

RESEARCH NOTE

POTENTIAL THREATS TO SUMATRAN RHINOCEROS
POPULATION IN BELUM VALLEY

Belum Valley refers to the area comprising Belum and Temengor Forest Reserves in northern Perak which is bordered by Thailand in the north, Sungai Temengor in the south, Gerik Forest Reserve in the west and the state of Kelantan in the east. It consists of an area of about 2830km². Of these, approximately 11,000 ha is covered with forest and 4,000 ha with secondary shrub and agriculture land in the Belum Valley were inundated with water in the 1980's following the construction of the Temengor hydro-electric power dam.

Prior to 1990, only two surveys on the Sumatran rhinoceros were carried out. The first record of two individuals Sumatran rhinoceros in the Belum Valley was reported by Stevens (1968). Later in 1972, Mr. B.Thong (unpubl. data) and his team found tracks of another two individuals in the lower section of Sungai Belum (currently Sungai Perak). Due to security reasons no further surveys were allowed in the area until the disarmament of the Communist Party of Malaya in 1990 after the last survey in 1972.

The Belum area is more accessible after the disarmament of the Communist Party Malaysia. As a result, poaching activities were found to be on the increase. This is based on evidence found by the survey team in various parts of the area. Apart from poaching, other activities like the conversion of forest into agricultural schemes, could further deteriorate the natural resources in the area.

Encroachment and Poaching

Evidence of human encroachment can be observed throughout the Belum Valley especially in the upper Belum region near the Malaysia - Thailand border. Signs of encroachment include abandoned camping sites, tree marking, used shotgun cartridges, animal carcasses, wire snares and dismantled booby trap. Judging from the signs of encroachment and poaching, it can be assumed that the intruders were both locals (possibly villagers from Gerik and security forces) and poachers from the neighbouring country. It is likely that these people enter the area to poach wildlife and to collect sandal wood.

The conversion of forest into agricultural land has been identified as one of the most significant threats facing all large mammals. However, the mountain and hilly areas where the Sumatran rhinoceros predominate are less affected. Contrary to reports, no signs of logging activities was observed in the Ha La Bala National Park on the Thailand side of the border. This area also has less human

encroachment compared to the Belum where signs of encroachment are rampant. Therefore, there is an urgent need to protect the Belum Valley against all forms of encroachment. Belum, together with Hala Bala National Park form a substantially large area which is viable for the conservation of natural resources.

Patrolling and enforcement need to be undertaken to prevent rampant encroachment in the area. Access to the upper reaches of Belum should be restricted only for research purposes. Tourism activities, if allowed, should be limited to the lower Belum areas of Banding. Co-operations from the security forces is also essential in preventing encroachment by outsiders into the area to poach wildlife. Control of poaching must be given top priority to ensure continuous protection to the wildlife population in the areas.

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