

Taking Rosa for a walk

We walked in a line as fast as we could, trying not to trip over treacherous roots, brushing leaves and cobwebs off our faces, looking out for leeches leaning towards us at the end of twigs, and all the while trying to get far enough away from Rosa to be able to turn around and take a photo.

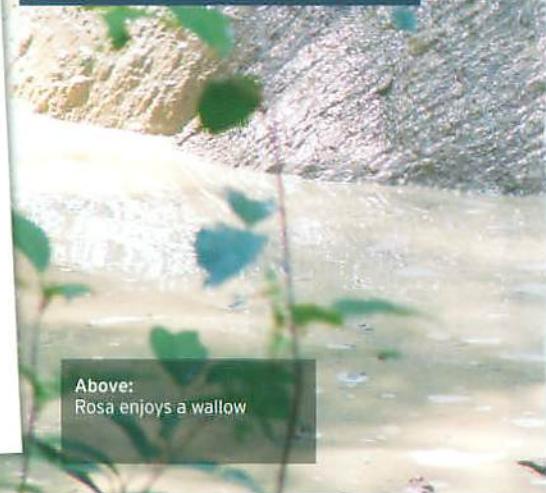
Cathy Dean
Director

We had just been to meet Andalas, who rested his head in our laps as we rubbed his ears and patted his flanks. Sumatran rhinos are the smallest of the five species, but when a 600kg animal is briskly trotting along behind you, desperate to find out why we all smell, well, so *interesting*, it feels like bull running in Pamplona.



Meeting the Rhino Protection Unit

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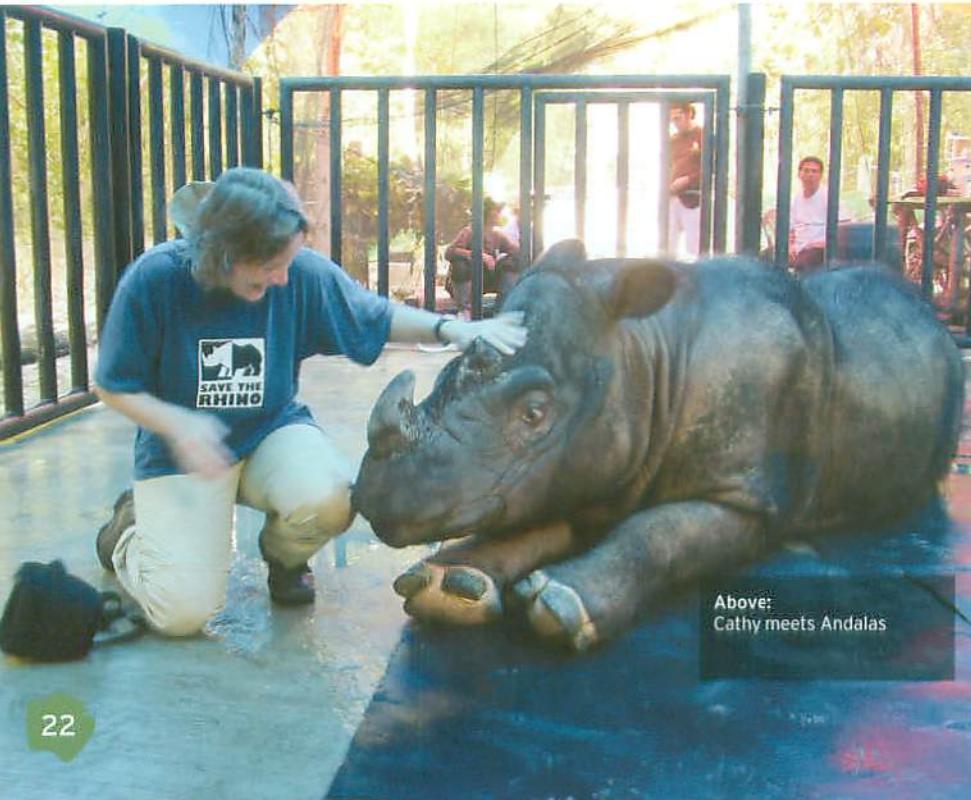
Above: Rosa enjoys a wallow

Rosa is a beautiful redhead, a four-year old who developed a taste for human company, and would stray out of Bukit Barisan Selatan (BBS) National Park in search of villages and, more likely, some tasty vegetable gardens. Rangers from the Rhino Protection Unit (RPU) were promptly dispatched to try to walk her back into the Park boundaries, and she quickly decided that rambling with friends was much more to her liking than her former solitary lifestyle. Eventually, worn out by the need to keep this boisterous female company

24/7, experts from the Indonesian Rhino Conservation Programme decided to bring her to the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary (SRS) in Way Kambas (WK) National Park. She was soon joined by another female, Ratu, who had similarly strayed out of safety in WK.

Rosa and Ratu, together with Bina and Torgamba, are kept in the circular SRS, which is divided into segments like an orange. Most of the time, as in the wild, they lead a solitary existence, but whenever the females cycle, they are brought to the 'honeymoon suite' in the centre, where Torgamba and Bina, and Torgamba and Ratu, enthusiastically mate. But Torgamba is firing blanks - he's really quite old now - and all hopes rest on Andalas, the young male brought over from the USA in February this year.

When we visited in May, Andalas was still in quarantine, and no one had previously gone direct from Andalas's enclosure to visit the females: hence Rosa's state of excitement on smelling us. When we later went to see Ratu, and to feed her bananas and slices of watermelon, Rosa came too. From the sniffing and snorting and squealing, we imagined a fine old gossip about this hot new guy. Nico van Strien, the International Rhino Foundation (IRF)'s SE Asia Coordinator, is optimistic that Andalas will be introduced to the two young females before the end of the year.



