

The Historical Range of the Javan Rhinoceros *Rhinoceros sondaicus* in South Asia

66.1 The Historical Distribution of *Rhinoceros sondaicus*

The Javan rhinoceros *R. sondaicus* of South Asia had its stronghold in the Sundarbans. It has always been the only species of rhino known in that part of the region. There was an isolated group in North Bengal sympatric with other rhino species. If there ever were rhinos in Odisha and further to the south-west, these would have been *R. sondaicus* as well.

There is definite certainty that *R. sondaicus* was found in the Sundarbans, a region of islands and creeks formed by the delta of the Ganges and Brahmaputra Rivers in the southern parts of West Bengal and Bangladesh. This is an important point of reference which helps to understand the zoogeography of all rhinos in South Asia. The Sundarbans were a challenging destination for explorers, sportsmen and settlers, partly due to the riverine landscape, largely due to diseases, bandits and an abundance of man-eating tigers. Being within reach of the large towns of Kolkata and Dacca, it was inevitable that over time many rhinos were killed, observed and captured, and all evidence shows that these belonged to *R. sondaicus* only. All passengers arriving in the harbours of the two cities had to pass the extreme ends of this region, and if ever a rhino was noticed, it was this species – and not the other single-horned *R. unicornis* which was so much better known in Europe.

There is a great similarity between *R. sondaicus* and *R. unicornis*. Both are single-horned, both show heavy skin folds, and any difference in size is difficult to interpret in the field. Examined side by side, dead or alive, the two species are distinguished with relative ease. As these are rare occasions, every record of every event involving a rhino in South Asia must be weighed carefully to be allocated to either of these species. My analysis of the records in the preceding chapters bears testimony to this constant battle.

66.2 Mapping the Distribution of *R. sondaicus*

The new map of the historical distribution of *R. sondaicus* (map 66.37) is my interpretation based on a combination

of all the records listed and explained in Section 2 (chapter 46 to 52). *R. sondaicus* was found in two widely separated regions, the Sundarbans in the south and North Bengal in the north. The species might have existed further to the west in past centuries. There is no substantiated evidence of a single-horned rhino living in Chittagong or even in any of the states in North-East India close to the border with Myanmar. The Javan Rhinoceros *R. sondaicus* is definitely an integral element in the history of the rhinoceros in South Asia.

Odisha (Orissa)

The records from Odisha are too few and too circumstantial to extend the range confidently in this direction (chapter 50). Most pertain to artefacts which introduce uncertainty in any type of locality. The single 19th century report based on oral tradition of local people is isolated in time and place, hence best treated with care until further evidence emerges. On the other hand, if *R. sondaicus* in fact extended westwards from the Sundarbans, it means that the species must be considered as a possible contender for any findings in the more southern parts of India. For instance, the Pleistocene species *Rhinoceros karnuliensis* found in Andhra Pradesh has been said to be most closely associated with *R. sondaicus* (8.7).

North-East India

In the existing literature, mainly dating from the 19th century but with regular repetitions later, there are references to the existence of *R. sondaicus* in North-East India. As explored in Section 3, these relate to Mizoram, Tripura, Sylhet, Cachar, Manipur, and Nagaland. Most, and probably all, of these instances were introduced by authors without personal acquaintance of a rhino in these states. For that reason, the evidence positively suggests that only *D. sumatrensis* was known in these hilly regions along the border with Myanmar. Hence the range of *R. sondaicus* did not include North-East India.

Chittagong

Despite allusions in the literature to the contrary, only *D. sumatrensis* has been found in this eastern part of Bangladesh, and even those only infrequently. The range of *R. sondaicus* did not include Chittagong. The

single-horned species was found further east in southern Myanmar and beyond towards Indonesia.

North Bengal

Towards the north, no definite sightings of *R. sondaicus* are known in the large tract between the vicinity of Kolkata and the *terai* of North Bengal. The existence of this isolated population in North Bengal remains difficult to interpret. There are just four substantiated records between 1877 and 1900. In the map I have combined these

as a separate region, left unconnected to other populations. The species has not been found in Assam.

In the course of my current investigation, I have tried to test the possibility that *R. sondaicus* ranged from the Sundarbans past Kolkata northwards along the Ganges River, then through the Rajmahal Hills of Jharkhand to the Malda and Rangpur regions ending in North Bengal, either allopatric or sympatric locally with *R. unicornis*. The evidence does not support this theory with any kind of confidence and finally had to be firmly rejected.



FIGURE 66.1 A rare photograph of *R. sondaicus* taken on 13 July 2009 on the Cigenter River in Ujung Kulon, Java by the French wildlife photographer Alain Compost
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TABLE 66.73 First and last records of *R. sondaicus* in the Rhino regions of South Asia

Rhino region	Area	Rock art	Earliest artefact	Earliest record	Last record	Species in region ^a
RR 24	North Bengal 1			1877	1877	SON, RU
RR 25	North Bengal 2			1878	1878	SON, RU
RR 26	North Bengal 3			1895	1900	SON, RU, SUM
RR 38	Odisha	Yes	before 200	[1664]	[1850s]	SON
RR 39	West Bengal Sundarbans		100	1737	1910	SON
RR 40	Bangladesh Sundarbans			1599	1909	SON

a SON: *Rhinoceros sondaicus*; RU: *Rhinoceros unicornis*; SUM: *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*. Dates enclosed in square brackets refer to indefinite and probably spurious records.

