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From Cincinnati to Sumatra

Taking a rhino across the world in a cargo plane

Photos and story by Emily Maxwell, WCPO

Posted Nov 18, 2015

Harapan is getting restless. But 22 hours in a crate will do that to you. The 1,800-pound rhino is throwing a temper tantrum. He stomps his feet, kicks the back of the crate, lets out a few deep breaths.

“Oh, Haaaaarraapaaaaan,” comes a calm, reassuring voice from outside the crate. Cincinnati zookeeper Paul Reinhart has spent the better part of this leg of the 10,000-mile trip on a flight from Anchorage to Hong Kong in the cargo area with Harapan.

It was, after all, Reinhart’s decision to transport the rhino from the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden — where Harapan has lived for the last two years — without a tranquilizer.

Tranquilizers can mask an animal’s condition if something goes wrong. The medical team’s biggest concern was Harapan’s legs swelling or cramping inside the crate. Too much swelling could cause long-term damage to his limbs. But at the same time, a nearly two-ton animal that hasn’t been sedated could pose enormous risk both in the

cargo plane and other legs of the journey. “Are you sure, Paul?” veterinarian Dr. Jenny Nollman had asked before they left. “But he kept saying, ‘He’s going to be calm and going to be fine.’”

After spending 34 years at the zoo and a majority of his career caring for Sumatran rhinos, Reinhart knows Harapan. He also knows it’s up to him to keep Harapan — who has become to him over the years something between a pet and a child — calm and fed for the next day and a half of travel.

Harapan lets out gusts of teen-like angst and kicks the back of his crate. His face pops out from the top of the crate, and Reinhart strokes Harapan’s face near one of his horns. Harapan leans into Reinhart’s hand.

It is a simple, sweet moment.

A moment that perhaps shouldn’t stick out in a story of survival, of potential extinction.

Scientists estimate only 100 Sumatran rhinos are left in existence, making Harapan one of the most valuable animals in the world. Millions of visitors saw Harapan at zoos over the



Harapan in his enclosure at the Cincinnati Zoo.

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Zoo employees load Harapan's crate into a moving truck.

years. Born in Cincinnati, Harapan spent a stint at the Los Angeles Zoo before returning to the Queen City in 2013. Now, he could be the key to making sure the Sumatran rhino isn't the next mammal to go extinct.

But first, the team has to get Harapan to his new home.

And with a day and a half of travel left, dwindling food supplies and a restless rhino, Reinhart and the zoo team still have a long way to go — and a host of obstacles to face, including the risk of poachers — before they can begin thinking about goodbyes.

Operation Rhino Drop: How do you transport a rhino 10,000 miles?

Following the death of his sister, Suci, in 2014, Harapan became the only Sumatran rhino in captivity in the Western Hemisphere.

"With Harapan going off to his new place, it is very sad for a lot of us and we will miss him personally, but given the situation we were in, it was the right thing to do," said Dr. Terri Roth, director of the Center for Conservation and Research of Endangered Wildlife at the Cincinnati Zoo.

Roth is also a prominent leader in the Sumatran rhino captive breeding program.

Harapan's father, Ipuh, was the only male Sumatran rhino in captivity in the United States when the program began in 1984. After a breakthrough in research, Roth successfully bred Ipuh with his female partner, Emi. She gave birth to the first Sumatran rhino calf born in captivity in more than 112 years.

That calf was Andalas, Harapan's brother, who was transported to the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary in 2007. The now-14-year-old rhino has continued his Cincinnati family's legacy, siring the first calf in captivity in Indonesia three years ago.



And now it was Harapan's turn.

The zoo filed miles of paperwork with both the United States and Indonesian governments as part of the months-long preparation process. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service needed to certify Harapan's departure. The Cincinnati Zoo had to book a space on board a Cathay Pacific cargo plane for the 30-hour trek across the world. Harapan had to undergo medical testing and vaccinations and spend 30 days in quarantine before he could leave.

