

## The Historical Range of the Sumatran Rhinoceros *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis* in South Asia

### 67.1 The Historical Distribution of *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*

The two-horned Sumatran rhinoceros *D. sumatrensis* is a marginal element in the South Asian fauna. It was the only species of rhino in the eastern parts of both Bangladesh and India along the border with Myanmar, from Chittagong in the south to Arunachal Pradesh in the north. The species was sympatric with others in an isolated group in North Bengal and Assam. The presence of the species in India was first suspected by Edward Blyth in 1862.

This sketch of historical distribution is correct with a fair degree of certainty, yet based on limited evidence (Section 3, chapter 54 to 63). This was to be expected when surveying a cryptic species which favours mountain ranges and forests rarely penetrated by humans and then with great difficulty. If a rhino is seen or heard, inevitably

the animal will have disappeared from view within a few seconds.

### 67.2 Rhino Species in North-East India and Chittagong

This all leads to continued uncertainty about the identity of the species in this region. The existing literature is confused because the records are rarely equivocal. There are no photographs taken in the field, only one complete specimen (of a captive animal) preserved in any scientific institution, and the written accounts have lost their impact over time. There is no doubt, however, that *D. sumatrensis* was found in Chittagong, in view of the two rhinos captured in 1867 and 1881. This certainty, combined with the occasional mention of two horns and the type of terrain, allows my suggestion that *D. sumatrensis* was the



FIGURE 67.1

Sumatran rhinoceros, *D. sumatrensis*. This female called Puntung lived in Tabin Wildlife Reserve, Sabah, East Malaysia. She was captured when 12 years old on 2011-12-18 and had to be euthanized on 2017-06-15  
PHOTO: JOHN PAYNE, JANUARY 2012

TABLE 67.74 Instances of direct evidence of the occurrence of *D. sumatrensis* in South Asia

Rhino region	Capture	Sighting (T = tracks)	Killed	Specimen
RR 26 – North Bengal RR 30, 31 – Assam			Sunder 1895 Blyth 1870 Sturt 1875	Cutter 1867
RR 41 – Chittagong	London Zoo 1867 <sup>a</sup> Kolkata Zoo 1882	Lewin 1872	Higgins 1891 Poached 1967	ZSL ‘Begum’ died 1900 <sup>a</sup>
RR 42 – Mizoram		Gordon 1911 (T)	Local 1903 Hutchinson 1906 Siatlal 20th cent.	
RR 43 – Tripura RR 44 – Sylhet RR 45 – Lower Assam		Anderson 1872 Synteng 1885	Manson 1876 Fraser 1910	1 destroyed
RR 46 – Manipur RR 47 – Nagaland RR 28 – East Arunachal Pradesh		Local hunters Griffith 1837 (T) McGregor 1885 (T) Henri 1895 (T)		Local 2 skulls Local 2 skulls Elliot 1883 (Singpho)
TOTAL RECORDS	2	8	10	7

a The specimen called ‘Begum’ is recorded twice, in captivity and as specimen.

only species of rhino ever known along the eastern border of the South Asian region.

### 67.3 Paucity of Records

The records are truly sparse. There are no more than 26 instances of captures, sightings or killings of a rhinoceros since 1862 (table 67.74). This is clearly an insignificant number for a period of 150 years and an area of 500,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, there is certainty that rhinos lived or visited the area and must be counted as part of the fauna of Bangladesh and India.

### 67.4 Mapping the Distribution of *D. sumatrensis*

The instances of the occurrence of *D. sumatrensis* are plotted in detail on the maps in chapters 56 to 64. These include a few records from Myanmar across the border from India and Bangladesh to help to elucidate the historical distribution. The species has never been known in Bhutan.

All records are combined in one map showing the historical distribution of *D. sumatrensis* in South Asia (map 67.38). This map best reflects the situation 1860–1930, incorporating the earlier reports and still allowing the possibility of continued survival. No sightings of *D. sumatrensis* in South Asia are known in the 21st century.

#### *Chittagong*

Two rhinos were captured in the second half of the 19th century in Chittagong. The first of these was described as a new species, which was later shown to be a geographic subspecies *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis lasiotis*. These specimens are important as they are clear and undeniable evidence of the existence of the two-horned species. It is likely that the main population inhabited the hills or mountains further east in adjoining Myanmar.

#### *North Bengal and West Assam*

The four records from the eastern part of North Bengal and the western part of Assam are isolated from any known occurrence of the species elsewhere in the region. These may constitute a separate population, or a misrepresentation of the historical record, all requiring further research

if ever further data become available. This is best shown as an area of distribution detached from other known records. There is no evidence of sightings of *D. sumatrensis* in the large area connecting western Assam with the range in Nagaland or Manipur.

### 67.5 Extinction of *D. sumatrensis* in South Asia

The dates of reports combined in table 67.75 show that rhinos might still have been present at the end of the 20th century. It is best not to speculate further to give

these animals a chance for survival if the evidence is actually current or reflected in reality.

