

Beast from the bog

It's the most endangered large mammal on Earth, and it's become nocturnal to avoid humans, making it reclusive as well as rare. But now new research is lifting the veil on Vietnam's very special rhinoceros.

Words: **Graham Holliday**

"I've seen dung and footprints," Gert Polet, WWF chief technical adviser to Cat Tien National Park, said as we made our way out of Ho Chi Minh City. "But, in three years I've never seen the rhino." I already knew any thoughts of waking up in a treehouse surrounded by a field of grazing rhinos were mere fantasy, but when Polet told me that all the rhinos lived in one section of the park, Cat Loc, and that visitors were barred from there, I realised I wouldn't even see one. There would surely be people living within Cat Tien who had run into this fugitive forest figure, I thought, and so I made it my mission to track one of them down.

Javan rhinos were thought to be extinct on mainland Asia until 1988, when a hunter was arrested for trying to sell the horn and hide of a female he had shot near Cat Tien. Continuous decimation caused by hunting, the use of defoliants during the Vietnam War and the conversion of forest into agricultural land have brought about their current dire situation. WWF believes the Javan rhino in Vietnam, a subspecies of the Javan rhino, which is now found only in Ujung Kulon National Park on the island of Java itself, is perhaps the most endangered large mammal in the world. No more than eight are thought to remain in Cat Loc, an area of steep, muddy hills, harbouring millions of leeches.

In the past, Javan rhinos inhabited a huge area of Southeast Asia, but now this small, 6,500-hectare plot in Vietnam is all that remains of their mainland home. With the species facing almost certain extinction, the governments of Vietnam and the Netherlands joined forces with WWF to help save it. An extensive photo-trap survey resulted in May 1999 in the first-ever pictures of a Vietnamese Javan rhino.

Three hours out of the sprawling megalopolis of Ho Chi Minh City, and the countryside is still heavily populated, but a blanket of undulating green at Dong Nai river signals the entrance to Cat Tien. The river, together with the steep slopes and the dense foliage of bamboo and rattan, have helped hide (and save) the rhino to date, acting as a natural boundary and a deterrent to tourists and poachers alike.

On arriving at Cat Tien, Polet showed me the survey photos, some of which show a rhino attacking part of the photo-trap set-up. It's thought that the rhinos may have disliked the flash triggered by passing through the infrared beam, resulting in serious damage to expensive equipment. In addition, on occasions, rhino footprints have been found behind the sensors, but not through the

beam, indicating acute sensitivity to any human presence in its last-remaining range. It all contributes to a lack of knowledge about the animal and its behaviour.

It is known that Vietnam's Javan rhino is much smaller than its Indonesian cousin, which exacerbates the problem of getting accurate statistics. For instance, researchers normally determine sex by the size of the horn, and age and individual identity by the size of the front hoof. But researchers can't necessarily assume that this is true for the subspecies.

I had arranged to meet Dr Nguyen Xuan Dang, of the Institute of Ecology and Biological Resources in Hanoi, who has been studying the rhinos since the late 1980s, while I was in Cat Tien, and I found him in the park headquarters restaurant. The rhino research had been stepped up in May 2001, he told me, and there were now two teams, which include tribesmen from the Chau Ma ethnic group, who have lived in





Out of the darkness. A remote camera flashes a rhino, prompting the surprised animal to lunge at the infrared sensor.

Left: Researchers also use more traditional techniques, such as tracking, to try to establish the size of Cat Tien's population.

the park all of their lives and are more familiar with the rhino than anyone else. These teams are collecting dung for DNA testing, setting more photo-traps and cataloguing footprints, evidence that will hopefully provide an accurate picture of the size and movements of the Javan rhino.

Dr Dang is responsible for the Vietnam Rhino Action Plan, part of which is seeking to resettle people living inside the park and give them land rights that they do not currently possess. As Dr Dang pointed out, this has to be handled very delicately and "will only go ahead when there is full agreement on all sides." It should extend the rhino's habitation area and be completed within the next two years. But, I wondered, had Dr Dang seen that which he had spent so much time protecting?

"No, I haven't seen the rhino, but I'd like to," he replied.

There may be a good reason why so few people have seen the rhino. While those in Ujung Kulon on Java have been photographed in the daytime, those in Vietnam have only ever been snapped at night, suggesting that a combination of human disturbance and the limited range available in Cat Loc has turned the rhino into a nocturnal animal. The forests around Cat Tien used to be much bigger, but human habitation and agriculture cut the park into the two distinct sections of Nam Cat Tien and Cat Loc, trapping the rhinos in the latter. And so, even with the amount of work being done, the rhino's future hangs in the balance. "If one rhino is lost, it could well be the end of the population and



No entry.
The inhospitable terrain of Cat Tien deters poachers and may help save Vietnam's rhinos.

therefore of this unique subspecies," Polet told me.

