

An Adventure in Indonesia: Searching for Java's Black Unicorn

Centuries ago, the Javan rhino roamed most of southern Asia. Today, a few dozen remain. Travelers to Indonesia can now search for the rhino through a new program meant to preserve the herd

By Jeff Barrus

"Before a rhino charges, he sniffs the air," the man says, speaking in Indonesian. "Smell is his strongest sense. Then he rotates his ears, like radar dishes. Only if he has smelled and heard you will he trust his eyes, which are not so good. If he charges, you must climb a tree—a thick one. And remember, he always charges three times. Three." The fingers are raised.

It's night and I'm sitting in a lamplit circle with four Indonesian park rangers. We're at a weather-beaten barracks just inside Ujung Kulon National Park on Java's remote southwestern shore. The jungle is close by. Cicadas buzz with live-wire intensity and bats swoop from the canopy to feast on the mosquitoes that are feasting on me. I've come by boat—skirting the mountain range that isolates this peninsula from the rest of the populous island—to search for the Javan rhino, the rarest large mammal on earth. My visit represents the vanguard of a new program launched by a local eco-tourism cooperative, kagum, and backed by the World Wildlife Fund to give ordinary travelers a chance to glimpse this reclusive 2,000-pound herbivore in its natural habitat.

Of the five species of rhino—Javan, Sumatran, Indian, African white, and African black—the Javan rhino is the most endangered. Though they once roamed from Bengal to Indochina, these single-horned animals now number less than 70. Some 50 or 60 are cornered in Ujung Kulon, and fewer than 10 are in the Cat Tien National Park in southern Vietnam. Rangers can spend months searching without ever seeing one. There are none in captivity.

Over centuries this rhino has become the stuff of folklore. When Marco Polo passed through Java in the 13th century, it's said he believed the animal was the black unicorn of European legend. Nearly 500 years later, rhinos were so numerous that the Dutch colonial government regarded them as a threat to Java's plantations and offered a bounty for each beast shot. But by the early 1900's, human encroachment had taken its toll. And in 1967, when the first census was conducted, it was estimated that there were only 25 rhinos in Ujung Kulon. The herd grew over the next few years, but has remained constant for the past two decades. Biologists consider this a fragile population, susceptible to disease and genetic deterioration.

I LEAVE THE RANGERS AND GO TO THE MESS. I'm sharing this outpost with two dozen sunburned English schoolgirls on a Christian retreat. One sulks over with a soggy rag and says she has been told to wipe down my table.

"What're you writing?" she asks, looking over my shoulder.

I tell her why I'm here.

"You probably won't find it," she says. "None of us have seen a rhino. Don't expect to either. Told they're bloody shy."

I say I'm really here for the search—the jungle, the other wildlife. The rhino simply gives me a motive.

"Yeah, right then," she yawns. "Say, is this going to be one of those stories where you discover the rhino is really, like, inside all of us?"

"I hope not."

Our conversation is cut short by the call to choir practice. On the way back to my hut, I pass a dozen village boys huddled in the wings waiting goggle-eyed for tonight's performance. It turns out to be a Christian hymn sung in three-part harmony. *Don't build your house upon the sandy shore* . . . I think of the rhino—his keen ears and shy ways. And I pity him.

CHUGGING FROM THE PIER THE NEXT MORNING, I feel like Sir Richard Burton searching for the source of the Nile. The crew is worthy of a great expedition—seven stalwart men, all indigenous. There's the captain, a rough-tongued fellow who has worked this coast for 22 years; his nephew, serving as first mate; Mirza, my Sundanese guide and his son; a park ranger in a khaki uniform; a porter from one of the nearby villages; and Putra, a skinny teenage boy from Jakarta, whom I met the day before and invited along. It's the dry season and the sky is a drowsy, cloudless blue that turns sizzling by midday. The sea imitates the jungle—deep and featureless except for its jadelike canopy—and one spills into the other.

The captain spots a lone fishing boat operating illegally inside the park boundary. He shouts at the young men in their underwear and pulls alongside as if we were pirates preparing to grapple. They don't look happy. I expect him to reprimand them, but instead he demands a share of the morning's catch. Our ranger, Dendin, who like many Indonesians uses one name, is obviously embarrassed by this extortion. But he is younger than the captain, and he says nothing. We leave with a bucketful of silver fish.

An hour on, four of us wade ashore and start walking inland. Rhino prints, droppings, and bite marks have recently been spotted in this area. Dendin leads, slashing through spiny rattan vines and carving notches in tree trunks so we can find our way back. This is secondary rain forest, unrulier than the original growth, which was destroyed in 1883 by the eruption of Krakatau some 30 miles offshore. The greatest cataclysm of the 19th century, Krakatau sent a tsunami far inland, washing away 36,000 people and leaving the Indian Ocean afloat with century-old trees and the corpses of tigers.

