CONSERVATION IN THE REGION

MYSTERY OF DEAD JAVAN RHINOS REMAINS; ANTHRAX SUSPECTED BY WWF/IUCN TEAM

Anthrax may have caused the recent mysterious deaths of five of the world's sixty remaining Javan rhinos, according to a WWF/IUCN specialist team which has just returned from investigating the situation in Indonesia.

Dr. Rudolf Schenkel, of the Faculty of Natural Sciences of Basel University and 1977 WWF Gold Medal winner, and his wife Dr. Lotte Schenkel, teamed up with Indonesian WWF researcher Haerudin Sajudin in a month long emergency study at the invitation of the Indonesian government.

Septicaemia epizootica, a virus disease which may have been responsible for killing some 350 domestic goats and 50 buffaloes in villages adjoining Ujung Kulon National Park in November 1981, was first considered to be the cause of the rhino deaths. This possibility was later discounted, advises Professor Schenkel, since an epidemic of septicaemia in the national park would have affected banteng (wild cattle) more readily than rhinos; no dead banteng were found.

"We've ruled out poaching, since all the horns were intact," notes Dr. Schenkel, who has studied the extremely rare Javan rhino since 1967. "Poisoning from toxic wastes dumped in the sea (rhinos occasionally drink sea water to obtain salt) is unlikely. We suspect the problem may be an endemic disease that was dormant and which became active under extreme climatic conditions."

Anthrax, or an anthrax-like disease, is suspected, since anthrax spores can remain dormant in the earth for decades and become active after heavy rains, such as the downpour which recently drenched the isolated Ujung Kulon National Park, the only home of the Javan rhino. The symptoms indirectly observed in the dying rhinos would fit in with an attack of anthrax. Outbreaks of the disease were recorded locally several decades ago.

The team also confirmed that the diet of the rhinos seems to have changed in recent years. "In 1967–70 we found that the rhinos were eating mostly saplings and small trees," Dr. Schenkel observes, "but a study in 1979–80 showed that many vine species, pandanus leaves and even a mangrove tree were important parts of the rhino menu." This might indicate that the preferred food plants of the rhino have become scarcer due to changes in the Ujung Kulon ecosystem.

Dr. Arne Schiotz, WWF International Director of Conservation, notes: "As part of the new WWF/IUCN – Indonesia programme now being developed we may consider further studies of Javan rhino ecology. We may also explore the possibilities of limited habitat management or translocation of a part of the population, since we now have all our rhinos in a single area, and this could prove a threat to the survival of the species."

Dr. Lee Talbot, IUCN Director General, led the first conservation survey of the Javan rhino in 1955 and estimated the population as probably under 30. As a result of Indonesian government efforts and a WWF/IUCN project to protect the rhinos and their habitat, begun in 1967 and led by Dr. Schenkel, the population had risen to about 60 last year.

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TRAFFIC Japan to halt illegal wildlife trade

In a move which could have major consequences for world conservation, WWF/IUCN will open a new Tokyo office called TRAFFIC Japan, it was announced at the World Conservation Centre near Geneva today.

The office will be modelled on similar operations in the US, the Federal Republic of Germany and the U.K., and follows the decision by Japan to accept the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

Japan is a key figure in many aspects of wildlife trade and the new TRAFFIC (Trade Records Analysis of Flora and Fauna in Commerce) office will work closely with customs authorities to see that the CITES regulations are strictly enforced.

Tom Milliken, a Japanese-speaking American conservationist, will be in day-to-day charge of operations, reporting to Mr. Hyosuke Kujiraoka, former Director of the Japanese Government's Environmental Protection Agency. TRAFFIC is backed by a strong scientific advisory committee headed by Dr. Hideo Obara, one of Japan's leading zoologists and a member of the Board of WWF Japan.

Mr. Eugene Lapointe, recently appointed Secretary General of CITES, described the opening of TRAFFIC Japan as "a major step towards the deve-