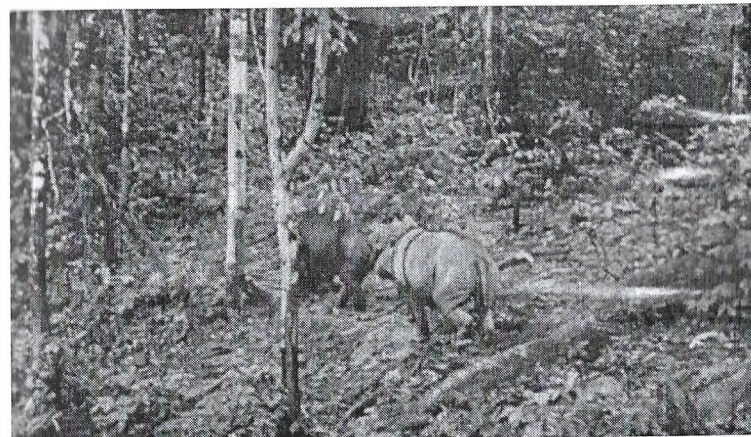


The rhino statue at Lahad Datu with the airport at the background.

The first rhino captured by SRWCC was at Kg Linbar, Sukau on 28<sup>th</sup> March 1987 but it died in the pit. The second, Tanegang was caught on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1987. I remember this rhino very well because of a wire snare around his leg which was digging into the flesh. I can imagine his misery walking and limping with the pain. At least Tanegang, as he was named, did not become a trophy for the poachers. We brought him to Sepilok

where Tanegang was able to live a normal life after the snare was removed. Tanegang was very aggressive for the first three weeks but after being fed with jackfruit leaves and fruits he began to accept the presence of humans.

I can say that Sumatran rhinos can easily adjust to humans. The cover picture of this book is my picture with Tanegang when he was moved to Sepilok.



Joining two rhinos is a high risk activity.