We break into a vast open marsh, spooking off two giant monitor lizards, cousins of the archipelago's famous Komodo dragons. This is Java of 1,000 years ago, before it was cultivated into submission by Hindu, Islamic, and Dutch dynasties. Hornbills dive from trees like pterodactyls, their massive wings pounding the air. Whirling above them are sea eagles; brilliantly azure kingfishers dart below. Monkeys rattle the fringe of the forest, and a gibbon whoops from deep inside. A herd of wild cattle stands at a watering hole across the marsh.

In Africa, as many as 100 rhinos are poached each year for their horns, which are used in

traditional Chinese medicine. But poaching in Ujung Kulon is rare, so conservationists have never taken the extreme measures adopted in the game parks of Zimbabwe, where the horns are sawed off tranquilized black rhinos to save them from hunters.

Wild cattle, however, are plentiful in Ujung Kulon and compete with the rhinos for food. These cattle, along with man's presence, are thought to be the reason the rhino population hasn't risen. Park officials have considered moving some of the rhinos to another island, perhaps Sumatra, but they aren't sure such a small herd could survive being split up. And while Sumatra is less densely populated than Java, rhino poaching is more common there.

HAVING FAILED TO FIND SIGNS OF THE RHINO, WE RETURN TO THE BOATS.

The next day we anchor on the far side of the peninsula, and then plow deeper into a tract of primary rain forest. All day long I have the disquieting feeling that it's dusk. Rising from the beautiful gloom are lofty trees with trunks smooth for 100 feet before the first branch emerges, giant bird's-nest ferns, and the liana vine, a creeper as thick as a python. There are groves where a single species dominates. A jungle isn't all plants living in harmony, I think; it's tribal warfare, and whenever one plant can strangle another or cut off its sunlight, it will.

Hours in, we find our first tracks. Though they're a week or two old, they thrill me more than a zoo full of rhinos. We lose them but pick up fresher ones, only a few days old, farther in. Heady with the pursuit and oblivious to exhaustion, we push onward. Late in the afternoon we find a rhino wallow near a deep stream and a thicket of yellow bamboo. The porter—the only one of the group who is from this forest—smells the mud and declares that indeed rhinos have wallowed here, perhaps as recently as this morning.

We decide to rest, so the porter cuts some giant leaves from a palm and begins matting them on the ground. Nearby, Dendin drops to his knees as if in prayer, then unzips his fly and begins to urinate. Local people observe a kind of forest etiquette: No one sits directly on the jungle floor, eats while walking, or pees standing up, which is believed will summon a tiger. And all people, regardless of their status in the outside world, are considered equals.

We certainly smell like equals. Knowing the rhino's legendary nose, none of us has bathed with soaps or shampoo, and my crew has also temporarily sworn off *kreteks*, the clove cigarettes that are the mother's milk of most Indonesian men. This, plus hunger, I believe, accounts for their irritability. By afternoon, all we have left are packaged ramen noodles, which we crunch up and eat dry. They taste like the absence of taste.

After trudging another five hours we reach our base camp and sleep in the jungle. It rains at twilight—a ferocious dry-season downpour. Huddled under a leaky lean-to, my guide Mirza tells me, "We cannot protect the rhino unless we protect the forest. That means local people must find a way to make money without going deep in the jungle to look for it." Eco-tourism, he says, may be the solution.

I think of the English girls. Can tourists tracking rhinos possibly help? (The answer comes later, after I leave Ujung Kulon, from Nazir Foad, a conservationist with World Wildlife Fund Indonesia. He says only a few tourists, under the supervision of rangers, will be allowed to participate in rhino census activities in the park's core. Most visitors will be restricted to the periphery of the park, where they might see the rhino but can't tromp through its main habitat.)

THE FIVE DAYS PASS LIKE THIS—STALKING, COMING CLOSE, TRUDGING BACK

AT DUSK. My feet are blistered; my hands bristle with rattan thorns. Tiny creatures have claimed different parts of my anatomy: mosquitoes zero in on the ears and arms, fire ants have trellised bites up the backs of my legs, sand fleas have ravaged my feet and shins.

On our last day in Ujung Kulon we paddle a dugout canoe up the Cigenter River, where rhinos occasionally come to drink. The river is bright green and lined by palm fronds. We hear a splash and see a small crocodile swimming away. Mirza talks about snakes we might see: the reticulated python, as long as the Amazon's anaconda, and the spitting cobra, which blinds its victim with a stream of expectorant in the eyes before moving in for the bite.

After a few hours the river is impassable and we get out to walk. I feign toughness, but my feet ache and a strange jungle rash is making movement unpleasant. We see no signs of the rhino, and when the rattan becomes nasty we give up and plod back to the canoe.

On the way out of the park our captain again stops to extort fish, this time from a different crew. As we speed away with another bucketful, Mirza says, "When we call someone 'rhino face,' it means they are a person who does not know shame. But actually, the rhino is the most ashamed creature of all. He is always hiding."

I sense this is an apology, but I'm not sure whom it's for.

"It was a good trip," I tell him.

"Yes," he says. "But I am sorry you did not find the rhino."

"It doesn't matter," I say, meaning it.

After all, the rhino is really inside all of us.

One figure of Javan rhino