

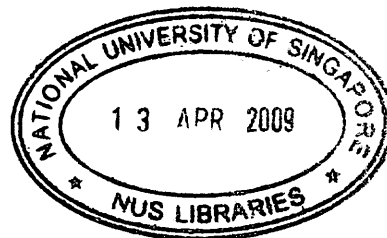
Tabin

*Sabah's Greatest
Wildlife Sanctuary*

WENDY HUTTON

photographs by

CEDE PRUDENTE



**Tabin Wildlife
Resort**

2008

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The Most Endangered Species in Borneo

The Sumatran Rhino

The world has five species of rhinoceros: the White and Black Rhinoceros in Africa; the Asian Greater One-horned Rhinoceros, found in India & Nepal; the critically endangered Javan Rhinoceros and the most endangered species of rhino in the world, the Sumatran or Asian Two-horned Rhinoceros.

All species of rhinoceros are almost prehistoric in appearance, with a solid body and heavy folds of thick skin, massive head and short legs. The first rhino ever seen in the West was an Indian rhinoceros shipped to Europe in 1515 as a gift for the king of Portugal. It created such excitement that the famous German engraver, Dürer, made a woodcut of this rhinoceros. It is obvious that he never saw the actual animal, which he depicts as having hard plates that covered its body like sheets of armour.

Fossils show that a primitive form of rhinoceros lived in Europe some 30 million years ago, and fossilised remains of the Javan rhino dating back some 10,000 years have been found in a cave in southeast Sabah.

It is estimated that only 300 Sumatran Rhinos still live in the wild, most of them in the Indonesian island of Sumatra. Not only is the number of animals small, a further challenge to their survival is fragmentation of their habitats owing to logging and clearing of land for agriculture.



A rare photograph of a juvenile rhinoceros taken in the wild, in the remote virgin forest of Tabin (above). Because of the hairs growing on the Sumatran Rhino (opposite), it is also known as the Hairy Rhino.

This is likely to result in demographic problems, such as too many males in one area and too few in another, or lead to in-breeding within a very small population of individuals.

Between 30-50 animals are thought to remain in Sabah, the last survivors in the world of the Bornean sub-species of the Sumatran Rhinoceros. Elsewhere in the island of Borneo, the Sumatran Rhino has disappeared. Despite the incredibly low number of these animals, it is hoped that they can be saved from the brink of extinction. The White Rhinoceros was brought back from possible extinction with only 50 surviving animals remaining, so scientists believe there is still hope for the Bornean pygmy rhino.

The main threats to the rhino are loss of habitat and poaching for its horn. Although this is made of keratin (just like a finger nail) and compacted hair, it has been erroneously regarded as having medicinal value by some Asian cultures.

The Sumatran rhino (the smallest of the 5 rhino species) is sometimes known as the hairy rhino as it is the only species to have its body entirely covered with coarse hair. Another name for it is the Borneo pygmy rhino, since it is the smallest of all rhino species. It feeds on leaves, twigs and fallen fruits, resting during the hottest part of the day in a mud wallow. It lives in both primary and tall secondary forests, and is known to visit Tabin's mud volcanoes to feed on the minerals.

Research on captive rhinos in Sepilok was begun by SOS Rhino (a US-based non-governmental organisation or NGO) in 2003. One of their aims was to assess the rhino's reproductive viability, a vital topic as rhinos are solitary, shy animals and little is known about their mating behaviour in the wild. At Sepilok, a pair of captive rhinos were mated — thought to be the first time this has ever occurred in captivity — but unfortunately this did not result in any offspring, owing to reproductive problems with the female.



