Puntung in her temporary enclosure at Tabin Wildlife Reserve.
[Photo by Suzanne Chong-Hartley/LEAP]

BORNEO RHINO SANCTUARY PROGRAMME IN TABIN WILDLIFE RESERVE

Last Chance To Prevent The Extinction Of The Rhino In Borneo (2011 Report)

The Sumatran rhino (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) is on the brink of extinction. Probably fewer than ten fertile female rhinos now remain on the island of Borneo, and perhaps 20 plus on the island of Sumatra, the only two islands where the species still exists. Rhino death rate, including from natural causes, has probably been higher than birth rate for many decades. The mindset needed to tackle this problem is very different from that needed for ecosystem, habitat or population conservation. There is only one imperative : to do all that is possible to boost rhino birth rate above death rate. This can be achieved only by bringing rhinos into fenced, managed conditions under world-class husbandry and veterinary standards, and applying all possible procedures and technologies to boost embryo production. Concerns over such issues as inbreeding, mixing sub-species, risks associated with capture of wild rhinos, from where rhinos might be captured, where any rhinos born might be released to in the future and so on, are barely relevant at this stage. Of course, one option is to give up and let the species go extinct. This option has been the subject of debate. The bottom line is : if there is a small group of people willing to have one last try, why not help them rather than keep on asking if it is worthwhile? In this case, the small group of people includes Sabah Wildlife Department, Sabah Forestry Department and a non-governmental organization, Borneo Rhino Alliance. Sabah Forestry Department has been at the forefront of efforts to

prevent the extinction of this species, and during 2011 continued to provide support to the Borneo Rhino Sanctuary (BRS) programme, under which husbandry and breeding facilities will be constructed in Tabin Wildlife Reserve.

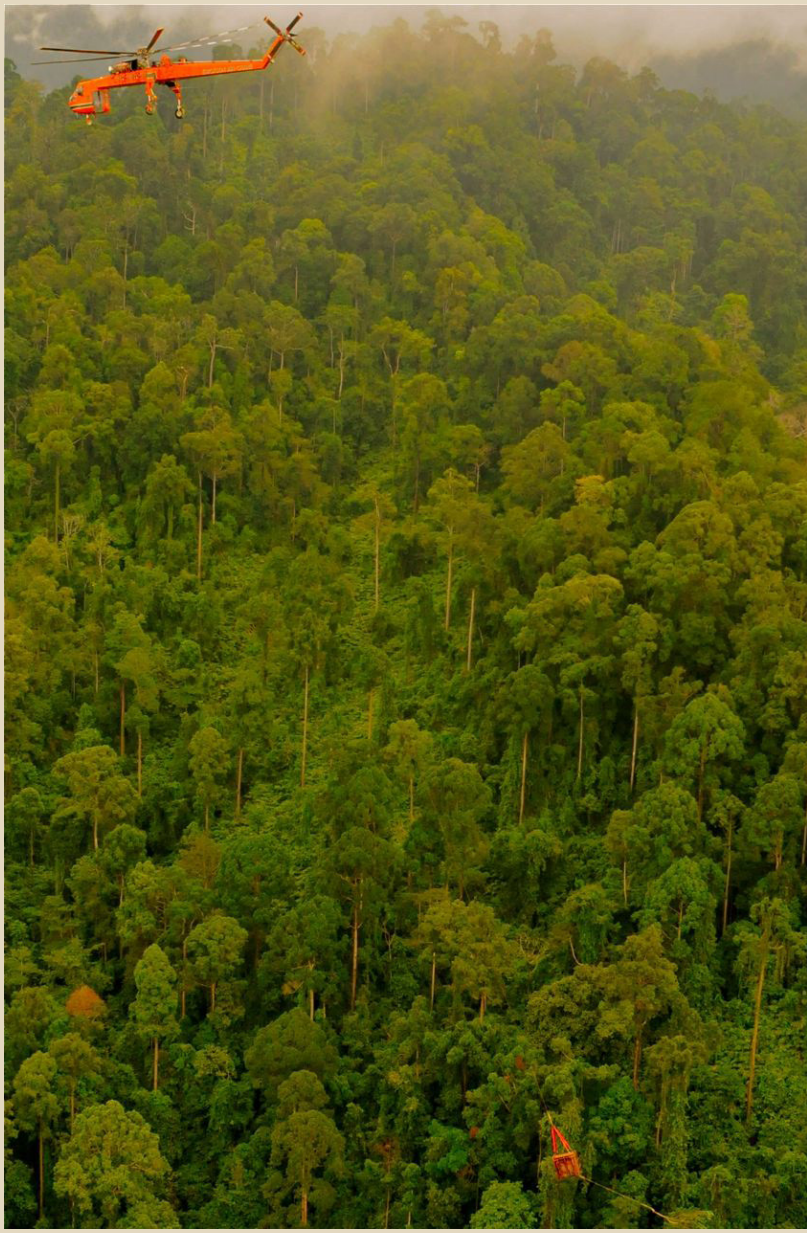
An ad hoc group of international Sumatran rhino experts, the Sumatran Rhinoceros Global Management and Propagation Board, met in Tuaran, 8-9 February 2011, and supported mixing of the gametes of Bornean and Sumatran forms of the rhino. Contact was maintained between Sabah and the Indonesian rhino authorities through 2011 – efforts to save the species now require a global view of the situation, with collaboration and sharing of information. For the BRS programme at Tabin, Sime Darby Foundation and WWF-Germany continued to be the major financial supporters, while WWF-Malaysia continued rhino monitoring work at other rhino sites, the US Fish and Wildlife Service Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Fund supported rhino protection at Tabin, and Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research (Berlin) provided technical assistance in relation to rhino reproductive biology. A paper entitled “Now or never: what will it take to save the Sumatran rhinoceros from extinction” by A W A Zafir *et al*. was published in the April 2011 edition of the international journal Oryx (45(2):225-233), showing how the established Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary (Indonesia) and BRS programme (Sabah, Malaysia) may between them now represent the final hope for the species.

