

Into the heart of Sabah



KENNETH DONALDSON

July 2005 found me in Sabah, in the northern tip of Borneo, on another holiday to a rhino-range country. Dr Edwin Bosi, Program Officer of SOS Rhino Borneo, very kindly arranged for me to meet Dr Mahedi Andau, Director of the Wildlife Department on my arrival. "Patrick", as he prefers to be known, gave me a brief overview of the role of the Department and its overlapping work with those dealing with forestry and marine environments. Sabah's conservation efforts have benefited from the close cooperation between these three departments, and from the excellent linkages with the tourism sector.

From Kota Kinabalu I went to Sandakan and the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre, where I met up with Dr Petra Kretzschmar, Scientific Director and Program Coordinator for SOS Rhino Borneo. Sepilok is home to two Sumatran rhinos, a male and a female, aged 18 and 25 respectively. The hope is that the two will breed, enabling re-stocking of protected areas such as Tabin Wildlife Reserve. However the male has a fertility problem - it is thought that a cyst is blocking the sperm's path - and there are plans for an operation to remove the cyst and then try artificial insemination. Although the female is partially blind (perhaps due to an infected leech bite), Dr Kretzschmar is confident that she would make a good mother.

At the moment, the rhinos are not on public view because of repairs needed to the enclosure and walkway. I hope very much that the two rhinos will be back on display soon, because there are so many visitors to Sepilok who would be fascinated to see the Sumatran rhinos and to learn more about them. I later sent out a DVD about Sumatran rhinos, and also a teaching pack that we helped fund for a project dealing with black and white rhinos in Zimbabwe, so that the education team at Sepilok can adapt it for their own needs. I am a firm believer in the power of rhinos to capture the public's attention and support; to do that, they need to be on display.

I next went to the Tabin Wildlife Reserve, which is thought to be home to some 30-50 Sumatran rhinos. These days, the rhinos tend to concentrate in the core area, which is about three days' journey by boat and then on foot from the Reserve's perimeter. I did not have time to get to the core area, but was delighted to meet up with Dr Bosi again, and some of the rangers from the Rhino Protection Units, at SOS Rhino's headquarters in Dagat.

Dr Bosi explained that the men were about to undertake a survey of the whole area,

but that first they needed to cut transects in a fish-bone pattern across the Reserve. Volunteers from Trekforce were helping with this work, and after that the RPU teams would be out in the field looking for, and recording, any signs of rhinos - spoor, browse, dung and even the animals themselves. By now I had spent some time in Sabah's rainforests and I was full of admiration for the RPUs' rangers. The habitat is difficult to say the least: not just the heat and humidity and leeches to contend with, but the sheer difficulty of walking through primary and secondary rainforest saps the energy.

Keeping motivation high is a key part of Dr Bosi's work. Creature comforts are few and far between, and I know that I would find it hard to cope without a shower and clean clothes every morning. So I was really pleased to be able to hand over a full team strip of shirts, which had been donated to us by the Leeds Rhinos Rugby Club. The rangers were delighted with their new, professional-looking strip, and I hope they'll be able to give Sabah's own Rhinos football team a run for their money!

I left Sabah feeling very impressed by the work being carried out by SOS Rhino



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Borneo and its loyal supporters. We need to ensure that people - in Europe and Malaysia - know more about the critically endangered Sumatran rhino, and about the important work that is being done to protect them from extinction. By saving the rhinos, we also save all the other species that share the same habitat, whether they're cute and furry or spiky and scary.

Cathy Dean, Director



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The third Douglas Adams Memorial Lecture

"Last chance to see...Just a bit more" - a lecture by Mark Carwardine.

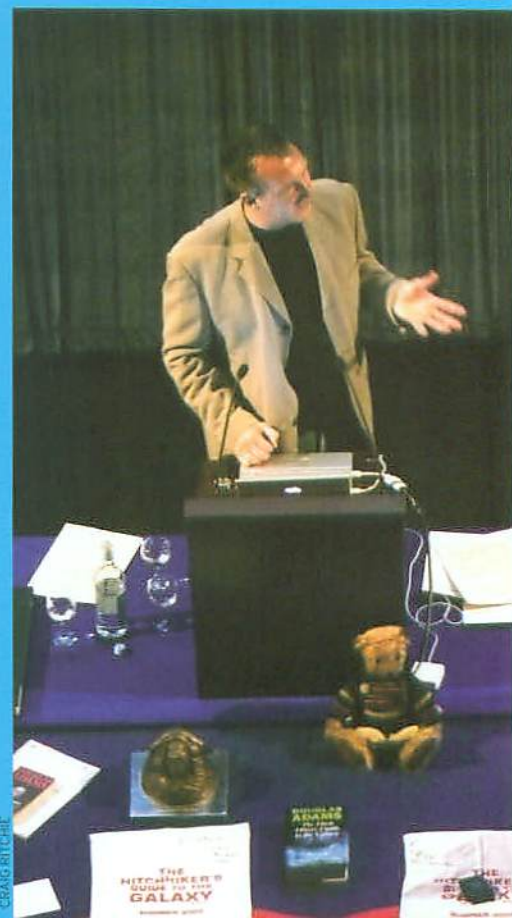
In 1985 Douglas Adams and Mark Carwardine began their friendship in the most unlikely of circumstances, searching for the elusive aye-aye in Madagascar. This led to travels to some of the remotest corners of earth in search of some of the world's most endangered animals, culminating in "Last Chance to See", published in 1990.

Twenty years after that first expedition, Mark found himself in front of an audience at the Royal Institution re-telling some of the tales and updating the progress of some of the animals they encountered. In what was a highly entertaining lecture, Mark described some of his experiences with wild animals, revealed some hilarious behind-the-scenes stories from "Last

Chance to See", and finished with his views on the state of the world and what we can do to reverse the downward trends. The importance of this is currently illustrated by the imminent extinction of the Northern white rhino (see the article on Garamba).

Huge thanks to Mark Carwardine for his hilarious lecture, Nick Baker for holding the auction which once again raised much-needed funds for Save the Rhino and the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund, and to Douglas's family for all their help and support. Once again thank you to everyone who attended the lecture, and to all those who donated and bid for the fantastic prizes.

Katy York



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