In August, the zoo announced Harapan would be leaving Cincinnati for Indonesia to help keep his species from going extinct. At the time, the Sumatran rhino was officially declared extinct in Malaysia.

The race was on for the zoo to transport Harapan to Sumatra. Since Harapan was the prime age for breeding and needed to be moved while it was still warm enough for him to be outside during transport, the zoo had a lot to do. And quickly.

I first learned the zoo was planning to transport Harapan while working on a story last year about his father, Ipuh. The zoo donated his body to the Cincinnati Museum Center following his death in 2013. I've never had a particular interest in rhinos, but wildlife conservation has always been close to my heart.

When I was in kindergarten, I wanted to save the whales – even telling people I had changed my name to “Emily Killer Whale Maxwell.” (That’s dedication, folks.) When I was 10, my

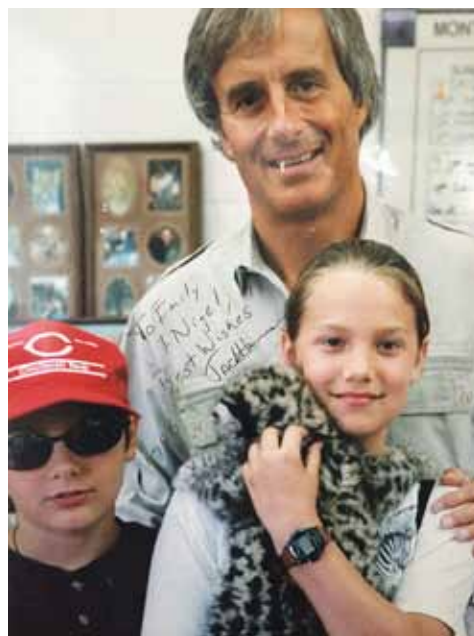


Dr. Jenny Nollman prepares food for Harapan while aboard the cargo plane.

interests shifted to zoology after meeting famed zoo director Jack Hanna and posing for a photo with him and a baby snow leopard.

My career veered down a different path, and I am now a photojournalist for WCPO.com. In my five years here, I've weaseled my way into working on several assignments about the Cincinnati Zoo. I've even been given the unofficial title of “zoo beat reporter” for our digital team.

I casually pitched the idea to my editors last October. What



Left: Paul Reinhart sits by Harapan's crate while traveling on a cargo plane. Right: The author at age ten (right) and her brother Nigel (left) with Jack Hanna (rear) at the Columbus Zoo.



Left: A media swarm greeted the Cincinnati Zoo team and Harapan when they arrived in Jakarta. Right: Staff from the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary drive Harapan's crate in a truck to a ferry in Jakarta.

if I go with Harapan? Document the process? I mean, how cool would it be to show people the logistics of transporting a rhinoceros 10,000 miles?

That began our own logistical gauntlet. The decision to go wasn't made lightly. My life could be in danger on the trip.

Our corporate risk analyst cautioned me about the threat of terrorism in the region where we were traveling. ISIS had put out a bounty on Western journalists because the group wants to behead journalists on video and then share that video worldwide.

We had to take security precautions and even develop code words so that I could communicate to my editor that I was safe while I was gone. I knew that despite the risk, this was too important a story to pass up. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to document the last Sumatran rhino the Western Hemisphere would likely see being transported to his native homeland in an attempt to revive his species. How could I not go?

I wasn't officially approved to go until 8 a.m. the day before our departure. Before I knew it, I was riding in a zoo van in front of a Penske truck carrying Harapan to Columbus.

Forget snakes: We put a rhino on a plane

A crowd of about 50 zoo employees gathered outside in a back lot of the Cincinnati Zoo. It was Friday, Oct. 30: Harapan's moving day and there was hardly a dry eye in the house. The crowd stared anxiously while a forklift moved Harapan's wooden crate until it was safely secured in the yellow Penske moving truck.

Reinhart stayed by Harapan's side in the back of the Penske truck for the two-hour drive to the Columbus airport. The rest of

the team, which included Nollman, zoo videographer Pat Story and myself, drove in a van in front of the truck.

