

# Asia:

One of the lucky tigers!

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## Greater one-horned, lesser one-horned, and hairy rhino experts join together

To be clear, those descriptions apply to the rhinos - not the experts! The biennial Asian Rhino Specialist Group (AsRSG) workshop, bringing together experts from South-East Asia and South Asia, was held from 10-12 February 2010, in Assam, India at Kaziranga National Park, home to the largest population of Greater one-horned rhinos.



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Whilst on my project visit to Manas, I was lucky enough to attend the AsRSG workshop.

The aim of the meeting was to lay the foundation for a new strategic plan across all of the Asian rhino species whilst also helping to strengthen partnerships. Over 50 delegates attended, with members coming from India, Nepal, Vietnam, Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah, Indonesia, and from overseas NGOs and Zoos.

The meeting began with updates from all rhino-range countries; some mixed news as always. Extensive surveying in Peninsular Malaysia has found almost no signs of Sumatran rhino presence, suggesting that there are very few remaining, if any. In Sabah, an update from the Borneo Rhino Alliance identified future priorities as: establishing a genetic relationship between the Sabah and any remaining Peninsular Malaysia populations and improving the Sabah Rhino Sanctuary, including introducing wild rhinos to enhance breeding success. Yayasan Badak Indonesia (YABI) spoke of the improved cooperation between Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam, in order to take urgent measures to prevent the continued fragmentation and eventual extinction of the Sumatran and

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Javan populations; whilst reinforcing the need to manage *in situ* and *ex situ* Sumatran rhino populations as one single meta-population, and for all sub-species to be treated as one single global population. The topical news on the Javan rhino are the plans to create a second habitat within Gunung Honje in Java, while in Vietnam there is an increased effort in rhino monitoring activities, with the recent introduction of sniffer dogs.

There was a strong Nepalese and Indian contingency at the workshop. Greater one-horned rhino conservation in Nepal has faced some major challenges because of past insurgency and political instability. The future looks brighter, with a strong coalition of conservation partners and improving anti-poaching and monitoring activities through a strong Rhino Conservation Action Plan. A hot topic was co-operation of trans-border efforts and information sharing between India and Nepal, which is extremely vital for the conservation efforts on the sub-continent. Key research and scientific studies relating to Asian rhino issues were also presented at the workshop.

Threats analysis was carried out on each of the three species and their habitat, in order to: better understand the current threats, whether existing or potential, in order to analyse which populations have the highest

level of threat and to look at the driving forces. The threats seen from most range countries were from an increase in poaching and / or habitat loss. Other threats identified were existing and potential threat from natural disasters, the unknown effects of climate change, invasive species in key rhino habitats and the problems of inbreeding depression and the current genetic bottle-neck in the Javan and Sumatran species. The strongest tools for mitigating such issues are strong policy and implementation, galvanizing government support as well as improved community awareness and involvement, and the provision of alternative livelihoods.

As the meeting closed, Country Coordinators for each rhino-range country were elected and various technical groups formed in order to provide ongoing information sharing within the specialist group and its members.

The highlight (of course!) was the field visit to Kaziranga National Park, where the latest census counted 2,048 rhinos. We were lucky enough to see two tigers within an hour of each other. The sightings were on the first day of the Chinese New Year, Year of the Tiger. Legend has it that it's good luck to see a tiger on this day, so we took this as a good sign for rhino and tiger conservation in the coming year!

AsRSG members Widodo Ramono - YABI, Sectionov - IRF both from Indonesia and Tran Van Thanh from Cat Tien National Park, Vietnam, enjoy a field visit to Kaziranga National Park.



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## Thanks

Taiwan Forestry Bureau very kindly provided a grant of \$5,000, which was used to fly various South-East Asian members to the workshop, as well as covering food and accommodation costs. Thank you also Dr Bibhab Talukdar for inviting me to attend the meeting on behalf of our Director, Cathy Dean, who is a member of AsRSG.