

Species in peril

Sumatran and Javan rhinos are easily the most threatened large mammals on Earth. A different set of threats places each species in peril.

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The Sumatran rhino, numbering no more than 200 individuals, is primarily threatened by human encroachment, which leads to a loss of usable habitat, and poaching, with a decrease in population size of over 50% during the last two decades. Approximately 175 animals live in three populations in Sumatra; and around 20–25 individuals live in fragmented pockets of habitat in Sabah, Malaysia. The species is extinct in Peninsular Malaysia.

In 1995, earnest, concerted efforts began for organised protection of Indonesian and Malaysian rhinos. The IUCN Asian Rhino Specialist Group and the International Rhino Foundation (IRF) facilitated and coordinated this effort, which was funded by the Global Environment Facility through the UN Development Programme, with participation by WWF and other NGOs. The IRF has continued to support Rhino Protection Units in Sumatra's Way Kambas and Bukit Barisan Selatan National Parks (and in Java's Ujung Kulon National Park) and the Sumatran rhino breeding centre in Sumatra, managed through Yayasan Badak Indonesia. Save the Rhino, the Asian Rhino Project, and WWF are also key funders of this work.

The government of Indonesia has already adopted the Indonesian Rhino Conservation Strategy and Action Plan, and established a Rhino Task Force, but more needs to be done to implement the strategy effectively. We are at a critical point in conserving Sumatran rhinos, which face imminent danger of extinction if urgent recovery measures are not initiated.

A small captive Sumatran rhino population of ten animals is maintained by four institutions in Sumatra, Sabah (Malaysia), and the United States. The population of Sumatran rhinos is managed internationally by the Sumatran Propagation and Management Board.

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Last year, the governments of Sabah, Malaysia and Indonesia agreed in principle to share gametes (sperm) between programmes, including the US. The captive breeding programme is at a tipping point. There are only two males producing sperm – Andalas, who was born in the US and was moved to Indonesia in 2007, and his father, Ipuh, at the Cincinnati Zoo. Andalas' sister, Suci, is one of the three

Sumatran rhino conservation is at a critical point, with the danger of extinction looming



breeding-age females in the population; the other two are at the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary in Way Kambas National Park. One, Ratu, is expecting a calf in June. In Sabah, Tam, a male who wandered out of the forest in 2008 does not appear to be producing sperm. Tanjung, a female living in isolation, was caught and moved to facilities in Tabin Wildlife Sanctuary to join Tam. Ostensibly, she has the potential to breed, but it is too soon to tell. One thing is for sure: true international cooperation will be needed to make the captive programme viable and sustainable, including collection of a few new individuals to genetically augment the population, in addition to exchange of gametes.

As *The Horn* goes to press, Asian rhino conservationists will meet in Indonesia to further strategize about steps, including collaboration, which will be necessary to reverse the decline and secure the future of these small populations. We can expect a spirited debate. The beauty and horror of these discussions is that not everyone sees the problem or the solution the same way. Are the populations really decreasing? Is protection enough? How do we increase usable habitat? What is the role of translocations? How do we engage communities living next to rhino areas to help conserve them? Should

more emphasis be placed on captive breeding?

One of the ground rules for these discussions will be that people leave their personal,

institutional and national agendas at the door to focus on the problem at hand. This is sometimes easier said than done, but it is our hope that these meetings will lead to agreement on the highest priority actions for these critically endangered species, including engaging the full support of the governments of Indonesia and Sabah, Malaysia, who bear ultimate responsibility for their survival.