As I watched drivers pass our caravan on the highway, it struck me that not one had a clue the truck was carrying one of the world's most endangered animals. Once in Columbus, teams from the zoo and Cathay Pacific spent hours carefully packaging Harapan's crate with supplies and food onto a platform that would be moved inside the cargo plane.

The airline is no stranger to transporting animals abroad, particularly race horses. While this was the first time a rhino had been on board, the airline crew knew what to do. They lined the bottom of the crate with plastic to prevent his waste (bet you didn't think you were going to read about rhino pee today) from spilling over in the event the wood shavings inside the crate weren't enough to soak it up.

6:30 p.m., Friday, Oct. 30: Crews prepare to load Harapan onto plane in Columbus.

After all of the other cargo had been arranged on the plane, workers loaded Harapan and all of our gear.

Rhinos' personalities are similar to dogs. Maybe even toddlers. They love people and attention. Naps are crucial. So are their favorite snacks. And they get restless when they're confined in a small space for too long.

If something were to happen with Harapan, Nollman was on hand to administer a tranquilizer or medications. But they had other ways to help keep the rhino happy, and hoped only to have to medicate or tranquilize him if absolutely necessary.

Reinhart and Nollman came prepared with Harapan's favorite snacks: apples and carrots. But they had to work around Transportation Security Administration rules to prepare



them: Knives weren't allowed on board, so Nollman used the steel bars of the crate to cut the fruits and vegetables.

In the more than 30 hours in the air, the rhino only urinated a few times. Harapan, apparently, has an enormous bladder.

He pooped just once at the very end of the trip. (Look at that. You get to read about rhino poop today, too.)

I was afraid the smell would be something like walking into an unkempt horse stall. But it was barely noticeable thanks to the wood chips.

Aside from takeoff and landing, Reinhart and Nollman took turns staying with Harapan in the cargo area.

"It's an awesome responsibility to take care of one of the rarest animals on earth, and bring him to the other side of the earth is an even more awesome responsibility," Reinhart said. "You never take that lightly."

1:30 p.m. (Indonesian time), Sunday, Nov. 1, Indonesia: Plane arrives in Jakarta.

When we finally arrived in Jakarta, sleep-deprived, sun-deprived and not really knowing what day it was, we were blasted by 94-degree heat. The plane doors opened and a wave of humidity hovered over us as we waited to be escorted to customs. Nollman stayed behind with Harapan while the rest of us obtained work visas and presented the proper paperwork so we could officially move the rhino off the plane. He had been in his crate for about 40 hours at this point.

But Harapan was home. Well, almost.

Staff members from the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary and Roth greeted us at the airport. They were anxious to see how Harapan held up during the long flight. He had slept most of the

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last leg of the trip, but his restlessness was settling in again with the commotion of the airport.

A dozen or so photographers and journalists swarmed his crate when he was brought from the tarmac to the cargo area inside the terminal. This was the last time a member of the public would likely see him in person, and everyone wanted to get a look.



Left: Zookeeper Paul Reinhart watches Harapan as he takes his first few steps after 53 hours in a crate. Right: Reinhart hugs Andalus, the first Sumatran rhino to be born in captivity in more than 112 years. He was born at the Cincinnati Zoo in 2001 and was transported to the sanctuary in 2007.





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The Jakarta airport staff unpacked the last of his food and supplies, accidentally removing the plastic lining from the bottom of the crate. A gush of rhino urine and poop oozed onto the cement floor, barely missing the workers and us. There's nothing funnier than splattered rhino waste after 30-plus hours in an airplane. Especially with the prospect of 10 more hours of travel to go.

The Race For Sumatra

A large crowd of spectators and media gathered as a forklift carried Harapan's crate out of the airport and into the back of a safari-like truck with zebra stripes on the sides.

They were witnessing the world's last Sumatran rhino outside of Indonesia return to its native homeland. They knew this was a historic moment.

Armed police escorted the truck out of the airport to keep crowds in control and to make the drive to our next stop, a ferry dock about three hours away, a bit easier.

