

## The IUCN SSC Asian Rhino Specialist Group

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It is an honour and a pleasure to be able to speak to you on behalf of the Asian Rhino Specialist Group for the occasion of the launch of the EAZA Rhino Campaign. I am very pleased to see so many animal friends here together and I am very glad that you all have chosen to support the rhino in this campaign, because rhinos really need all the support they can get.

Rhinos, the biggest land animals after the elephants, are a group of charismatic animals that have had quite their share of problems in the past. All have been, or still are, close to extinction and rhinos are still among the animals that are most sought after for their horns, by poachers and traders. But fortunately they are still with us, thanks to the continuing efforts of conservationists worldwide. I will try to give you a brief overview of the current state of affairs of the Asian rhino species, and indicate what future actions will be needed.

I have been involved with Asian rhinos for 30 years, first as a researcher on Sumatran rhino (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) ecology in Sumatra and later in various functions with development and implementation of rhino conservation programmes. For the last ten years I have been with the International Rhino Foundation, a US based charity that has provided, with its partner organizations, significant support for Asian rhino conservation.

From its start, I have been involved in the IUCN SSC Asian Rhino Specialist Group, first as a member, later for many years as a programme officer, and recently I have been appointed as one of the co-chairs. I believe that most of you will be familiar with the IUCN SSC Specialist Groups and many of you will function in one or more of these groups.

The Asian Rhino Group has been instrumental in bringing rhino scientists and rhino managers together and in charting the course of action for rhino conservation. Many strategies and action plans, both Asia-wide and regional, have been developed by the group and the group and its members have been involved in one way or the other in every rhino conservation activity in Asia. For the future I hope that the group will become even more involved and will be able to tackle some of the big challenges ahead.

What is the status of the Asian rhinos today? There are three species of rhino in Asia, against two in Africa. The biggest rhino is the great Indian rhino, that can be seen in several zoos worldwide. There are about 2,500 in the wild and 150 in captivity. Then there is a smaller cousin, the Javan rhino (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*), with about 50 in the wild and none in captivity. The third species is the miniature and hairy Sumatran rhino, with about 300 survivors in the wild and nine in captivity. All three species once roamed over much of South and Southeast Asia

But the number of all three species of Asian rhinos is smaller than the number of the rarest of the African species, the black rhino. More than 90% of the Asian rhinos are Indian rhinos and the two other species are still in a critical situation, with numbers so low that they could become extinct in our lifetime, if the conservation efforts are not continued and intensified. Overall it is not a very bright picture.

### **The Indian rhino**

But let us start with the brightest part, the Indian rhino. About 500 years ago there were probably about half a million Indian rhino living in the fertile plains of the mighty rivers coming down from the Himalayas. But fertile plains are not only attractive for rhinos and, both in India and Nepal, the rhino once almost became extinct because of hunting and loss of land for agriculture, with numbers in the lower tens. In India this happened around 1900, and in Nepal around 1960.

But thanks to rigorous protection of the remaining rhinos and their habitat in both countries, the numbers have recovered to a total of about 2,500, a number that is usually regarded as being the minimum for long term survival of a species.

This is a true success story, especially considering the human, economic and political environment, and in February 2005 the centenary of Kaziranga National Park was celebrated in a big way, with the slogan 'The Century's Greatest Conservation Success Story'. Some exuberance should be accepted on such occasions.

But not all is well, and more needs to be done. The biggest remaining challenge for this species is the fact that more than 90% of all Indian rhinos are in just two reserves, Chitwan in Nepal and Kaziranga in Assam - India, with Kaziranga having 70% of the world population. There are too many eggs in too few baskets. This is highlighted by recent developments in Nepal, where the popular unrest has caused a breakdown in the protection and a resumption of poaching. Chitwan has already lost 200 rhinos and Bardia may have lost most of its 100 rhinos. In a few years the results of many years of protection can be lost.

Therefore the priority action for the future is the establishment of more and larger Indian rhino populations in other areas. Admittedly it is not easy in these densely populated countries to locate large wild areas where rhinos could be reintroduced, but in India there are two candidate areas, Dibrosaikhowa in the east, and Manas on the Bhutanese border. Manas has lost almost all its rhino several years ago, due to the same factor that plays now in Nepal, but since then the security has much improved and a few rhinos have already returned to the area naturally.

Translocation and reintroduction is also the focus of the project submitted for the EAZA Rhino Campaign and in November 2005 the partners will get together again for the further development of this initiative.

### **The Javan rhino**

Lets now have a look at the other two species, starting with the smaller cousin of the Indian rhino: the Javan rhino. This species had a very large distribution area, but probably because of its preference for more open habitats and lower altitudes, has been declining much faster than the other species. When the first naturalists in the early 19th century wrote about South-east Asian mammals, this species was already rather rare and extinct over large parts of its former range.

By 1930, the Javan rhino only occurred on the Ujung Kulon peninsula on the western tip of Java and in a few areas in Indochina. Currently there are only two populations left. Fewer than five Javan rhinos survive in Vietnam, in the Cat Tien National Park, but they have not reproduced since 1998. The population in Ujung Kulon has recovered since 1930, but has now been stagnant for 30 years at a level of 50-60 animals. This is a truly worrying situation. Just imagine that the tsunami that destroyed north Sumatra had occurred 2,000 km further south in the same fault line. Then there would probably be no more rhinos in Ujung Kulon, where most of the land is just a few meters above sea-level.

Therefore, to salvage this species, we must establish new populations and gradually build up populations to more secure levels. If we do not do that, this species will become extinct, sometime in the future. But if we act now, the species could recover as also the Indian rhino has done in India and Nepal and the Southern white rhino has done in Africa. 100 years ago, these species were in about the same situation as the Javan rhino is in today, and look how these species are doing now.

