



Scenic lake amidst primeval forest in Leuser National Park.



Proof of existence in Leuser National Park - A photo showing a Sumatran rhino soaking in a mud wallow captured by camera trap.

One step away from extinction!

Fourth of a series

Kan Yaw Chong

THE Sumatran rhino is just one step towards extinction! There are no two ways about it. It is fighting for its life, as a species, with probably only 50 or less than 100 individuals left worldwide, reckoned Dr Sen, Assistant Director of Sabah Wildlife Department. It is an emergency. Even Dr Terri Roth, the master breeder who succeeded in siring three babies at Cincinnati Zoo and helped Indonesia another, cried out at the recent Sumatran Rhino Crisis Summit in Singapore: "We are in a crisis, we are desperate!" The dire situation is not new though.

In 1996, the International Union of Conservation of Nature (IUCN) put the Sumatran rhino on its Red List which categorized it as 'Critically Endangered' or - just one step away from extinction!

So, how far is one step? As quickly a blink of the eye, this awesome species can just vanish from Planet Earth altogether.

Extinct in West Malaysia

Take Malaysia, the animal used to exist in West Malaysia and Sarawak. As recent as 12 years ago, there were seven animals in the Sungai Dusun Rhino Sanctuary, Peninsular Malaysia.

But all got wiped out in a matter of just one year, the last which died in December 2003, said to have been killed by a fatal disease called surra - caused by a protozoan trypanosomes of several species which infect the blood, causing fever, weakness, lethargy, weight loss, anemia, ending in total poisoning suspected to have originated from contaminated food, water or the environment.

So, the Sumatran rhino had gone extinct in West Malaysia - gone forever.

Extinct in Sarawak

In Sarawak, conservationists discovered a population of the animal in the Batu Lati and Mt Merud area and initiated a protection area some 720-hectare big, after a flurry of excitement.

But nothing has been heard about it since. In other words - it has also gone extinct in Sarawak as well!

Then Yan Kong, Veteran Sabah Sabah adventure trekker, said he used to see banteh (rhino) inscribed on a log book in a hut in Batu Lati and heard Lundayehs talk about hunting for rhino horns, in some of the seven trips there between the 1970s and 1990s. But the jungle had been deforested since!



A healthy female Sumatran rhino photographed in Leuser National Park, Sumatra.



Extinct in West Malaysia. Shah - a favorite rhino in Sg Dusun, was one of seven wiped out completely by the Febrilia by disease by December 2003!

The Sumatran rhino once inhabited the rainforests, swamps and cloud forests in India, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, China, but one by one, this animal disappeared from these vast range countries, leaving only some six scattered populations in Indonesia and Sabah!

Sabah next?

In Sabah, the count is a low 10 or even less, says Dattuk Dr Junaidi Payne, after recent camera traps indicate no sign of the animal in Tabak Wildlife Reserve.

Given such a low local number and low gene pool, it too, has arrived at the gate of hell in Sabah - the sobering truth that extinction is just one step away!

Some cheer-some news from Leuser, Sumatra

Amidst gloom and doom, there is still some cheer-some breaking news from Sumatra's Leuser National Park for us to cling to hope.

Just as every body thought the animal had gone extinct in Sumatra's 2.5 million-hectare Gunung Leuser National Park, Aceh Province, after 26 years had gone by with no real evidence of its existence, then all of a sudden, some 700-1000 pictures taken by 30 hidden movement triggered cameras between July 2011 and April 2012, confirmed positively the existence of six females and one male!

The 30 instant cameras set up on

trees near wallows, used infrared sensors to detect movement of animals and trigger without sound and without a flash, just blink.

Experts identify 1 male, 6 females from pictures

The first pictures captured shows a rhino on December 9, 2011.

How did they identify for certain from pictures alone these were six females and one male?

To identify gender, rhino experts use morphological rhino features in general.

The male has a relatively larger body. And although both the male and female have two horns, the male horn is much longer and pointed while the female horn is shorter and blunt.

Besides the pictures, an interesting part of the find include 1000 footprints and droppings, after a US Fish and Wildlife Services funded survey, which led them to conclude that the area has an estimated population of between 7 to 27 healthy individuals.

They also found 15 active wallows and 28 inactive - a lot of wallowing!

Wow! That's quit a lot at this moment of crisis.