About 9 million people live in Jakarta, and they all seemed to hit the highway as soon as we did. Our team separated into vehicles with staff members and volunteers from the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary who met us at the airport. We were driving behind the rhino truck and police escort, moving inches at a time. Motorcycles zipped in and out of traffic while cars of all sizes switched lanes without warning.

"This isn't bad for a Sunday," said a volunteer with Yayasan Badak Indonesia, also known as YABI or the International Rhino Foundation, while sitting in the back seat of an SUV with me. Videographer Pat Story and I politely grinned and held our collective breath as cars merged across lanes just inches from each other.

Queen's "I Just Want To Break Free" came on the radio — appropriate for Harapan's current state.

By the time we arrived at the Sunda Strait Bridge, we were still about six hours from the sanctuary, and Harapan had been crated for 43 hours.

At the dock, the vehicles traveling with the rhino filed onto the ferry, where we spent the next three hours coasting the calm waters of the Sunda Strait. The sky was pitch black, the humidity thick. A group of locals, along with the zoo team and sanctuary staff, stood by the rhino in the parking lot area on the ferry.

Reinhart, Nollman and Roth climbed onto the top of the truck with Harapan's crate to continue to look after Harapan, who went through a few restless fits before finally falling asleep.

At this point, we had been wearing the same clothes for almost three days and had hardly slept. A few of us took naps on





Left: Harapan eats plants in his new enclosure at the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary in Lampung. Right: Paul Reinhart says his final goodbyes to Harapan at the sanctuary.

benches in the indoor area of the ferry — the last air-conditioned room we would experience for the rest of our time in Sumatra. Others tried to catch a breeze outside while the ferry continued along the water.

But the zoo team's focus remained on a sleeping Harapan. "I'll be so glad when he's out of his crate," Reinhart said.

When Harapan woke, he ate plants retrieved from the rainforest in Sumatra. It was the first time he had eaten plants from his native land.

2 a.m. Monday, Nov. 2: Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary.

When we finally arrived at the sanctuary, Harapan had been in his crate for 51 hours. We were tired, sweaty and smelly. We had been in Indonesia for more than 12 hours and traveling for 40, but it was far from quitting time.

We were in the middle of the rainforest, using our cellphones as flashlights to navigate the ground. A truck drove Harapan's crate to an enclosure in the park where a crane lifted him off the truck and into his new paddock.

But the transition wasn't as easy at night.

Harapan would be quarantined for at least a week until he acclimated to his new environment. That meant his new area was covered in mosquito netting. Crews from the sanctuary had to cut the netting so the crane could lift his crate close enough to let him out safely. Men disappeared into the rainforest to cut down logs to slide his crate to the doors of the pen.

It took nearly two hours to complete the mission.

Finally, the crate opened, one side crashing to the ground.

"Go on Harapan...sloooooow," Reinhart coaxed him. "Gooood boy... Aww there he is."

A tired crew gave a round of applause as Harapan calmly

took his first steps in three days, backing slowly out of the crate into his new enclosure. A pile of fresh plants and tree branches was waiting for him and he began to munch on a much-deserved late-night snack. He stretched his legs like a newborn calf, walking slowly in circles.

Harapan was finally home.

Home Sweet Home: The Beginning and the End

The Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary is 250 acres of rainforest outside the Way Kambas National Park in Lampung, Sumatra. Each rhino has 20-25 enclosed acres to themselves. Every morning the staff feeds them, washes them and gives them routine medical exams. They spend only about 2 to 3 hours in an enclosed space, then the rest of the time browsing the rainforest.

The sanctuary has a female in mind for Harapan named Rosa. But before Harapan can be introduced to her, he will remain in quarantine to monitor his health until he adjusts to his new environment and the various risks, such as native insects.

Thanks to the sanctuary's Rhino Protection Unit, one of those risks is no longer poachers. The Way Kambas National Park has not had a rhino death because of poaching in more than eight years thanks to these armed guards, who keep watch over the three females and three males that live at the sanctuary.