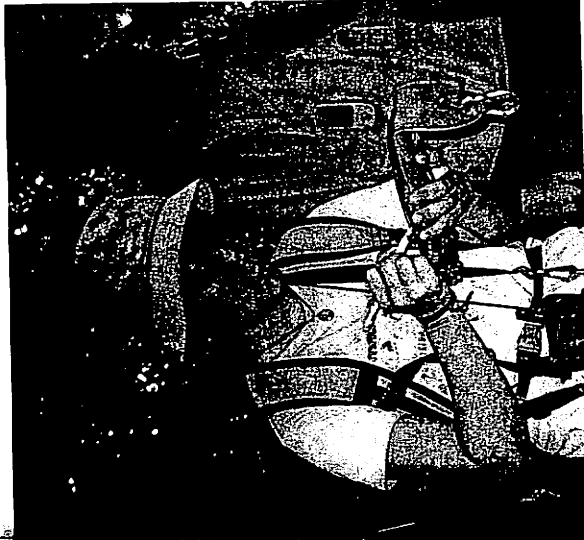
The rhinoceros loves to wallow in muddy pools, to cool off during the heat of the day. Its eyes are very sensitive to the light and it prefers the deeply shaded areas of the rainforest. Because of its shy, secretive nature, mud wallows and its distinctive footprints on the forest floor are all that most scientists see of this endangered creature in the wild.

SOS Rhino Borneo (a locally registered, non-profit organisation affiliated to the US-based SOS Rhino) was then formed, and has since been conducting research in Tabin Wildlife Reserve together with Sabah Wildlife Department. Tabin and Danum Valley Conservation Area are home to the majority of Sabah's few remaining rhinos. They are well protected in Danum, but the animals in Tabin Wildlife Reserve are thought to be more vulnerable to poaching. Thus, Tabin has become a designated protection area for relocating any isolated rhinos, and strict monitoring is constantly carried out to prevent poaching carried out by the Wildlife Department, as well as by patrols formed by adjacent oil palm plantations.

Apart from footprints, wallows and dung, further confirmation of rhino existence in Tabin has been obtained by photographs taken by camera traps. Even more exciting was the first-ever video footage of a Sumatran rhino, captured by hand-held video-camera in Tabin in 2006. Further video footage has been obtained since then, with SOS Rhino Borneo handing over 20 minutes of hand-held video footage of rhinos in Tabin, as well as all their research and observations to the Sabah Wildlife Department.

During its five years in Tabin, SOS Rhino Borneo worked at raising awareness of the rhino, communicating with surrounding oil palm plantations owners and workers, and with villagers living near Tabin. Their rangers — locals who have come from surrounding communities — have worked together with Sabah Wildlife Department to tackle rhino poaching. SOS Rhino Borneo has also helped raise awareness among local and international stakeholders through exhibits, events and public service announcements, in their attempt to gain support for Sabah's rhino conservation efforts.