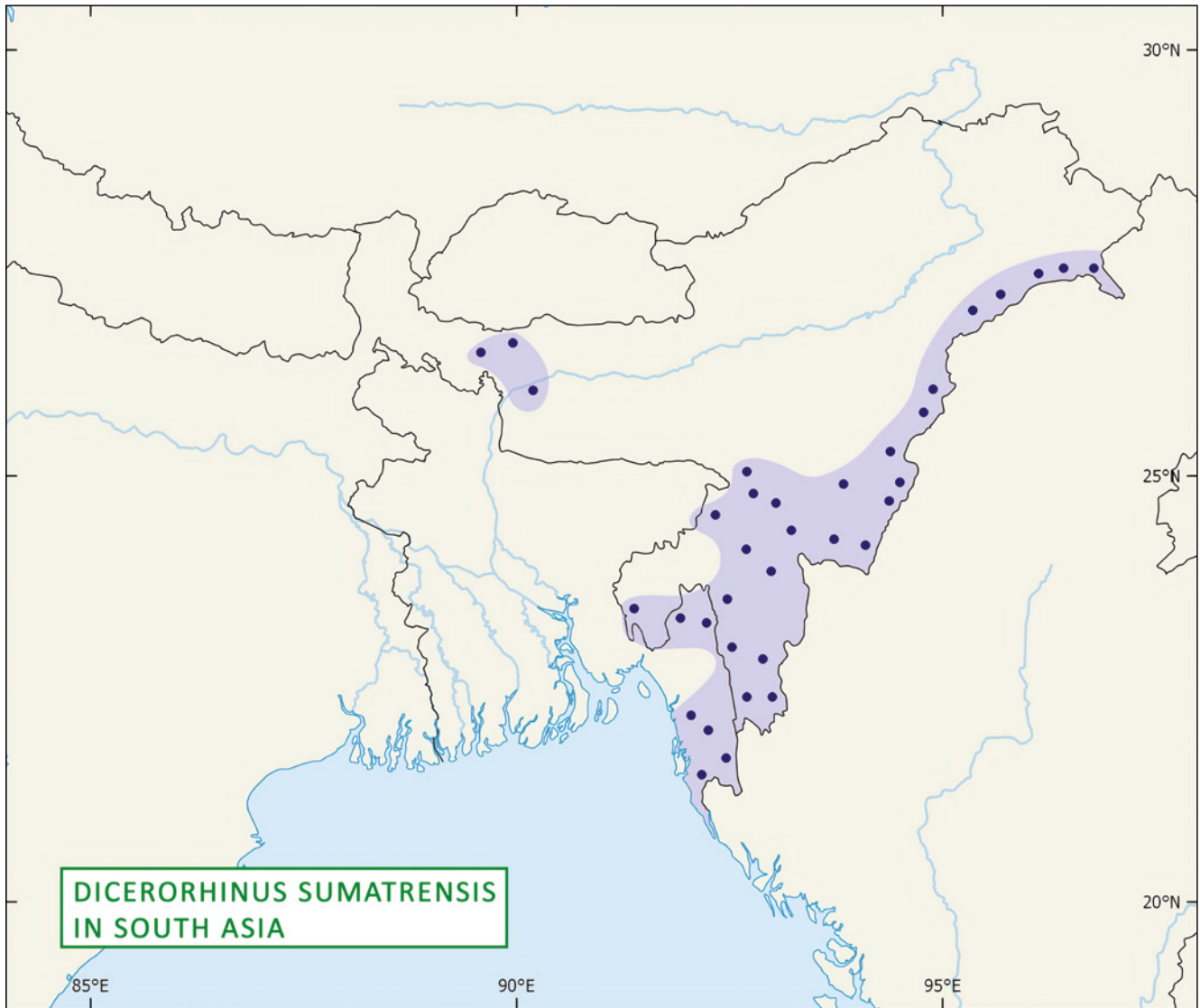
### 67.6 New Map of the Historical Distribution of *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis* in South Asia

A new representation of the historical distribution of *D. sumatrensis* (from 1860–1930) in the South Asian part of its range, based on the discussions in this book, is presented in map 67.38.

TABLE 67.75 First and last records of *D. sumatrensis* in the Rhino Regions of South Asia

<i>D. sumatrensis</i>				
Rhino Region	Area	Earliest Record	Last Record	Species in region <sup>a</sup>
RR 26	North Bengal	1895	1895	SUM, SON, RU
RR 28	Arunachal Pradesh East	1826	1966	SUM, RU
RR 30	Assam – North-West	1875	1875	SUM, RU
RR 31	Assam – South-West	1862	1862	SUM, RU
RR 41	Chittagong	1867	1967	SUM
RR 42	Mizoram	1872	1930s, 2009?	SUM
RR 43	Tripura	1750	1920s	SUM
RR 44	Sylhet	1910	1910	SUM
RR 45	Lower Assam	1840	1967	SUM
RR 46	Manipur	1720	1990s	SUM
RR 47	Nagaland	1879	1999	SUM

a SUM: *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*; SON: *Rhinoceros sondaicus*; RU: *Rhinoceros unicornis*



MAP 67.38 Map showing the Historical Distribution of *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis lasiotis* in South Asia. This incorporates data from 1860 to 1930  
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