

Sumatran rhinos exported to Western zoos

EFFORTS to save the endangered Sumatran rhino have resulted in two sets of agreements between zoos in the West and the governments of Indonesia and Malaysia, where the rhino live.

Last week, Britain's Department of the Environment gave permission for John Aspinall's zoos at Howletts and Port Lympne to import two pairs of Sumatran rhinos from the wild. These rhinos will be caught in Indonesia and will be owned jointly by the government there and the zoos.

In a separate agreement, American zoos are to take Sumatran rhinos from their natural habitats in Malaysia in an attempt to breed them in captivity.

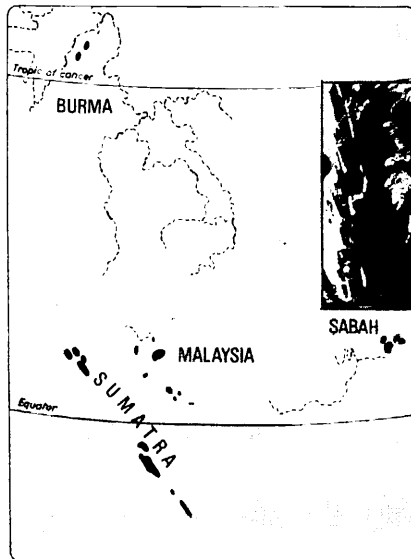
At the end of last month, Malaysia's Wildlife Department signed an agreement with zoos in the US that permits them to import rhinos in return for help from the zoos in conserving the rhinos at home. Both efforts are part of a project to save the rhino, which is coordinated by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. There are fewer than 800 Sumatran rhinos (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) left in the wild, and the species is one of the 12 most endangered in the world.

Last month's agreement with American zoos covers the capture of 10 pairs of rhino. Four will be taken from peninsular Malaysia, and kept at the Malaysian Wildlife Department's own Malacca Zoo, and the other six will be taken from Sabah, a nearby

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island where the rhino is a distinct subspecies. Four of these six pairs will be exported to zoos in Los Angeles, San Diego, New York and Cincinnati. The two remaining pairs will remain in a zoo on Sabah.

Not everyone is happy about capturing members of this



Wildlife Dept Malaysia

Jeram, the Sumatran rhino: what future for her cousins elsewhere?

rare species, and still less with exporting them abroad. Kiew Bong Heang, a zoologist from the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur and a member of the Malaysian Nature Society, says that the agreement "will kick up an international fuss if it is true. The idea of capturing any of the rhinos for export is a serious cause of concern".

The feeling is that more emphasis should be placed on conserving the rhinos' natural habitats, and that because little is known about breeding the rhino in captivity, the success rate is likely to be low. And yet, the trauma and risk of injury to the animals is high.

Nevertheless, the Malaysian Wildlife Department is adamant that the project will succeed. It says that it has already

shown that it is possible to keep Sumatran rhinos in captivity. One such rhino, called Jeram, has settled down well since her capture last year, the department says, despite the need for a complex diet of forest vegetation. The department also points to the success stories of many foreign zoos in breeding white, black and Indian rhinos.

The wildlife department has driven a hard bargain with the Sumatran Rhino

Trust, set up by the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums. In addition to a commitment from the trust that it will spend \$1 million in the first three years of the project, the Malaysians will receive training in new breeding technologies, such as artificial insemination and embryo manipu-

lation. The Americans will also help the Malaysians to set up their own rhino breeding centres.

The agreement stipulates that only solitary rhinos, not those with a viable breeding group, will be captured. Although the rhinos that will be exported to the US are the responsibility of the zoos there, they will still be technically owned by the Malaysian government. After three years, both sides have the option of "reviewing" the agreement.

The Sumatran rhino has a gestation period that lasts about 16 months, and typical litter size of just one offspring. Only three reserves in Malaysia are of a suitable size to support a viable population. It is estimated that 700 square kilometres of land is needed for a population of 70 individuals. If a population falls below 50, then even the short-term future of the rhino is jeopardised. Poaching on Sabah alone is known to have claimed the lives of three rhinos last year, and two so far this year. □