



**A JAVAN
RHINO
BIT
MY BROTHER**

BY WALTER ANGST



Dr Angst's report of his encounters with the Javan rhinoceros is made particularly remarkable by the fact that so few of these rare animals have ever been seen — and even fewer have been photographed. The only other colour photograph of a Javan rhino, taken by Eugen Schuhmacher, was published in *Animals* ten years ago

'A rhinoceros bit me', my brother told a friend on the telephone from the hospital.

'Don't make me laugh: you should save that sort of story for April Fool's Day.'

'No, really. I have just come back from my holiday in the Ujung Kulon, and I'm in a hospital in Zurich . . .'

My brother had some trouble convincing his friend that he had, in fact, been bitten by a wild Javan rhino. For the layman finds it hard to believe that a rhino will bite: after all, isn't the animal's main weapon its horn? But the story is even more hard to take for a zoologist. It is almost incredible that a visitor should come into physical contact with an animal which is so rare that even to see its shadow would be a unique stroke of luck.

The last surviving representatives of the single-horned Javan rhino (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*) live in the strictly protected Ujung Kulon nature reserve on the western tip of the Indonesian island of Java. The reserve totals about 360 square kilometres, and at the latest count there were some 44 rhinos living there.

The reserve has quite a long history. In 1883 there was a tremendous tidal wave, perhaps 30 metres high, which destroyed a considerable area of western Java. The villages of Djung-Kulon, Tjikuja, and Rumah Tiga, which were within the area now covered by the reserve, were completely flattened. Following this natural disaster, the Ujung Kulon peninsula became a refuge for many Javanese animals — which otherwise would not have been able to exist due to increasing human cultivation of the land. At that time the Dutch colonists used the region for hunting; the local people hunted, too, and above all they hunted the *badak* (the Indonesian word for rhinoceros), whose horn especially but also its skin, hooves, and teeth, could be sold at great profit to the Chinese.

'... Never before had anyone seen so young a Javan rhino. It moved a little, then lay down. Then it stood up and began to move out of the thicket and into a ray of sunlight . . .'



Left, and from left to right: Misdi, Sardamin, and Saridan, the three wardens present when the baby rhino was seen

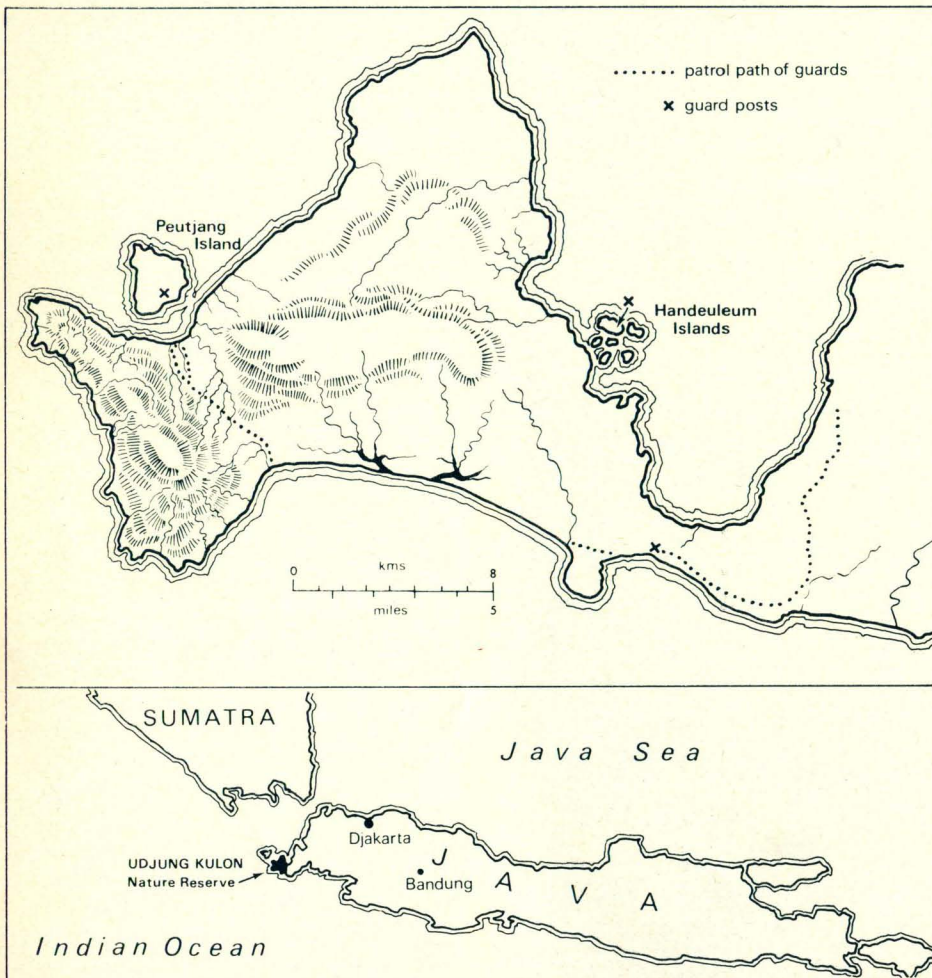
In 1921, however, the Dutch realised that the Javan rhino and the Javan tiger were on the brink of extinction and declared the whole peninsula an inviolable 'nature monument'. The reserve was placed under the control of the Ministry of the Interior, but was not supervised in any way. In 1937 the area of the nature reserve was increased to include the large Panaitan Island, the small Peutjang Island, the group of Handeuleum islands, and a large part of the Gunung Hondje. A guard system was established and the grazing land, which was most important for the banteng (wild cattle), was managed so that it would not revert to forest. Now it was the Forestry Department, a division of the Ministry of Agriculture, which was in charge.

