



Health check: Dr Hildebrand and Dr Zainal looking at Puntung's ultrasound results.

Taking the right steps

Procedures in place to prevent extinction of the Sumatran rhinoceros

MALAYSIA'S hope to prevent the extinction of the Sumatran rhinoceros now seems much brighter following procedures conducted by a group of renowned wildlife veterinarians at the Borneo Rhinoceros Sanctuary (BRS) facilities.

Puntung, the sole fertile female Sumatran rhino at the BRS facilities in Tabin Wildlife Reserve, Lahad Datu district, Sabah, underwent several examinations and procedures by the veterinarians in recent months to determine and improve her chances of conceiving.

Borneo Rhinoceros Alliance (BORA) executive director Dr Junaidi Payne said the examinations were carried out by specialist veterinarians from the Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research (IZW), Berlin, led by Dr Thomas Hildebrand. They have made three visits to see Puntung.

On March 28, the first attempt was made to flush away cysts in Puntung's reproductive tract with antibiotics followed by more growth removed by the IZW veterinarians using an endoscopic laser device on June 27.

Initially, conservationists were dismayed when it was found during an ultrasound examination conducted on February 24 that Puntung suffered from endometrial cyst growth.

This condition is not only painful but could hinder sperm from reaching the ova, as well as prevent implantation of embryos on to the uterine wall.

"Now, the BRS programme task force has to decide whether to promote entirely natural breeding, or opt for technologies such as artificial insemination," Payne said.

The Sumatran rhino is Malaysia's most endangered wildlife species, and very small wild populations are now believed to exist only on the islands of Sumatra and Borneo.

Just last month, Indonesia succeeded in its attempt at breeding Sumatran rhinos with the birth of Andatu, only the fourth Sumatran rhino successfully born in captive conditions over the past century.

Andatu's father, Andalas was the first Sumatran rhino born in captivity after 112 years in 2001, in Cincinnati Zoo. He was paired with Ratu in 2009, at the Sumatran Rhinoceros Sanctuary within the Way Kambas National Park in Sumatra, Indonesia.

After two consecutive miscarriages, Ratu delivered Andatu after a 16-month third and successful pregnancy.

Puntung, who has a stump for her left leg, was airlifted from a solitary life on a hill range in the Tabin Wildlife Reserve on Dec 25 2011,

in a dramatic operation, as a mate for Ketam, who is also at the BRS facilities. It is hoped that the duo would be able to produce an offspring to help save their species from impending extinction.

Puntung's foot is believed to have been ripped off in a poachers snare trap when she was a small infant but, miraculously, the wound healed and she survived.

The BRS programme, initiated by the Sabah government in 2009 aimed to prevent the extinction of the Sumatran rhino, the only wild species of rhino in Malaysia, now possibly confined to Sabah with hardly 200 believed to be in the wild in Sumatra and Borneo combined.

Yayasan Sime Darby (YSD), the philanthropic arm of the Sime Darby Group has spent RM5 mil over the past three years and committed another RM6.4mil for development and operation of the BRS programme over the next three years.

Sabah Wildlife Department director Dr Laurentius Ambu said the close collaboration between government, NGOs, research institutions and financial supporters was a crucial framework for a last-ditch battle to save Malaysia's most endangered wildlife species.

Besides BORA running the day-to-day development of the programme and the facilities at Tabin, WWF Malaysia helped with patrols and monitoring wild populations while IZW helped with advanced reproductive technologies.

Meanwhile, BORA chairman Dr Abdul Hamid Ahmad said the first priority in husbandry of captive wildlife was the animals' health, including reducing all forms of stress, biological and mental.

"There is no point maintaining a breeding programme if animals die through poor hygiene, and if their reproductive potential is depressed through stress. We are fortunate to have Dr Zainal Zahari Zainuddin as BORA's field manager, as he is Malaysia's most experienced large mammal veterinarian."

YSD chairman Tun Musa Hitam says the foundation, which has pledged to prevent the extinction of nine endangered animals besides the rhinoceros, would work closely with the other partners to save Malaysia's most endangered wildlife species, the Sumatran rhino.

"The BRS programme is one of our most exciting and challenging efforts and we are trying to save Malaysia most endangered wildlife species from the brink of extinction.

"We are aware that there are enormous obstacles to succeed as there are hardly any fertile rhinos left. Our view is that we have a moral obligation to try our best while there is still the possibility of success," he added.