

REALLY, RHINOS!



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Asian rhinos said facing extinction by poaching

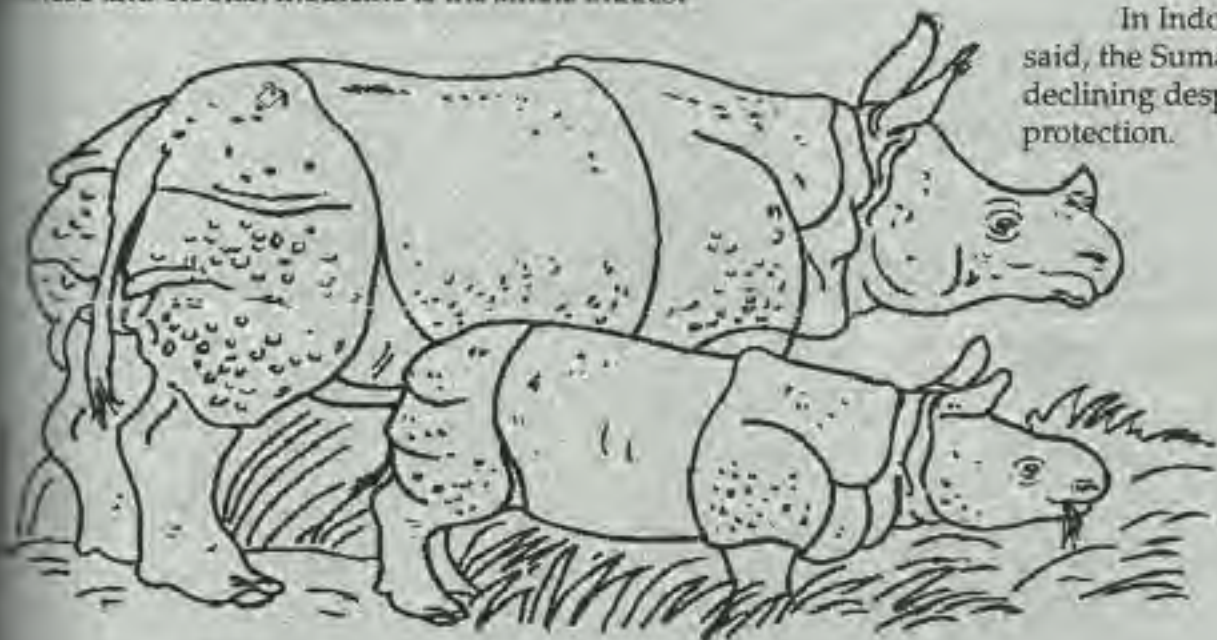
GENEVA (Reuter) - Asian rhinos, whose horn is widely used in traditional oriental medicines, face extinction from heavily armed poachers who even use high tension power lines to electrocute them, conservationists said Tuesday. The Swiss-based World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the World Conservation Union (IUCN) said in a new report that only two viable populations survived in India, while in Indonesia only between 250 and 450 animals remained. "The worse rhino crisis now in Asia, where all three surviving species are endangered," an introduction to the report by WWF's Elizabeth Kemf said. In the past, environmentalists have seen African rhinos as facing the main threat to extinction.

Demand for the rhino's horn in traditional Chinese and Tibetan medicine is the single biggest

pit traps and shooting, the most common method of killing the animals. At a separate WWF news conference in London, conservationist Vivek Menon said park guards were sent out with rusty old bolt action rifles and a handful of bullets and were no match for the better-equipped poachers.

"Anti-poaching must be a top priority," he told reporters. "Manas National Park has lost nine guards in the past couple of years who have been shot by poachers." Calling on courts to hand out stiffer penalties to poachers, Menon said, "The arms and drug mafias control the trade. Wildlife is now the world's second largest illegal trade after drugs." Although almost extinct by the turn of the century, rhino numbers had increased due to conservation policies but many have died since the 1980s. Illegal killing accelerated in the early 1990s, leading to a loss of 14 percent in the total population between 1990 and 1993. Another five percent were estimated

In Indonesia, the report said, the Sumatran rhino was declining despite increased protection.



threat to the beast's survival. In India, the herd of greater one-horned rhino had been reduced to around 1,500 by an increase in activity by poachers who often kill the animals by electrocution, the report said. Poachers dangled wires connected to high tension powerlines across rhino paths, but also used

"The Indonesian government itself says illegal killing of the rhino in Sumatra is 'uncontrollable' and 'overwhelming'," Kemf said.