Jamal Gawi: Now we can prove to the world

This writer met Jamal Gawi, Chairman of the Leuser International Rhino Foundation, at the March 31 to April 4 Sumatran Rhino Crisis Summit, at the Singapore Zoo.

He was ecstatic.

"Of course, we feel very, very happy. Now, after 26 years, we really know the rhinos are still alive in the Leuser Ecosystem," he said.

"We have been attending inter-

national conferences on the plight of the Asian and Asian rhino, when they talk about the Sumatran rhino status in Leuser, they always put a question negatively.

"Now, we can prove to them we have found the rhino, they are alive," Jamal enthused.

"Some of the rhinos which our camera had captured are in good health, which is very good. You can see from the pictures that they are quite healthy and look very strong. From our identification exercise, we determined six females and one male," Jamal said.

"Soon after that, we started to establish the rhino protection units for monitoring and protecting the habitats, one from the southeast and one from the south," Jamal said.

Still mating and producing babies in the wild

Very interesting finds include footprints of a mother and baby, Jamal said.

"One or two pictures show two mature rhinos together and this is stunning because usually rhinos compete with each other and fighting so if you find two rhinos close by probably this is a pair of male and female meaning they are reproducing in the wild and the population can grow," he said, raising a glimmer of hope that some populations are still breeding in the their wild habitats.

Hope is exactly what Stefan Ziegler of WWF-Germany had said.

"It shows protection of the Sumatran rhino isn't doomed to failure," but warned that quick action is needed because news of the finds could attract poachers.

Discovered by accident

Strangely, Jamal's team stumbled on the rhinos just when they were not looking for it.

It was all by accident they noticed rhino tracks while they were surveying and searching for tigers in the north of Leuser. That led to the installation of the 30 cameras on trees near the wallows.

"Right now, we are planning for more surveys in new locations because the current locations covered only three of nine sites, so there are still six to seven locations to go," he noted.

The surprise - a 'highland' species

How far is the Gunung Leuser National Park from the capital city of Aceh?

"Quite far, about one-and-half days by road," he said.

The word 'gunning' (meaning mount) begged the question whether this rhino range is lowland or highland.



Jamal Gawi - Chairman of Leuser International Rhino Foundation.

Jamal shot back with a big surprise!

"No, not low land. This is a very unique finding actually. The rhinos we found are actually highland rhinos. Most of the pictures captured rhino were 1,500 metres above sea level. That's unique. Here, even in this meeting, we hear people saying the Sumatran rhino is a lowland species, which is not always true. Based on our findings, the Leuser rhino is a highland species," Jamal contended.

Sumatran rhino foot prints at 11,000 ft, Mt Kinabalu!

Interestingly, a scientific expedition to eastern Mt Kinabalu in the early 1960s led by Lord Cranbrook found rhino foot print at 11,000ft!

Which means there were once Sumatran rhinos in the Kinabalu area and they do venture up to highlands.

Isolated from threats to far but

Are the newfound rhinos inside Leuser National Park protected?

"Yes, they are inside a protected area, isolated from the threats so far but we have to be very careful because based on our surveys, we also investigate illegal activities around the habitats and we also found some illegal activities approaching the habitats now," Jamal conceded.

"That's why we established the Rhino Protection Units to really deal with this issue," he said.

Does all that mean Jamal Gawi is not worried that the species will go extinct?

"No, I am still very worried because we don't really know how many rhinos are in the forest right now in the area," he said.

"For example, if it is less than 25, then you know, it will be very difficult to survive," he said.

Critical mass - 25 is not good enough

Asked if a population of 25 individuals is the critical mass, Jamal said:

"The good size is actually 100. That's why we hope that we can find more rhinos in the new locations, and if we can find more rhinos in the new locations and if the population is more than 100, then we can be a little bit more happy with that," Jamal wished.

Leuser - a World Heritage Site

Leuser is 2.5m hectare in size but only 1.5m hectares are protected - the same size as Belgium.

In 2004, UNESCO declared Gunung Leuser National Park, the Kerinci Seblang National Park and the Bukit Barisan National Park in Sumatra a World Heritage Site, because they satisfied Criteria VI for 'outstanding scenic beauty; for outstanding representations of significant ongoing ecological and biological processes and Criterion X for containing the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation.



The search for tiger in northern Leuser accidentally stumbled into rhino tracks.



A volcanic lake in Leuser National Park.