While the distribution of *R. sondaicus* in Myanmar needs further evaluation, the records seem sparse, and there is the continuous possibility of confusion with *D. sumatrensis*. Their former occurrence in eastern and central parts of Myanmar is insufficiently known, yet maybe never included regions close to the border with India or Bangladesh.

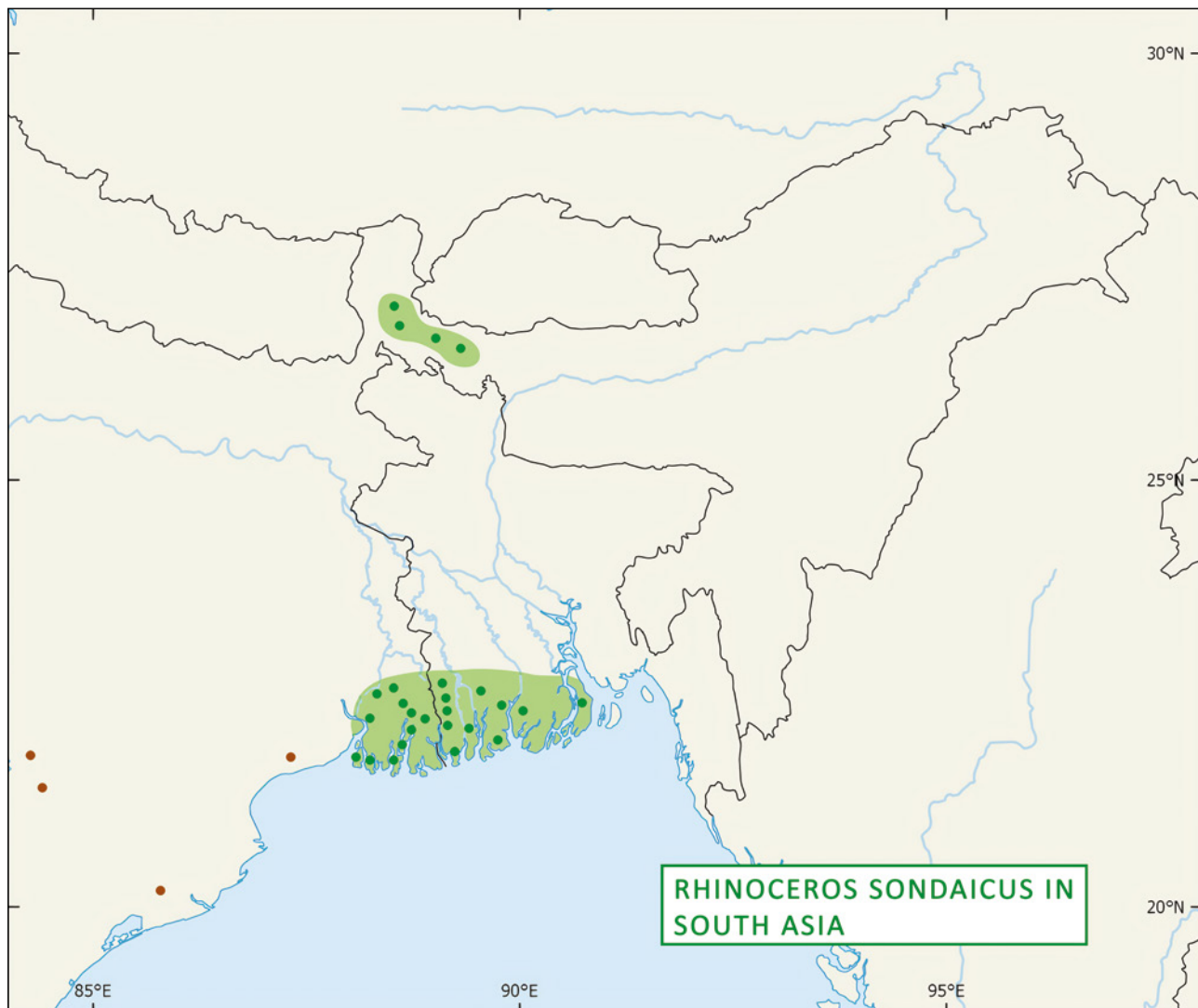
glance cannot rank high as a region where sports hunting by foreign personnel or even extension of agricultural practices could have been the deciding factor. Tigers and other wildlife are still found in the Sundarbans. While other factors including changes in climate or availability of good water should be considered, the processes leading to the extinction of *R. sondaicus* are far from clear and evident.

66.3 Extinction of *R. sondaicus* in South Asia

The dates of all accepted records of *R. sondaicus* in South Asia show that the species was extinct in North Bengal before 1900 and in the Sundarbans before 1910 (table 66.73). These final dates may not be entirely exact, but they definitely give an indication when the rhinos disappeared. The route to extinction will need further analysis. The Sundarbans with its limitations of accessibility at first

66.4 New Map of the Historical Distribution of *Rhinoceros sondaicus* in South Asia

A new representation of the historical distribution of *R. sondaicus* (from around 1500 CE to 1920) in the South Asian part of its range, based on the discussions in this book, is presented in map 66.37.



MAP 66.37 Map showing the Historical Distribution of *Rhinoceros sondaicus inermis* in South Asia. This shows the extent of their range from records up to 1920. The dots in the region of Odisha and Chhattisgarh represent unverifiable reports

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