Ujung Kulon is a comparatively small area, at least for rhino standards, and extension of the habitat is impossible on the densely populated island of Java. But it is the only source of animals to work with, and therefore the first priority has been to improve protection and eliminate poaching. This has been achieved by the establishment of dedicated Rhino Patrol Units (RPU) and coastal patrols, and since 1994 no rhinos have been lost to poaching.

IRF and partners have funded the RPU program, forming the 'first line of defence', and other organizations, in particular WWF, have been active in general management and community work in Ujung Kulon. Overall the situation is secure for the rhinos in Ujung Kulon, but the habitat does not allow the rhino population to expand very much above current levels.

In early 2005 the Indonesian Rhino Conservation Strategy will be reviewed and updated during a workshop in Jakarta, and this issue will definitely be one of the main topics. We have made projections of potential growth of the Javan rhino population if we start translocation and managed breeding now, and even with a modest increase of 3-4% per year we could reach our goal of 1,000 Javan rhino in Indonesia (and probably a few hundred in other parts of its former range) by the year 2075.

### **The Sumatran rhino**

Last, but not least, as this is obviously my favourite species: the Sumatran rhino. This is a rhino that lacks the 'brutal image' and 'grotesqueness' of the other species, but it is a graceful and shy animal, agile and playful, and beautifully adapted to living in the dense tropical rainforest.

Historically the Sumatran rhino occupied pretty much the same area as the Javan rhino, but with a more restricted distribution eastward, and also occurring with a special subspecies on the island of Borneo. Its decline in numbers has been slower than that of the Javan rhino, probably because of its preference for dense forests in mountain areas, and 30 years ago there were probably a few thousand left in smaller and larger pockets throughout most of the historic range.

The decline in number, largely because of poaching as its preferred habitat is less suitable for human enterprise, has continued till the mid 1990s, when effective anti-poaching measures were put in place. Though Sumatran rhinos have disappeared in most of the smaller areas and only very few are rumoured to survive in Thailand, Myanmar, and probably even in easternmost India, the decline has been halted in all of the main populations and in some there are early signs of recovery. The 300 remaining Sumatran rhinos are located in three main areas on Sumatra (200), two or three areas in Peninsular Malaysia (75) and two areas in Sabah (25).

The Sumatran rhino is probably the most difficult species to protect and to manage as it lives in very low densities in mountains covered with thick tropical jungle. Seeing a Sumatran rhino is a very rare event, at best one can find footprints, dung, feeding marks and wallows. Normally they are also shy and avoid humans at the first alarm.

On the other hand it is an animal that is traditional in the use of its range and uses fixed routes for foraging and especially to go to saltlicks that provide additional minerals. The fodder in the tropical forest, that appears to be abundant, is very poor in nutrients and slow growing because of lack of light.

Rhino poachers set their traps, spear falls, pitfalls or steel wire snares, on these traditional routes, and within a few years they will have caught all rhinos in an area. Then they move on further into the heartland of the rhino country. In this way they have stripped millions of hectares of otherwise suitable habitat of its entire rhino population.

Since the mid 1990s, anti-poaching units were established in all major Sumatran rhino areas in Sumatra and Peninsular Malaysia at the initiative of the Asian Rhino Specialist Group and International Rhino Foundation. Earlier similar units were established in Gunung Leuser by WWF and the Leuser Foundation, and later SOS Rhino established similar units in Tabin Wildlife Reserve in Sabah (Malaysia - North Borneo), the last stronghold of the Bornean subspecies.

The only way to stop the rhino poachers is to have smarter, faster and more dedicated people protecting them in the field. These anti-poaching units are not primarily to catch poachers, because that is quite difficult in this terrain, but to destroy the traps and by doing this to discourage the poachers to return, as their chances of bagging a rhino are becoming too slim.

So far this policy has worked and incidents of poaching have stopped or became very rare once sufficient units are deployed. But such a programme is quite an investment in time and money. Currently the programme employs one person per two rhinos at a cost of about US\$1,500 per rhino per year. And it needs to continue as long as there is demand for rhino horn and consequently an incentive for poachers to try their luck. On the longer term, we hope that the belief in the magical and medicinal values of rhino horn will fade, but until that day, there is no other option to protect these rhinos.

### **Rhino conservation and the EAZA Rhino Campaign**

Rhino conservation is a long term thing, and does not fit into the standard three or five year project cycle. Long term commitment - till the job is done and the goals are met (or proven to be unrealistic) - is critical for success in rhino conservation. This is what we have done with the RPU program for both the Javan and the Sumatran rhino, and we are hopeful to be able to continue until the Asian rhinos have reached sustainable population levels, main threats have been removed or are mitigated, and the rhinos have sufficient secure habitat to thrive in.

Therefore, this EAZA campaign is timely and very much needed, both for increasing awareness, to educate the public, and to generate the necessary funds for the rhino conservation programmes. The awareness and support for rhino conservation is growing in the range states, but it is too little and too slow. Support from non-range countries is needed more than ever and will be needed for many years to come.

Therefore I hope that the involvement of the European zoos in rhino conservation will not be limited to this campaign only, but that some more long-term initiatives can be developed. Zoos reach an enormous audience and should be able to recruit significant support in their home countries for rhino conservation. They also may be able to work together with zoos and other institutions in the countries that consume rhino products, to educate the public about the adverse effects of these traditions. Zoos can make most valuable contributions to rhino conservation in several ways.

I thank you for listening to all of this and I wish the EAZA Rhino Campaign a great start and a thunderous conclusion. Long live the rhinos. Thank you.