Before the guards were brought to the sanctuary, the risk of poaching was much higher. The Sumatran rhino is the only Asian rhino with two horns, which are used in traditional Chinese medicine, making them a valuable asset on the black market.

But why is it important to save this species? Why are governments across the world joining forces to halt extinction?



For Roth, the answer is simple. It comes down to us.

“The Sumatran rhino — to me it represents something different,” Roth said. “The Sumatran rhino is a species that lives in the forest. It does not compete for good farmland. It does not harm humans. It is not a danger to humans. It is probably one of the most benign large mammals on the planet. And the way I see it is, if we cannot manage to live and allow something like that to live with us, if we can’t let that happen, then what does that say about humanity itself and what does it say about how anyone will live with wildlife in the coming years? We have to take a stand, and we have to say that these animals are important. They’re important to us for a lot of reasons, and we have to show that we can live with other creatures on this earth. And if we don’t, once we lose those other creatures, we will be lost as well.”

Harapan’s departure from Cincinnati signifies the end of U.S. zoos’ involvement in the Sumatran rhino breeding program. Roth has run the program at the Cincinnati Zoo for the past 18 years. During that time, she has shared her research with the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary staff, specifically helping them to breed Harapan’s relatives Andalas and Ratu. The next success will (hopefully) be Harapan’s offspring, which makes walking away from the program a tad easier for Roth to bear.

“I think the kind of contribution we’ve already made and the one yet to be made is something that nobody can ever take away from the Cincinnati Zoo,” Roth said. “Nobody can ever take it away from me. We’ve done our small part.”

At 8 years old, Harapan is at his prime — both sexually and socially — to interact with other rhinos, which is why the zoo wanted to act quickly.

“Sumatran rhino conservation is not only for Indonesia, but the species belongs to the world. Therefore, I think the value of Harapan is very big,” said Widobo Ramono, executive director of the Indonesian Rhino Foundation.

Ramono has worked closely with Roth over the years on the global effort to conserve the species. He’s thankful the

zoo shared its scientific advancements in breeding with the sanctuary. “With a dwindling population of less than 100, even just one rhino counts,” Ramono said.

“The thing about the value of this (Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary), is that we only had five and now we have six. That is more than 20 percent of the value of the whole rhino conservation,” Ramono said.

‘Harapan Means Hope’

5 a.m. Wednesday, Nov. 4, Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary.

It’s the last day of the trip. And it’s time to say goodbye to Harapan. I asked Reinhart how he would describe his relationship with the rhino. His response? He’s family.

Reinhart spent the night before sleeping next to Harapan’s stall, fully exposed in the dark rainforest.

“People are going to think I’m weird, but we said our peace. I told him he was going to be OK,” Reinhart says as Harapan chews on Reinhart’s clothes, playfully seeking his attention.

He sits down on the wet cement floor of Harapan’s enclosure. The man and the rhino lean against each other.

“You’re going to be a good boy here,” Reinhart says as he pats and strokes the rough skin around Harapan’s face. He gently holds the animal’s upper horn.

Reinhart has cared for every member of Harapan’s family over the years. So he is saying goodbye to a lot more than just one rhino. But knowing Harapan could help revive the species helps Reinhart with his final farewell.

“Emily... you said, ‘Is there hope for Sumatran rhinos?’ and the answer is yes, there is. There’s Harapan. And Harapan means hope. He’s going to come through,” Reinhart says, stroking Harapan’s face.

After feeding Harapan one last banana – his favorite treat – Reinhart gives him one final pat and walks away from the enclosure for the last time.

Harapan follows until he reaches the edge of the fence. He stands still for a few seconds, then walks into his new life. ■

About this story: Photojournalist Emily Maxwell spent seven days traveling with the team from the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden to document the transportation of Harapan, the last Sumatran rhino in captivity in the Western Hemisphere. Harapan is now living in the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary in Sumatra, Indonesia. Follow her on Twitter @EmilyWCPO and Instagram @emaxphoto.

