1986 seems likely to be a red-letter year for reintroduction and captive breeding projects. Though perennial controversy surrounds such exercises, which many see as meddling in natural selection, the success of model schemes like Operation Oryx may have turned the tide of opinion in favour of giving other species the chance to reclaim native habitats, especially in cases where human (therefore mutable) factors rather than irresistible natural pressures are driving or have already driven species into exile and technical extinction.

Three outstanding projects involving reintroduction, captive breeding or both, are now under way and timed to reach their peak next year. They concern Père David's Deer in China, the Sumatran Rhino in Indonesia and Malaysia and the Przewalski Horse in the Peoples' Republic of Mongolia.

safari park; they should go back to a semi-wild environment. In fact, about five kilometres away from the site where they will be located, antlers have been discovered, indicating that the species lived in the area a couple of hundred years ago," he said.

The final stages of the project (fencing and enclosure-building on the final site) will go ahead once the deer-owners have agreed to provide the animals required and as soon as transport has been arranged. If things go according to plan, the first herd of 'Four Unlikes' could be back in the wilds of China in March or April of 1986.

Kingdom for a horse

The only truly 'wild' horse of recent times ranged over the steppes of Central Asia. Called Przewalski's Horse, it probably became extinct in the wild in the late 1970s though reports are still heard of survivors in very remote areas.

A few individuals were taken into captivity some time ago and, though some genetic contamination through inter-breeding with domestic stock is known to have occurred since then, the world's Przewalski Horse breeders have worked hard to 'breed out' this contamination and to keep the remaining captive population of this species physically and genetically viable. The world studbook, started in 1959, now shows a total population of around 600 animals in about 100 locations, mostly zoos, in many parts of the world.

Now the dream of reintroducing the horse into its natural range, where it can run wild and once more undergo the rough-and-tumble of natural selection (removed from which it remains a genetic resource of little account) may be set to become a reality. A workshop held in Moscow from 29-31 May brought 25 specialists from Europe, North America, the Peoples' Republic of Mongolia and the USSR together to discuss steps which could be taken to reintroduce the species to the wild in Mongolia. IUCN, UNEP, the USSR Centre for International Projects and FAO are prime movers of the plan. "Steps agreed at the workshop seem sound and practicable but not simple, easy or quick," says IUCN's Robert Scott, Executive Officer of the Species Survival Commission, "so stay tuned!" □

New hope for 'woolly' rhino

For years conservationists have been anxious about the fate of the elusive Sumatran rhino — sometimes known as the 'woolly' rhino. The estimated 850 of these unique creatures left in the world face extinction because of hunting and human population pressure in their native Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. But their day may now have been saved by a bold conservation plan involving the Indonesian and Malaysian governments and several zoos in Britain and the United States.

Sumatran rhino. Photo: Nico van Strien

Under the programme, the rhino will receive better protection in sufficiently large areas of its natural habitat. There will be a captive breeding programme to preserve its genetic diversity in its home countries, as well as in North America and Europe. An education programme will be launched to enhance public awareness of the rhino's plight and to generate support for its conservation.

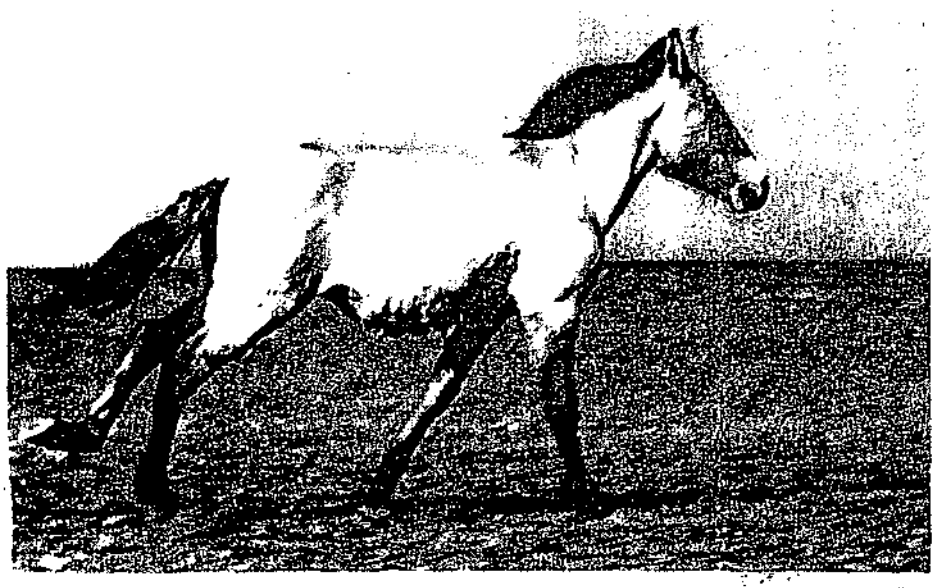
Agreement on the programme has been provisionally reached between representatives of the Indonesian and Malaysian governments, the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquaria (AAZPA), and Howlett's and Port Lympne zoo parks in Britain. In America, it is hoped to have rhinos at San Diego, Los Angeles, Cincinnati and New York zoos.

Dr Nico van Strien, a Dutch mammologist who has been appointed Coordinator of the programme, says the rhino is an extremely difficult animal to find, let alone study or capture. He had to rely on tracks, feeding signs, and other evidence during his research in Gunung Leuser. He claims a world record of sightings — three in four years.

Because the aim, above all, is to conserve the rhino in the wild, trapping will be confined to 'doomed' animals — those occurring as small isolated populations with no future because their habitat cannot be preserved. There are risks in the captive breeding programme, for there is very little experience of handling Sumatran rhinos in zoos, although Indian and both kinds of African rhinos have been successfully bred.

"We shall have to learn a lot," says Dr van Strien. "But the rhinos we capture will be those subject to greater risks in the wild than in captivity. We shall decide on a case-by-case basis. If there is good chance for an animal to contribute to breeding in the wild, we shall leave it there."

Because rhino horn is fetching higher and higher prices as it becomes rarer, there is still hunting for the Sumatran rhino. But Dr van Strien says the art is dying out. And in a rather strange twist, some former poachers may be employed in the coming programme because they have the stamina to remain in the forest for the long periods necessary to locate rhinos. □



Przewalski's Horse. Photo: WWF/Bannikov