

# A documented 20th century record of Javan Rhinoceros *Rhinoceros sondaicus* from Cambodia

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Although both Javan Rhinoceros *Rhinoceros sondaicus* and Sumatran Rhinoceros *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis* are mapped as previously occurring across Cambodia by Corbet & Hill (1992), there are no documented modern records of either and the status of both species in the country remains unclear. This note documents photographic evidence for a 20th century record of *R. sondaicus* from Cambodia.

A comprehensive summary of records of both species from across their global ranges was produced by Rookmaaker (1980). However, the only confirmed records he traced from Cambodia were those of *R. sondaicus* from the Pleistocene fossil record. Several authors have pointed out that images of rhinoceros are found on the 12th century reliefs of Angkor Wat (Stonner 1925; Brentjes 1978), and Brentjes (1978) tentatively identified at least one of these as *R. sondaicus*. A recent comprehensive study of the reliefs of Angkor Wat revealed four images of single-horned rhinoceroses (Roveda 2002). As first

noted by Brentjes (1978), three of these were associated with the god Agni. The association of Agni with a rhinoceros is unique to Khmer mythology, as in Hindu iconography Agni is usually riding a goat (Roveda 2002). This implies that Khmer artists of the 12th century at least had knowledge of a one-horned rhinoceros and were not simply copying a foreign design.

Rookmaaker (1980) critically reviewed all 20th century hunting and collecting records of rhinoceroses available to him, but was unable to trace any record from Cambodia accompanied by either a specimen or a photograph to make certain as to which species was involved. In 2000 the authors were examining the collection of the Bibliothèque Centrale du Cambodge in Phnom Penh when they came across in Demariaux (1949: 48) a photograph of a French hunter, Monsieur Merle, standing over a dead rhinoceros he shot at Trao-Bak, Chup, Kampong Cham Province on the 19th May 1930. The text states the animal to be a female that he shot in the



swamps of the Chup Plateau after a pursuit of 42 hours. Although we can find no record, historical or current, of a specific location named Trao-Bak, the only area of Chup that could be described as swampy and on a plateau is on slightly elevated land east of the Mekong at approximately 12°00'N, 105°40'E. This area is no longer under natural forest cover. Subsequent investigations have revealed that this photograph was first published in Dufossé (1930: 9) and following that in Teston & Pecheron (1932: 604). It is also probably the same record as noted by Harper (1945) as "a specimen was killed about 1930 in the province of Kompong-Cham". However none of these publications add further relevant details to those provided by Demariaux (1949) and there is no record of what subsequently happened to the animal. Moreover, the record has been overlooked by the more recent publications.

Based on discussion with biologists experienced with both *R. sondaicus* and *D. sumatrensis*, there seems no doubt that the animal in the photograph is *R. sondaicus*. This is based upon the skin – with large distinctive "cells" all over the surface, the distinct folds, the general shape of the head and the size of the animal (M. Griffiths & L. C. Rookmaaker *in litt.* to C. M. Poole 2002)

In conclusion, we believe this to be the only documented modern record of *R. sondaicus* from Cambodia. The only other 20th century locality records of rhinoceros from Indochina documented by photographs or specimens are of *R. sondaicus* from Cat Tien National Park, southern Vietnam (Polet *et al.* 1999). The localities of the historical record from Cambodia and the current records from Vietnam are only *c.* 200 km apart and historically would have been connected by suitable habitat. Both are representative of a lowland mixed semi-evergreen forest type that was once widespread east of the Mekong River in southern Cambodia and Vietnam. However, very little of this habitat now remains. Unfortunately, we also believe this may be the last documented record of *R. sondaicus* from Cambodia, as despite

numerous wildlife surveys throughout remote areas of Cambodia over the past six years, there have still to be any convincing reports of the continued existence of rhinoceroses (Walston 2001).

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