Between 1942 and 1945 Java was occupied by the Japanese. They left so many weapons behind that it was not surprising that heavy poaching started after the end of the Second World War. After Indonesian independence, in 1950, the Ujung Kulon was placed under the newly created Department for Reserves and Nature Protection (within the Forestry Department). Paths were established and buildings for wardens and visitors erected. Soon, however, it became apparent that the only things that could stop the destruction of the animals were increased financial aid and the help of scientific experts, who were not available locally.

In 1964, the IUCN and the World Wildlife Fund began to be concerned about Ujung Kulon. Above all, they were concerned about the Javan rhino, which is a full species (the Javan tiger, though fine and important, is only a subspecies); the rhino was only represented in Ujung Kulon by a few animals, and was on the verge of extinction.

And so, in 1967, the World Wildlife Fund sent a rhino specialist, Dr Rudi Schenkel of Basle University, to study the species and its requirements. Since then Schenkel has personally and very efficiently supervised all operations in the Ujung Kulon. He visits the area regularly.

With 3½ metres of rain a year, the Ujung Kulon is one of the rainiest areas in the world. The plant cover therefore consists of a lush, evergreen tropical forest, interspersed only by a few swamps and two grassy areas which the wardens keep clear for the banteng. In the east it is flat, and in the west hilly. There are hundreds of different trees, some of them more than 40



Above: The Ujung Kulon area on the western tip of Java

The Javan rhinoceros once ranged from Bengal throughout South-East Asia, but is now confined to the Ujung Kulon reserve in western Java. Its numbers have increased from about 24 to at least 44 after five years of intensive conservation work. Dr Rudi Schenkel, who has directed the conservation programme with World Wildlife Fund support, pays tribute to the Indonesian guard system: no trace could be found in 1972 of poachers, who had been one of the main threats to the rhino. In addition, areas where the vegetation has been managed to increase food for the animals all show signs of rhino use. Numbers of the Javan rhino could now total as many as 48, but an accurate census is difficult in the thick forest. Besides supporting Dr Schenkel and his wife, World Wildlife has provided boats and land vehicles, uniforms and equipment for guards, and has financed the construction of guard huts.



Above: Twenty to forty banteng (Bos javanicus) regularly assemble on the two grazing areas kept clear for them in the reserve. Both the black bulls (second from right) and the ochre-coloured cows have white 'socks' and a white panel on the rump



metres tall. Brightly coloured flowers and strange fruits are found throughout the year. Many of the trees are draped with lianas and epiphytes, under which beautiful orchids and pretty ferns catch one's eye. Palms make the deepest impression — literally — on the visitor: their thorns can penetrate the skin centimetres deep. Tough thickets abound, which can only be passed through by using a bush knife; and surprisingly, the wild bananas are full of hard pips.

There is also a lot to see on the ground, such as the *tepus* flower, with its bright red stars the size of a hand; while at night there are luminous mushrooms. During the summer dry season almost all the water dries up and one drinks from a water-retaining liana.

A few observation paths, which have been opened up by hard work, facilitate a quick effortless progress from place to place. Elsewhere one needs a bush knife, a compass, plenty of time, some good shoes, and endurance.

On the mainland part of the reserve the wildlife is abundant and varied. Besides the rhinos, there are the

Left: Fig tree with trunk fruits; figs form a main part of the diet of Ujung Kulon's monkeys



banteng: the bulls are black, the cows a bright ochre colour, and both sexes have pretty white 'socks' and a large white panel on the rump. Up to 40 animals at a time come to graze on the pastureland.

I have never seen a leopard in the Ujung Kulon, and after measuring many tracks have come to the conclusion that the tiger is extinct in the reserve. I have, however, been lucky enough to see the Asiatic wild dog.

I have often come across the silvered leaf monkey, a jet-black, leaf-eating monkey; but I have only once seen its relative the Sunda Island leaf monkey. Most interesting of all are the grey or moloch gibbons which live in family groups in the eastern part of the reserve. Their far-reaching cry, with a pitch similar to a yodel, helps to keep the group together — and incidentally, makes it possible for an observer to find the group. It is a delightful experience to watch the gibbons swinging effortlessly from branch to branch.

Two squirrels are commonly seen — the large, white-tailed giant squirrel, and the small, uniform grey, common oriental squirrel. The lesser Malay chevrotain is seldom seen. And only once have I seen the Malayan flying lemur or colugo, with its tough membrane between arms and legs enabling it to glide from tree to tree.