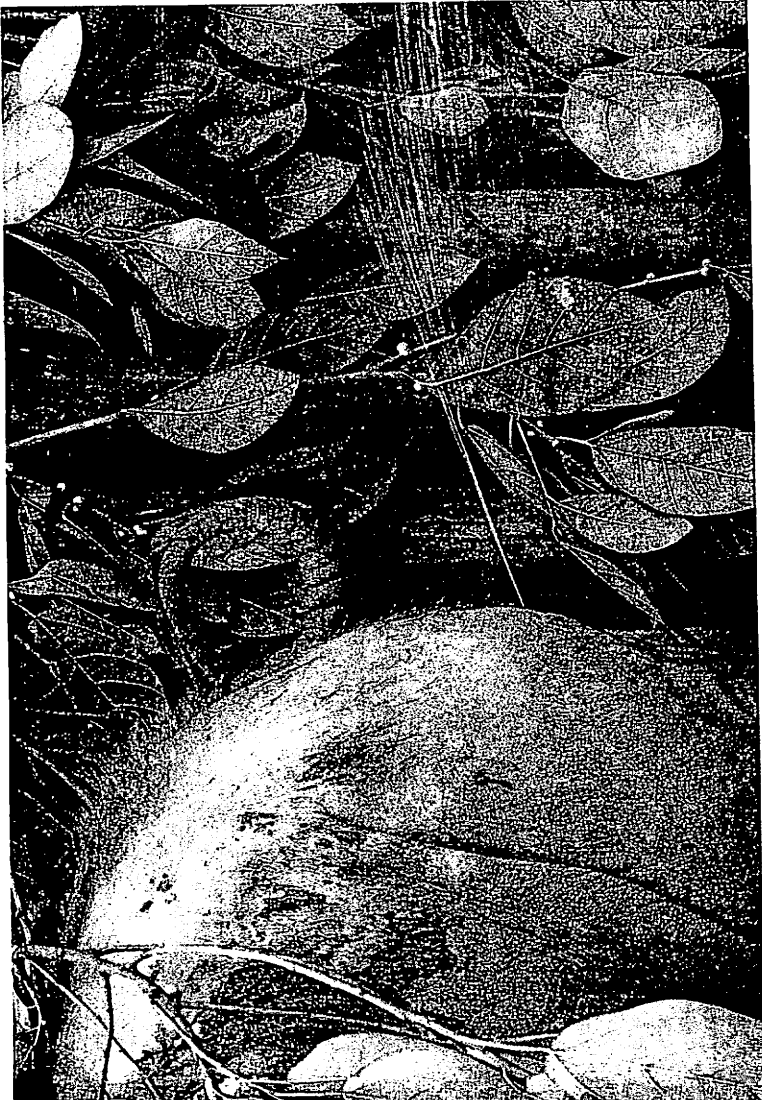
As a result of discussions during the Fourth Sumatran Rhinoceros Workshop held in Kota Kinabalu in July 2007, the decision was taken to establish a recovery



Researchers from Sabah Wildlife Department, assisted by staff members of SOS Rhino, gather information on the highly secretive Sumatran rhino. Guests staying at Tabin Wildlife Resort can arrange in advance to join in the hot, sweaty but ultimately rewarding work. A captive breeding programme is now under way in Tabin, to help save this critically endangered mammal.

Department to tackle rhino poaching. SOS Rhino Borneo has also helped raise awareness among local and international stakeholders through exhibits, events and public service announcements, in their attempt to gain support for Sabah's rhino conservation efforts.

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Camera traps help capture images of the extremely shy Sumatran Rhino, which hides deep in the rainforest. On occasion, however, they have been surprised in secondary forest and if captured, are transferred to a safer protected area.

This exciting programme will be carried out for a period of five years, after which progress will be reviewed, and if necessary, changes made to Sabah's rhino policy.

Because of the rarity of these extremely shy and secretive animals, visitors to Tabin cannot expect to encounter a rhino. However, Tabin Wildlife Resort offers interested guests the opportunity to assist in a conservation programme to save the Sumatran Rhino. Their special Rhino Conservation Package begins with a couple of days based at the resort, exploring the surrounding area, followed by two days deep in the forest helping researchers gather data relating to the rhino and its habitat. After staying in temporary camps in the rainforest during the expedition, the comfort of the Tabin Wildlife Resort is sure to be appreciated more than ever.



Local staff are joined by foreign volunteers (all clad in leech socks to help protect them against this ever-present blood sucker) in gathering data on the rhinos. Here, a footprint is being measured.

programme for Sabah's rhinos. With Laurentius Ambu, Director of Sabah Wildlife Department, as its chairman, an advisory group has been formed and includes organisations such as WWF-Malaysia, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, SOS Rhino Borneo and other individuals.

In order to establish a closely-managed rhino population in Sabah, selected rhinos from throughout Sabah will be captured and brought to a designated area within Tabin Wildlife Reserve for captive breeding. The purpose is to get as many of these rhinos as possible to breed.

The designated area will be designed and managed in light of the lessons learned from past experience and mistakes in the capture and husbandry of Sumatran rhinos. The importance of breeding healthy rhinos taken from different areas of Sabah, to widen the gene pool and increase the likelihood of successful reproduction, has been acknowledged.