

Ficus factor feeds Cincinnati zoo's rhino baby boomlet



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Emi enjoys a postpartum snack as her newborn stays close at Cincinnati's zoo in April. The male is Emi's third calf.

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By [Paul Watson](#)

It was a small miracle that Andalas' father, Ipuh, survived long enough in his cramped Cincinnati enclosure to become a proud papa.

"Everybody in the zoo community thought [Sumatran rhinos] would adapt to hay and grain the way the black and white rhinos from Africa and the Indian rhinos did," zookeeper Steve Romo said by phone from Los Angeles.

"That turned out not to be the case. When I was in Cincinnati, our first female basically starved to death. She wasted away to nothing."

Romo helped raise Andalas' parents at the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden and moved with their son to the Los Angeles Zoo, which had been the first home in the United States for Andalas' mother. Romo learned about Sumatran rhinos' eating habits while working in Malaysia in 1984, during the early days of the captive-breeding program.

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Ipuh was supposed to be conditioned to eat hay before arriving in Cincinnati in 1991, but he wasn't interested in the meals.

“Over a six-month period, this animal had lost 260 pounds,” the keeper recalled. “You could see his shoulder blades, backbone and ribs, his pelvic bones.” When all seemed lost, Romo had a eureka moment.

“Ipuh, basically, was probably 24 hours away from death,” Romo said. “The zoo director told me, ‘Anything you want to do, we’ll try.’ I phoned San Diego and had some ficus shipped in. It was probably too late, and the vets didn’t even want me to try it.”

Five boxes of ficus leaves arrived express from the coast. When Romo was 75 feet away from Ipuh with a fistful of fresh leaves, “he put his head up. He could smell it. He got up and walked to the next stall and he began eating. Basically, the agreement was that San Diego was going to send ficus until he died. But he didn’t die.”

Within 13 months, Ipuh was ready for his first try at mating. He was paired with a young female named Emi, whose mother had been killed by poachers in Indonesia.

She was transferred from the Los Angeles Zoo to Cincinnati in 1995 for breeding, and gave birth to Andalas six years later. He weighed in at 76.2 pounds, with long black hair and a sly look. A year later, Romo moved with the rhino calf to Los Angeles, where ficus trees growing on city land provided steady food.

Andalas was the first of his species born in captivity since 1889, when a Sumatran rhino gave birth at India’s Calcutta Zoo. His mother, Emi, has since had two more calves in Cincinnati: Suci, a 75-pound female born in 2004 that remains at the zoo, and an 86-pound male born April 29.

The new baby, scheduled to make its public zoo debut today, has yet to be named.

Ipuh, the father of all three calves, is the only successful sire in captivity.

Material from The Associated Press is included in this report.