Javan rhinos are known to be solitary, living on a diet of shoots, twigs, fruits and, in Cat Tien at least, the abundant rattan. A single calf is born after around 16 months' gestation, and females are thought to breed only once every four to five years. The reproductive cycle is therefore very long.

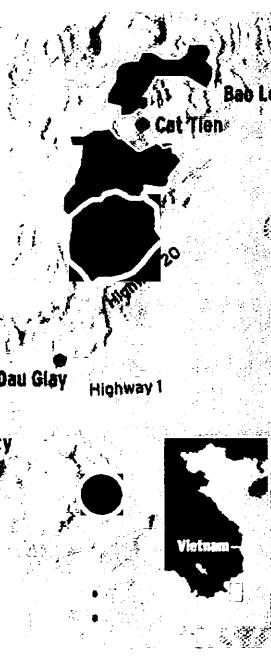
Polet's wife, Ina Becker, has been working on a Rhino Awareness Campaign for the past three years, travelling around the schools and households in the surrounding area and talking with the people about the forest and its elusive inhabitant. "Everybody had heard about the rhino, of course – the old people saw them when they were young – but they'd never seen a picture of it," she said. Together with a local artist, Ina has put together a series of booklets incorporating the photo-trap images, which have helped increase awareness of the rhino's plight.

No one working on the rhino project is under any illusions about the task they face, but hopes were raised recently with the discovery that four rhino calves have been born in

the past two years in Ujung Kulon (News of the Earth, December, 2001). Such a success story may be a long way off in Vietnam, but it still inspires the people in the field.

Just before I was due to go back to Ho Chi Minh, Polet told me a story. "Two of the park guards got a fright earlier this year when they came across a rhino," he said. "They dropped their gear and ran one way, and the rhino ran the other." At last, two people who had seen a rhino – but I couldn't meet them, because they were deep in that part of the park where it was forbidden for visitors to go.

Crossing back over the Dong Nai, something occurred to me that emphasised the perilous existence of Vietnam's rhinos. Not only are your chances of seeing one zero, you're only marginally more likely to meet someone who has. ■



Divided country.
As the map clearly shows, Cat Tien has been split into two as a result of human encroachment.

Asian rhinos run into trouble

- According to the International Rhino Foundation (IRF), the worldwide rhino population of all five species combined currently stands at 16,000 animals in the wild and a further 1,000 in captivity.
- Two species live in South-east Asia: the Javan rhino *Rhinoceros sondaicus* with its subspecies *R. s. sondaicus* (found in Indonesia only) and *R. s. annamiticus*, now probably only found in Vietnam (the IUCN's Red List lists former range states as being Cambodia, Laos and Thailand); and the Sumatran rhino *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis* along with its three subspecies, *D. s. harrissoni*, *D. s. sumatrensis* and *D. s. lasiotis* (which is known to be extinct in its former range states of Bangladesh and India, but may still hang on in Burma).
- There are between 50 and 60 Indonesian Javan rhinos living in Ujung Kulon National Park and between five and eight Vietnamese Javan rhinos in Cat Tien National Park. None are held in captivity.
- A third subspecies of Javan rhino is known to have lived in the Sundarbans area of India, Bangladesh and Burma, but became extinct early in the twentieth century.
- The Sumatran rhino is the only remaining hairy rhino. The IUCN says it can still be found in Indonesia (Sumatra and Borneo) and Malaysia, as well as Burma, Thailand and Vietnam. There are 50 Borneo Sumatran rhinos in the wild and two in captivity and 250 Malaya/Sumatra Sumatran rhinos in the wild and 18 in captivity.
- Asian rhinos are poached for their horn and body parts, which are used in traditional Chinese medicine to help with fever, epilepsy and malaria. According to the wildlife-trade monitoring body TRAFFIC, the biggest markets for medicinal rhino horn are China, South Korea and Taiwan. Asian rhino horn is preferred because its smaller size is believed to 'concentrate' the medicinal properties.
- All five species are fully protected under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which prohibits trade in rhino horn and any by-products. But despite this, rhino hunting has continued, particularly in the Southern African countries.

Contacts

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The International Rhino Foundation (IRF) www.rhinos-irf.org

Mike Baltzer/WWF

Rhino Mayday Symposium

The UK Rhino Group is holding this year's event at the Friends Meeting House, on Euston Road, London, on 23 May between noon and 5pm. Presentations and discussions at the event will cover both African and Asian species and include contributions from scientists, campaigners and project staff, all of whom have first-hand knowledge of rhino conservation. Tickets cost £3, £1.50 for students and the unemployed. Contact Tony Charnick, vice-chairman, UK Rhino Group, c/o IARF London Project Office, 13 Bouverie Place, London WC1N 3AT, 020 8347 6170, tony@rhino-uk.org.



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3280 May 2002 Vol 20 No 5 ISSN 0898-2603



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