

B R I E F C O M M U N I C A T I O N S

The Rhinoceros - and Mammal Extinction in General

From Tom Harrisson

Extinction of mammal species by man is not new in Borneo. *Homo sapiens* is almost certainly responsible for the tapir and the tiger which are found among the stone-age food remains at Niah Caves but not in historic times, though both survive on other islands and the mainland (under threat - the Bali Tiger may right now be extinct). A giant pangolin (*Manis palaeojavanica*), otherwise known from the Pleistocene fossil beds of Java, in association with early *Homo erectus* (*Pithecanthropus*), occurs as unfossilized food bone around the 30,000 B.C. mark at Niah too, but no later. Orangutan and rhino are also quite common there, and rhino horn was used as ritual pillow for at least one Niah neolithic cave burial; neither species now occur within 200 miles and both are on the grave danger list for the whole island.

The only rhino known in Borneo is the Sumatran or Two-horned, smallest of the species and uniquely a rain forest animal. The Borneo form is named by a German zoologist *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis harrissoni*, after yours sincerely, like whom it is in imminent danger of becoming extinct in the seventies. Borneo Research Bulletin has published previous references to this remarkable, harmless very shy creature. I saw one fleetingly on the overland crossing between the Bahau headwaters and the Apo Kayan, interior Kalimantan, in October 1945, and am perhaps the last non-native to have done so. Nearly all recent records have been sightings of footprints only, and all of them in the largely uninhabited Segama-Kinabatangan upriver areas of eastern Sabah. The horns and skin have retained their fantastic value with the Chinese as aphrodisiac, so that rhinos have been illegally hunted to death, mostly by far-ranging Iban and Kelabit-Muruts. There are probably not more than twenty (perhaps ten) left on the island; none in Sarawak and Brunei, just possibly one or two in Kalimantan; the rest in Sabah where, however, they are split up in very difficult terrain so that breeding contact is unnaturally difficult.

Other Sumatran rhinos are on Sumatra (perhaps thirty?) and on the mainland in Malaya (1974 enquiries in detail suggest less than twelve, mainly in the north), southern Thailand (a few accidentally protected by Communist guerrillas), Burma (some, but the situation is unsure), and possibly in Indo-China (no recent information). There is still no effective conservation for them outside two national parks in Sumatra and Malaya - from which, however, they tend to roam, vulnerably.

The Survival Service Commission of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature' (I.U.C.N.) is deeply concerned with the Sumatran Rhino and is planning to redevelop conservation efforts for it. Latest information and signs of interest inside the relevant areas would be most helpful. Also any local stories, actual or folklore, on the rhino in the past anywhere in Borneo would be of great interest for past background. Anthropologists please note.

Fortunately, a Dutch biology student, Kees Rookmaaker, at Amsterdam Free University has developed a passionate interest in the general literature of the Sumatran and Javan Rhinoceros. He is now making an effort to bring together all that is known on the species, as an aid to a conservation program. For hitherto efforts at conservation, notably in Sumatra and in Malaya, have been both costly and (for the Sumatran Rhino) conspicuously unsuccessful. The situation now becomes critical, and this must be regarded as among the most immediately threatened large animals on earth.

On Sumatra the problem for rhino and all life is the exceedingly high rate of jungle felling for timber during the seventies. This is also re-opening the threat to the orangutan, which in the sixties looked for a while to be safe again. Confined entirely to Sumatra and Borneo, the orang is again under increased pressure in Kalimantan, and best served through the efforts of the Game Warden's department and Mr. Stanley de Silva in Sabah. This work is far ahead of any other. Likewise, his major effort in saving the Turtle Islands off Sandakan is of world importance; the more so since effective conservation of Green Turtles elsewhere in the region is at a very low ebb right now.

Any points on any of these or related problems will be taken up promptly by the undersigned.

NEWS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mervyn Aubrey Jaspan, 1926-1975. An Obituary

Professor Mervyn Jaspan died suddenly at Hull while still in the prime of early middle age, 26th April 1975. He was young in mind too, "full of beans" in the old English slang term, a restless, provocative, occasionally near-incoherent gad-fly.

The elegant memorial card sent out from the University of Hull bears a nice sketch drawing of "a traditional Rejang house." Clearly this is the Sumatran usage and the pleasant thatched hut has nothing to do with the greatest river of northwest Borneo. Jaspan will be remembered primarily for his enormous and enormously competent fieldwork-publications on Sumatra, and for founding and running the Southeast Asia research project at Hull.

The Hull project has proved to be the most enduring and effective in Britain, though on a far more modest scale than in some American parallels or the Kyoto one which I reported in an earlier Bulletin. It has experienced teething and breathing troubles, some of them directly stemming from Mervyn's own mercurial personality. Mercury can be poisonous if used carelessly. But though others sometimes found it hard to deal with (or for) him on any basis of long-term stability, these qualities were essential in getting new things done and a unit moving. It is profoundly to be hoped that the project will survive his death, recent re-arrangements inside the University and the chronic shortage of British educational finance. Among other things, the group has sent an outstanding fieldworker, Victor King, to study the Malohs in southern Kalimantan.