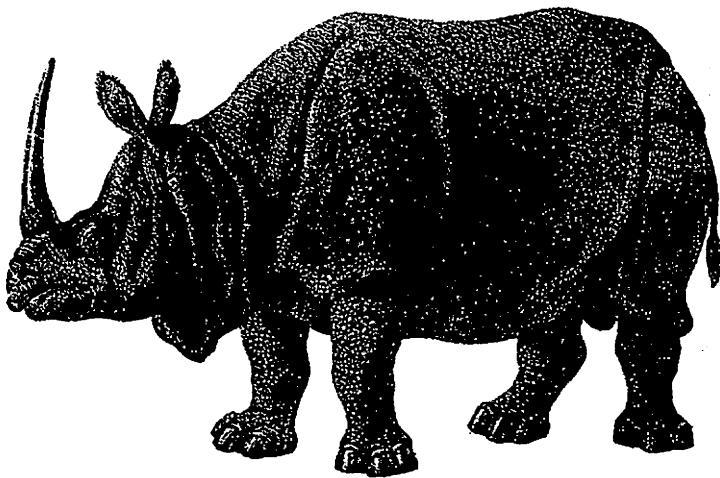


## Asian Rhino Specialist Group



The AsRSG was formed 20 years ago, in 1979. At that time the Group was very small and, like other Specialist Groups, its primary purpose was to compile information and provide advice. These informational and advisory functions are still important for the AsRSG. However, over the last two decades, the AsRSG has grown in size and expanded its scope to assume a more active role in advocacy, coordination, and funding rhino conservation activities.

To facilitate this role, the structure of the AsRSG has evolved. There is now a Chair; two Deputy Chairs (Southeast Asia and Indian Subcontinent); an Executive Committee comprising principal representatives from the significant range states for Asian rhinos (India, Nepal, Indonesia, Peninsula Malaysia, Sabah, and Vietnam); and two Program Officers. the AsRSG has also decided to concentrate on regional (India/Nepal and Southeast Asia) rather than global meetings.

Over the 20 years the AsRSG has been in existence, the situation for the three species of Asian rhinos has changed.

- Populations of Sumatran rhinos (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) have declined drastically from well over 1,000 distributed in at least five range states (Indonesia, Peninsula Malaysia, Sabah, Thailand, Myanmar) to only about 300 primarily in three of the range states. The primary cause has been overexploitation by poachers for the horns. The Sumatran rhino is a spectacular example of a species that is vanishing much more rapidly than its habitat and a validation for efforts at species as well as landscape/ ecosystem conservation. Poacher pressure on this species remains intense, and the survival of the species is in great doubt.
- Numbers of Javan rhinos (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*) have not changed much in Indonesia, where most of this species survives ( $\approx 50$  rhino). While it is fortunate that there has not been a decline, it is worrisome that this population has not increased despite what has appeared to be relatively good protection. Serendipitously, another population of this species has been rediscovered in Vietnam, although numbers there are precariously low.

- The real success story in Asian rhino conservation has been the programs for the Indian/Nepali rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) in both India and Nepal, where populations have increased at least two-fold. To date, these countries have achieved this success with very little external support. However, the situation is changing rapidly, and much more assistance from outside will be needed if the success is to be sustained. The AsRSG is becoming more involved with this species as indicated by the recent regional meeting conducted at Kaziranga National Park.

Because of the desperate situation for the Sumatran and the Javan rhino, these two species have been the greater focus for the AsRSG until very recently. The AsRSG believes that its greatest achievement has been its pivotal involvement in development of the conservation strategy and Action Plan for the Sumatran and now Javan rhino. This strategy, developed in the early 1980s, is diversified with two main components: (1) protection of rhino in situ via anti-poaching teams known as rhino protection units (RPUs) and (2) an attempt at managed breeding using rhinos considered “doomed” in the wild to propagate the species for reinforcement of wild populations.

In terms of the RPUs, the AsRSG was instrumental in securing a Global Environment Facility (GEF) grant to initiate this program. To the best of the AsRSG’s knowledge, this grant is still the only species conservation project the GEF has ever supported. Beyond the GEF, the AsRSG has been very active and successful in recruiting additional funds to expand and extend the RPU program. Moreover, in addition to securing and sustaining the financial support for this program, the AsRSG has been directly involved in coordination. It has proven more effective for the RPUs to be semi-autonomous from, although coordinated closely with, the government conservation departments.

In terms of the managed breeding, the challenge has proven greater and the results are still problematic. Originally, there was an attempt at traditional captive breeding. However, the biology of the species has rendered it one of the most difficult ever to be tried in captivity. Among other discoveries in the 10 years of

effort and frustration is the fact that this rhino seems to be an induced ovulator and a particularly complex one at that. Much knowledge of this species and its biology has been acquired during the last 10 years. The AsRSG has managed this program very adaptively and is now attempting managed breeding in native habitat through “rhino sanctuaries” that have a dual purpose of generating income through conservation tourism to support the RPUs. While the ultimate value of the managed breeding program for conservation of the species is yet to be determined, progress is occurring, with matings finally being achieved and hopefully pregnancies soon.

For the future, the key priorities for the AsRSG are to continue contributions to the survival and recovery of all three species. The population goal for the next 50 years is for populations of:

- 4,000-5,000 *Rhinoceros unicornis* in at least six major populations in India and Nepal;
- 500 *Rhinoceros sondaicus* in at least two populations in Indonesia and three populations on the Asian mainland (two in Vietnam and one re-established in Peninsula Malaysia)
- 2,000 *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis* in at least two populations (primarily in Sumatra, Peninsula Malaysia, and on Borneo but also hopefully re-established in Thailand and Myanmar)

This level of recovery should be possible through the continued activity of the RPUs, as well as expansion of the managed breeding programs for Sumatran and eventually Javan rhinos to provide animals for the recovery and re-establishment programs. Achievement of the population goals is dependent upon an equally important key priority for the AsRSG of helping to develop financial viability of the Asian rhino conservation programs.

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# Species

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