

# The Red Rhino Blogs (Part VII): Mischievous Harapan

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Sumatran Rhino Harapan after a mud bath at the L.A. Zoo (Photo by Jamie Pham)

## **THE RED RHINO BLOGS**

The announcement in August 2015 that [Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden](#) would send the last Sumatran rhinoceros, 8-year-old Harapan, in North America to the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary in Indonesia's Way Kambas National Park was bittersweet news. For those who have had the rare opportunity to work with these animals, it's a sad parting of ways, but it is also a reason for hope. Thanks to valuable knowledge gained in North American zoos about the science of Sumatran rhino husbandry and reproduction, Harapan will hopefully start a new legacy at his ancestral home. For the staff members at the L.A. Zoo who were

fortunate enough to work with Harapan and other Sumatran rhinos, it's been an occasion to reflect on these magical creatures.

(UPDATE – [January 11, 2016](#): At the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary (SRS) in Indonesia, Harapan is eating normally, receiving daily health check-ups, and has moved to a new, spacious corridor. Read more updates below.)

## Mischievous Harapan



Sumatran Rhino Harapan at the L.A. Zoo (Photo courtesy of Ayessa Rourke)

Harapan was an upbeat, charismatic animal who seemed to enjoy interacting with staff at the Los Angeles Zoo. Prior to his arrival at the Zoo, Harapan had sustained some eye damage due to sun exposure. He was prescribed eye meds that had to be applied two to three times a day. He learned to stand in his barn and place his head where the keeper asked (a behavior that is called “stationing”), while medications were applied. He was very smart and grasped the daily routine and hand signals easily. We just had to keep those apples coming! To protect his eyes from further damage, his yard was covered with shade cloth. Mischievous Harapan would stand on his hind legs while leaning against his barn and use his horn to tear at the cloth until he tore it off. Our excellent construction staff came down many a time to repair what he had destroyed. Unfortunately, this behavior ultimately led to us removing his large play ball, as he would also use that as a platform for a “ripping good time.” Yes, he was a very playful boy...

Part of his husbandry routine included a weekly weigh-in, so Harapan was conditioned to walk onto a scale and stand while being fed apples, carrots, and the like. He was so good and good-natured about this that our veterinary staff were also able to get blood samples from a vein in his tail while he was on the scale. The scale was located in a secured area outside his regular holding yard, so we had to lure him through a gate to come out and encourage him to back off the scale and return to his yard. This meant the keeper had to go in with him and guide him using, once again, a food item. He really enjoyed getting extra portions when called. I never felt in danger or threatened when with him, but it was imperative to be vigilant because he would sometimes get excited and toss his head. If he had made contact, it would have left quite a bruise, at the very least!



Sumatran Rhino Harapan eating browse at the L.A. Zoo (Photo courtesy of Ayessa Rourke) Another one of Harapan's passions was the mud wallow. The keeper would use a hose to add water to the mud and at the same time give Harapan a bath. He would get up a full head of steam, run at or through the water stream, race around his yard, and then come back for more. He would also sometimes buck, snort, and kick up his heels. It was amazing to see just how fast and agile such a large creature could be! It was important to get the dried mud off his coat. We gave many, many tours and talks about Harapan, and we needed to let the interested parties see his long red hair, unique to his species, rather than look at some gigantic mud creature.

When Harapan moved out of our facility, I was extremely happy and hopeful for him, even though it was one of the saddest days of my life to see him go. I knew he deserved a home with lots of greenery and a chance to breed. Although, initially, things did not work out as planned, Harapan has now returned to his ancestral home as one of the very last of his kind—an effort to save his species from going extinct in our lifetime.

While caring for him was often a backbreaking task—the cutting, carting, feeding out of around 150 pounds of mixed ficus daily, and shoveling mass quantities of poo—it was nothing in comparison to being one of a small group of humans on Earth to have the privilege and honor to work with this ancient species, which I fear has a very tenuous hold on life. Even now, as I type this blog, I am getting a lump in my throat thinking about the sad, hard fact that Harapan and his kin may vanish off the earth in my lifetime. I wish humans shared the planet better, cared more about their fellow creatures. I stand firmly behind my belief that Harapan is truly a good soul, and I'll bet anyone who has cared for a Sumatran rhino would say the same thing.



L.A. Zoo Animal Keeper Ayessa Rourke and Sumatran Rhino Harapan

Thanks, big buddy, for being such a joy to work with and for giving me some of the most amazing experiences and memories I will have in my life. I hope all those tours we gave somehow helped your species. You were and are a star. And you will always deserve the very best, such as a good scratching, a big mud wallow, and a delicious yam. Have a safe journey and go make some babies!

Yours in conservation,

Ayessa Rourke  
Animal Keeper, Los Angeles Zoo and Botanical Gardens

UPDATES:

- On November 2, 2015, after his long journey to Indonesia, Harapan arrived safely at the SRS.

*Read more about the history of Sumatran rhinos at the L.A. Zoo:*

**Zooscape "Full Circle" (April 2007)**

**Zooscape "Andalas Summer" (Aug/Sept 2003)**

**White and Black and Red All Over**

**Full Circle**

**First Encounter of a Red Rhino Kind**

**Remembering the Red Rhinos**

**Magical Creatures**