

# Sumatran rhino put to death at zoo

*Officials fear ailing male may also be lost*

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Staff Writer

One of the two rare Sumatran rhinos at the San Diego Zoo was euthanized yesterday, and zoo officials were worried that the remaining rhino might also die as it struggles with an ailment.

The death of the female rhino, Barakas, leaves just four Sumatran rhinos in U.S. zoos. Keepers are not sure what caused the health of the animals to deteriorate.

A keeper found the male rhino, Tanjung, lying on his side in his barn yesterday morning. By late yesterday, veterinarians had ruled out an earlier diagnosis of a twisted intestine. Tanjung has been given antibiotics and keepers planned to observe him last night.

Losing Barakas is a blow for the zoo, which is part of an international breeding effort aimed at saving the red-haired rhino from extinction.

"It is a serious setback to the Sumatran rhino breeding program and since that's a component of the overall rescue effort, the whole species is worse off for it," zoo spokesman Jeff Jouett said.

Jouett said the two rare animals — also known as red rhinos — are among the keepers' favorites.

"The red rhinos have a chirping song and they are very mellow animals, and very friendly with the keepers," Jouett said. "On several levels, it's a great loss for us."

Jouett said veterinarians decided yesterday to euthanize the female rhino because of her deteriorating condition. Barakas had been losing weight steadily in the past several months and had been at the zoo's hospital since early December.

She was 13 and had been at the zoo since February 1989.

"She was obviously in great discomfort and was not getting any better. And she had lost too much weight," Jouett said.

The rhino, which weighed about 1,100 pounds in September, had dropped about 88 pounds before being moved to the zoo hospital. By this week, her weight had dropped below 900 pounds and she was unable to stand.



FILE PHOTO

Rare rhino: Barakas, who was put to death yesterday at the San Diego Zoo, is pictured here in 1991.

"It is a serious setback to the Sumatran rhino breeding program."

JEFF JOUETT  
Zoo spokesman

A necropsy was done on Barakas, but no cause of her condition was immediately known, Jouett said. Cell samples were sent out for further analysis.

Jouett said the health problem of the male rhino was discovered about 7 a.m. yesterday. Keeper Red Thomas found Tanjung lying on the floor in the barn. Much of his food was left uneaten.

"Red was able to coax him out on the exhibit, but only reluctantly, and he was charging at Red, which is very uncharacteristic. He is one of the most laid-back animals we have," Jouett said.

The rhino also ignored free-cut

leaves that Thomas threw in the exhibit and showed signs of discomfort, Jouett said.

Yesterday, zoo veterinarians called in an equine specialist, Dr. G. Lynn Richardson, for assistance.

Those examinations eliminated the possibility of intestinal torsion, which occurs occasionally in horses and has caused the death of two other Sumatran rhinos, including a female named Rami at the San Diego Zoo in May 1992, Jouett said.

Tanjung has been at the zoo since September 1992.

The rhinos were brought to North America after four U.S. zoos — San Diego, Los Angeles, Cincinnati and the International Wildlife Conservation Park, formerly known as the Bronx zoo — formed a consortium and negotiated with the Indonesian government to try to breed them in captivity.

Other Sumatran rhinos in the U.S. are at the Los Angeles Zoo, which has a female, and the Cincinnati zoo, which has a pair. None of the pairs has reproduced.

Officials estimate there are fewer than 700 Sumatran rhinos left in the wild.