
Letter to the editor

Dear Sir,

Recently while going through the pages of *Pachyderm* no. 21 of 1996, I again looked at the photo of the Sumatran rhino published on p. 13. It looks like a Javan rhino with one horn (very clearly visible in the photo) and lack of brownish hair on the body.

I would like to have your comments.

Anwaruddin Choudhury

Reply

It's a common misperception that having two horns and hair are good distinguishing characteristics for the Sumatran rhino, as both characters are usually not visible in the field or on low resolution pictures. The second horn is normally only a knob above the eyes and, when the head is turned away as in the *Pachyderm* picture, not visible. The hair in the wild is very short, 1–2 cm in length except on the ear fringes and tail tip, and Sumatran rhinos are usually covered in mud. Hair is therefore rarely visible in a wild rhino, and the ones in Way Kambas are particularly shorthaired. The long shaggy hair that develops in zoos is an aberration caused by lack of mud wallows and thick vegetation.

The print in *Pachyderm* is clearly a Sumatran rhino even though the second horn and the hair are not visible. The form of body and head, the folds, the skin structure and colour are much better characteristics, but more difficult to quantify or describe. The body form, skin folds and skin structure of a Javan rhino are quite different.

It has happened several times in the past that Sumatran rhinos were misidentified as Javan rhinos because the 'report' does not indicate a second horn or hair. In 1958 the great Grzimek pub-

lished a picture of a Sumatran rhino walking on a plantation road in Malaysia as a Javan rhino, because the picture does not show a second horn or hair. The first rhino seen in Way Kambas in 1990 was also identified as being a Javan rhino because the guards that saw the rhino reported only one horn, no hair, and 'scales' on the body (most likely cracked mud). The rediscovery of the Javan rhino on Sumatra, believed to have been exterminated in the 1930s, was quickly published. These are only two examples, and there are many more cases where one should doubt the identification.

Also reports of large tracks have in the past been referred to Javan rhino without providing any further evidence. The form of the foot is quite distinct between the two species, even in specimens of about the same size, and from a clear picture, or better a plastercast, one usually can determine whether it's a Javan rhino or an 'overlapper' of a Sumatran.

Great caution has to be taken with any report of 'single-horned', 'hairless' or 'large-footed' rhinos. One needs to have a good picture, or a reliable sketch of the body and the body folds, or a good plastercast of a clear footprint before an identification can be made.

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