But back to the Javan rhino, the animal for which the reserve is famous. In October 1970, together with three wardens, Saridan, Sardamin, and Misdi, I was moving through the heart of the Ujung Kulon looking for monkeys. Suddenly Saridan stopped in a bamboo thicket and whispered to me that there were fresh rhino tracks ahead; he could also see the sleeping place of the animal. We whispered to each other, and soon heard the cracking of bamboo in front of us. We ran back, but soon all was quiet again.

I unpacked and prepared my camera, carefully approached, and stopped a little short of the place. We had to peer through the thicket — and there we saw the right hind leg of a rhino! Although it was far too dark, I took lots of photographs. Then the rhino turned and started to come towards us. We ran away as best we could. Then all was

Female timor deer (Cervus timorensis) on the island of Peutjang, which is included in the reserve. These deer come regularly to the clearing by the field station and wardens' houses; they are similar in appearance to red deer, but are smaller with a relatively longer tail. The males, which often have a mane, have only three tines on each antler



A small white heron wades along by the Tjidjungkulon, one of the many rivers in the reserve; its background is the dense tropical forest typical of Ujung Kulon

quiet once more. We hid in the shadow of the trees.

I had lost the lens shade from my camera, and had to go back to find it, though my companions advised me against this. We all searched for the shade, and having found it, suddenly realised that a baby rhino was standing not far away. I thought at first that it was a wild boar, for it was so small, but it was indeed a baby rhinoceros.

Yet again I took photographs in the dim light. The young rhino was in fact no larger than a boar, and must have been practically new-born. Never before had anyone seen so young a Javan rhino. It moved a little, then lay down. Then it stood up and began to move out of the thicket and into a ray of sunlight. I approached closer and took more photographs. The baby animal looked at me, but appeared to take no notice. Saridan eventually dragged me away, for to our left and not far from us stood the mother rhino. I had run out of film and so we stole quietly away. One cannot argue with an adult rhino.

In January 1971 my brother came for a visit and wanted to go on a search for a rhinoceros. However, this was not possible. But I decided to take him instead to an area where the scenery and vegetation were beautiful — and where a warden had recently seen rhino tracks.

We were accompanied by the wardens Suwardi and Akmar, and the American botanist Albert Will.

We were in the Tjiboom valley when we saw fresh rhinoceros tracks. We followed them, and came across the very fresh track of a second animal. This track led us in a south-westerly direction, down a slope, and then in a curve to the east. Suwardi and I continued in the lead to get nearer to the rhino. It took several hours, and the others had fallen a little behind.

In an area of shrubland Suwardi and I heard a noise about 20 metres ahead of us. We stopped and looked hard to see if a boar or a banteng was running away. But the animal came nearer. It was a rhino, coming straight for us.

As we had seen no tracks for fifteen minutes, and had seen no signs of the animal in the vicinity, we were completely taken by surprise. I had no time to think and acted instinctively. I ran to the nearest tree, which was about 6 metres above me, up a slope. The rhino changed direction. As I reached the tree, the animal caught up with me. As in a slow-motion film, I jumped over the tree roots; and as I did so, the rhino nudged my left leg so that I struck my shin. However, I recovered, and cleared the nearest roots.

The head of the rhino was so close I

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could have touched it, and I could see the young, blunt horn. It obviously had difficulty climbing over the roots. The rhino circled the tree. Then I saw Suwardi: he was running in the direction from which the rhino had come. The rhino then circled in the other direction, and this time it came towards me. I quickly began to climb the tree. And then the rhino ran away. I could see how it ran in a zig-zag movement. I tried to use my camera, but to my disappointment it had become entangled in the branches.

The rhinoceros had disappeared. But then a second animal arrived on the scene. I remembered my companions and shouted to them. The second rhino, which was fully grown, followed the direction of the first and also disappeared.

After a while I heard Suwardi calling that my brother was badly injured. I hurried over to them. Apparently the rhinoceros had charged them — and my brother had stood his ground in order to film the animal. While he was looking through his viewfinder the rhino approached, and so my brother moved aside; but the rhino swiftly changed direction and caught my brother with his horn. My brother fell into a hollow and hit his head on a stone. He put his hands over his head and lay still. The rhino stopped beside him, stared, and turned about.

It turned out that my brother had three deep wounds, mainly from bites, but luckily they were all flesh wounds. In addition, he was bruised and scratched. With some difficulty we finally managed to get him to a doctor, five days later. Apart from his scars, he is today perfectly all right.

Why did this animal attack immediately, and so persistently? I agree with Dr Schenkel that the basic requirement for a serious attack is that the rhino not only smells the man, but also hears and sees him. Furthermore, a previous experience of some kind can influence an animal's behaviour. I would say that one should be wary of encountering a rhino in the wild. Since the man who comes across one can have no idea of the state of mind of his opponent, he cannot foresee how the animal will behave. ●

WALTER ANGST works in the Zoological Institute of Basle University, Switzerland. His article is adapted from one first published in the German language magazine *Das Tier*.