Above: Cathy meets Andalas



IMAGES: CATHY DEAN

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Taking Rosa for a walk was an obvious highlight, but for me the most interesting bit of my trip to Indonesia, to see the rhino conservation work being done in Sumatra and Java, was the night before. We had put-putted our way downriver, in a long wooden motorboat, to the estuary of one of WK's major rivers, and a long spit of

sand that has been illegally settled by seasonal fisherman. 106 families take up residence inside the Park boundaries for three or four months every year. Park authorities have been in discussion for years with the regional government about moving them out, but votes matter, and the political will is lacking. On the way, we had seen large areas of forest that had been burned by poachers, who would then shoot animals fleeing the smoke. We'd already visited the RPU headquarters and seen the trophy room, with its skulls of poached animals, confiscated snares, guns and saws. WK is shrinking - due to encroachment - by an estimated 10% a year and, I must admit, it's hard to feel optimistic about the chances of survival of its 20-25 Sumatran rhinos.

Which is why that evening was so extraordinary. All the RPU rangers had gathered for the night, and after supper we had a pow-wow: everyone cross-legged in a circle in the firelight. Susie Ellis, the Executive Director of the IRF who took over after the death last year of the much-loved Tom Foose, introduced us, and explained why we had come to Sumatra. We - Susie, me, and Eric and Jane, two American zookeepers who won the trip by raising large sums of money in the annual Bowling for Rhinos fundraiser - wanted to see the conservation work for ourselves, so that we could better articulate why funding is needed. We then asked three simple questions.

What do you most enjoy about your job?

Back came the answers: they appreciated the opportunity to work with rhinos, they knew they were playing an important role in conservation. They also liked being part

of a good team, said it was like being in a big family, and if they had a problem, they could share it with the group.

What part of your job do you find most difficult?

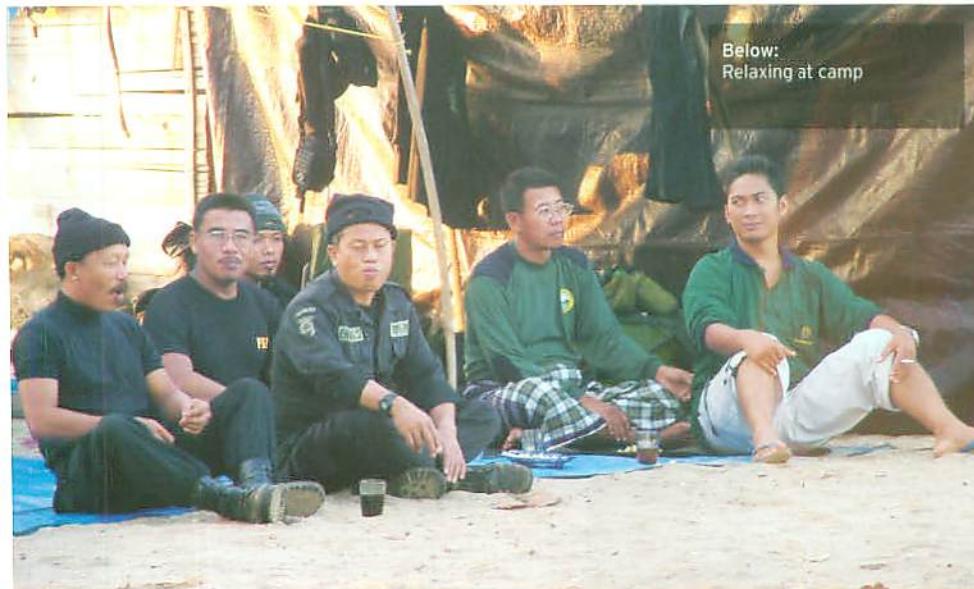
The first man said cooking, and everyone laughed. (They had just magicked up a stupendous dinner of chili, fish and more chili.) Someone else said that communications were a problem, that it was difficult for patrols to get in touch with the SRS and the Park's headquarters. Not surprisingly, others said they feared encounters with armed gangs of poachers. And finally, they didn't like writing reports, so we explained how we use the information to write better fundraising proposals.

What do you need to help you do your job better?

A radio repeater station, ideally at the SRS, to improve communications between National Parks and the RPUs, plus handheld and vehicle transmitters / receivers. Five new motorcycles: three for the RPUs and two for intelligence. Pepper spray for when they come into contact with armed poachers. An intelligence unit, like Arief's in BBS, that can work with the villages on outreach and gather intelligence. And a speedboat, to help them chase poaching gangs.

I was impressed with these answers: the men were clearly highly motivated and their needs were practical and to the point. So it was a pleasure to be able to send over a grant of £3,821 in July to pay for the new radio repeater station, as well as a bit more fuel and maintenance for the vehicle we bought back in 2002, which has been so well looked after, it's almost as good as new. I'm about to start working on a grant application to the BBC Wildlife Fund, to ask for up to £20,000 from the proceeds of the *Saving Planet Earth* series. I so hope this will be successful, as I'm very keen to cross a few more things off that shopping list.

Below:
Relaxing at camp



Thanks

Thanks to the IRF, Nico, Inov and Waladi for hosting me for that wonderful trip. And thanks to Joanna Skipwith and Silver Jungle, Andy Lindsay, the Simon Gibson Charitable Trust and an anonymous Foundation for making our grant possible. I was pleased to be able to donate another £250 on the spot to equip each RPU member with a mosquito net.