Work of a routine nature on the ground at Tabin during 2011 focused on maintaining good health and condition of the captive rhinos already there, a male named Tam and an elderly female, Gelogob, as well as improving the interim holding and rhino quarantine facilities (built during mid-2011), pending construction of the permanent BRS breeding facilities by government. Reconstruction of 1.2 km of an old logging road to the site selected for the permanent facilities continued during 2011. Heavy rainfall was experienced at Tabin for every month during 2011, delaying all infrastructure work, ruining the road to the interim rhino facilities, and turning the soil in the rhino paddocks into a quagmire.

The major news for 2011 came only at the very end of the year when, on 18 December, a wild female rhino named Puntung fell into the sixth pit trap built specifically to capture her, having been completed only 36 hours beforehand on a ridge top inside Tabin. The lesson, twenty months after the first such trap had been built, was to build rhino traps exactly where the rhino will eventually have to walk, rather than where it is convenient for humans to work and monitor. This achievement was special because Puntung had been targeted as a mate for the male rhino named Tam, who

(Left) Puntung enters the transport crate from her temporary holding pen at the trap site in Tabin Wildlife Reserve, 23 December 2011.
(Right) The transport crate containing Puntung is pushed through the forest from the trap site to the helilift site night of 23-24 December 2012.
[Both photos by Mr. Azrie Alliamat/ITBC, Universiti Malaysia Sabah]

(Left) Early morning, 24 December. The crate is manoeuvered on to a platform ready for the helilift. (Right) Dr. Zainal Z. Zainuddin (BORA veterinarian/field manager) and Mr. Herman Stawin (Sabah Wildlife Department senior ranger) awaiting the Erickson Air Crane helicopter to pick up the crate, 25 December. [Photos by Mr Azrie Alliamat / ITBC, Universiti Malaysia Sabah]



(Above) Attaching the crate containing Puntung to the Air Crane helicopter and (right) the Air Crane helicopter (top) carrying Puntung in a crate (visible at bottom) out of the forest Christmas morning 2011. [Photos by Dr. Sen Nathan, Sabah Wildlife Department]

had been in captivity at Tabin since August 2008. During 2011, it had been ascertained that an old female named Gelogob, also in captivity at Tabin, was too old to ovulate, despite two rounds of hormone treatment aimed at rejuvenating her reproductive status. Further excitement prevailed when an Erickson Air Crane helicopter arrived at Tabin on 23 December from Sarawak, ready to lift Puntung from the forest to the interim BRS facilities the next morning. But seventeen hours of rain on 24 December prevented further work, as well as cutting off the rhino capture team from food re-supply. Puntung was successfully lifted in a crate from her capture site to the interim holding facilities on 25 December 2011. Despite dire warnings from instant experts that Puntung would "freak out" in the carrying crate, and either have a heart attack or cause the pilot to drop her, she arrived safely. Close examination of Puntung's front left leg foot revealed that her foot must have been ripped off in a poacher's snare trap when she was a small infant but, miraculously, the wound healed and she survived. The debilitation of having to travel and feed on three feet has is in turn led to her being permanently stunted. At 495 kg, she is the smallest adult Sumatra rhino on record. Puntung will be the main hope for progress of the programme during 2012.

Puntung's front feet, showing the effect of snare trap damage. [Photo by Suzanne Chong-Hartley/LEAP]

The rhino capture team (Sabah Wildlife Department and BORA) after successfully moving Puntung, in her transport crate, to the helilift site, 25 December. [Photo by Mr Azrie Alliamat / ITBC, Universiti Malaysia Sabah]