

Malaysia:

Community outreach in Sabah, Borneo

Many conservationists identify the Sumatran rhinoceros as the most critically endangered of all the rhinoceros species in the world.

Cindy Salopek
SOS Rhino

The North Eastern region of the island of Borneo is the last known location where one subspecies of the Sumatran rhinoceros, *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis harissoni*, exists. Successful field conservation efforts must address the concerns of local communities - in the case of the Sumatran rhino of Borneo, those local communities are located in the Malaysian State of Sabah.

SOS Rhino Borneo's Community Outreach Programme is one of the models used by many non-governmental organisations in reaching out to stakeholders, engaging with them directly so that they may benefit from their local environment. SOS Rhino Borneo staff engage local people and businesses in the north of Tabin Wildlife Reserve and the areas along the lower Segama river and its estuary, mainly the three villages of Dagat, Tidung and Parit.

The first line of defence

SOS Rhino and SOS Rhino Borneo have been operating at Tabin Wildlife Reserve since November 2001. Having found much evidence of the Sumatran rhinos' existence in the reserve, there is an obvious need to protect the habitat and its inhabitants.

Grants

The EAZA Rhino Campaign supported SOS Rhino with grants totalling €15,000. With these funds, SOS Rhino recently started renovation on a longhouse donated by the Sabah Wildlife Department, expected to be complete by the end of this year. The facility will comfortably accommodate RPU staff, volunteers and visiting researchers. The funds also covered the recruitment of two new RPUs on one of the less-well protected borders of Tabin.



ALL IMAGES: SOS RHINO



Involving local communities is vital in ensuring lasting protection for rhinos

Protection by traditional Rhino Protection Units - groups of patrolling rangers - is necessary, but insufficient. Indeed, no matter how many expensive RPUs are deployed, the units cannot be everywhere at once. Thus engaging surrounding villages and plantations to the conservation effort was found to be vital as they represent the first line of defence against poachers in a Reserve. Accordingly, in Tabin Wildlife Reserve, since 2001, RPUs have directly engaged villagers and oil palm plantation owners and employees in the effort to protect the rhinos and their habitat, through our Community Outreach Programme (COP). This programme has been instrumental in securing Sumatran rhino protection.

Agents of conservation

The COP produces incentives for local communities to become involved by raising awareness and establishing alternate income sources. We recruit rangers from the villages and we are building the foundations for eco-tourism in the Reserve. The RPUs are responsible for various aspects of our volunteer programme, which generates funds for both the COP and the villages around the Reserve. Volunteers travel to Sabah to assist our field staff on rhino surveys by collecting data on the Sumatran rhino and other flora and fauna found in the area. Volunteers are introduced to the culture of the people in the area, and have the opportunity to experience, first-hand, a conservation and research programme in action. The volunteers then act as agents of conservation by sharing their experience and raising awareness at their workplace, in their schools, and in their communities.

Without advertising, the volunteer programme has captured the support and participation of individuals and organisations around the world. These individuals (students, researchers, scientists, nature enthusiasts, adventure travel seekers, zookeepers and zoo administrators) come from diverse backgrounds. Zoo staff have gained valuable experience and they return home with a greater appreciation for the global conservation perspective, becoming more effective in promoting the sustainable conservation message to both visitors and donors to their zoos.



Above:
Educating school children

Left:
A Rhino Protection Unit
in Tabin