On the Horns of a Huge Dilemma: Saving the Asian Rhino

Story by Barry Daniel
Pictures by Daniel Corrigan

There are things that you can do to help save the almost-extinct Asian rhino. But, we have to act now, or wild rhinos will be gone in 20 years.

One of most ubiquitous icons of the last few decades is the image of a pair of rutting rhinos going at it hammer and tongs, usually on the tire slipcover of the huge recreational vehicle that's blocking your way.

This graphic rendering of reproductive enthusiasm is beloved of Jeep and SUV owners from San Francisco to Shanghai. But whoever came up with it got things slightly wrong. Far from being a rampant sexual athlete, the average rhino is about as amorous as Walter Mitty on a particularly self-conscious day. Just ask a rhino – that is, if you can actually find one left to chat to.

Three of the five species of rhinos in the world are indigenous to Asia, and apart from the biggest species – the Indian rhino – they are on the verge of extinction. In fact, there are so few left that you could almost get to know each one personally, as the dedicated conservationists who are trying to save them have done. There are between 500 and 850 of the smaller, hairy Sumatran rhinos left in Kerinci Seblat National Park in Western Sumatra. Years ago the massive Java rhino ranged all over southern Asia; at the time of writing, there are only 75 or so confirmed members of this particular species left, some in Vietnam and some in Ujung Kulan National Park in Western Java. Rumours of rhino sightings continue to surface in Cambodia and along the Thailand/Malaysia and Thailand/Burma borders. But the truth is nobody really knows whether these notoriously shy and solitary creatures are still in these areas or not.

The chunkier members of the small remaining population of Javan rhinos weigh up to 2,000 kilos each, and have a top speed of 35 kilometres an hour at full charge; nevertheless, their immense power and strength are of little use in the struggle against the human forces that are currently overwhelming them.

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In a way, it's wonderful to still have rhinos here with us. The rhino is a throwback species, perfectly adapted to an era that was hell for our ancestors, but pretty cool for theirs. They've been nibbling the Earth for around 50 million years; however, it takes a lot of leaves, branches and berries to keep such a huge mammal alive, and each rhino therefore needs a vast area over which to graze.

Rapidly developing Asia, with its burgeoning human population, is where things have gone wrong. Both the marshy lowland habitat favoured by the Javan rhino and the more dense forests beloved of their Sumatran cousins are increasingly under threat from agricultural development, logging and human settlement. In addition, rhino horn (which is composed of compacted keratin fibres, much like out own hair and nails) has the unfortunate reputation of being an effective Chinese medicine. The Chinese have used powdered horn for around 4,600 years to treat fever, rheumatism, arthritis and even strokes. While there may be far more effective modern drugs available for these aliments, such entrenched beliefs are hard to change.

Charges of insensitivity and even cultural imperialism continue to be levelled at global conservation efforts, such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

CITES, which essentially outlaws the international trade in rhino horn, has been signed by 169 countries to date, including China. As rhino populations diminish, however, the black market price of rhino horn increases, and so the incentive to poach the last few survivors grows.

So what can be done to help the poor rhinos survive? Some people believe that breeding them in captivity and releasing them back into the wild might help, while others feel the real solution is the complete eradication of the market in rhino horn.

Depending on whom you talk to, breeding in captivity has either been a modest success offering a glimmer of hope, or an unmitigated disaster! (Anecdotally, the first baby rhino born in captivity arrived rather unexpectedly on board a boat as its mother was being shipped to a zoo in Victorian England in 1897. This is not recommended practice.)

Save the Whale

Know about the law of six degrees of separation? It suggests that between you and any existing piece of information known by someone alive today, no more than six people separate you from the person with the information you seek.

In other words, you personally know someone who knows someone who knows someone who knows precisely where the Japanese whaling fleet is hunting endangered whales at this moment.

Think hard about this. Do you know someone who works in satellite imaging? Maritime insurance? The Japanese fishing industry? Are you in contact with someone making an ocean crossing in the Pacific? Or a radio operator who listens in on maritime communications? If so, pass this page along, and ask them to get in touch: *hunt-the-hunters@greenpeace.org.*

As long as there exists demand for (and profits from) rhino horn, there will always be poachers, often poor villagers living near the reserves who are just trying to feed their kids.

Brooke Squires runs a breeding programme for southern white rhinos near Melbourne, Australia. She has had success in breeding a calf ('Ganini') in captivity, but the problems of doing so have been significant, even though these African rhinos breed more readily than do their Asian cousins.

Rhino society is really complex and the amount of space per beast is critical. If a boy and girl rhino grow up together in too-close proximity, they come to believe that they are brother and sister. When the time comes for candlelit dinners, as Brooke puts it, "they think that going for it with their sibling would be, well, sort of icky, and so they just don't do it."

Males tend to be solitary and often aggressively territorial towards other males. So you need truly huge – and safe – spaces for rhinos to roam about undisturbed. Other than under-populated but well-regulated places like Australia, such breeding areas are hard to find in our increasingly over-crowded world.

Dr. Tajuddin Abdulla was instrumental in planning and implementing the rhino breeding programme in Malaysia; today, however, he believes that such efforts should cease, as it is essentially a death sentence for all participating animals. Bacterial infections and illness become much more prevalent among rhinos when they live in close proximity. All the breeding pairs in Dr. Abdulla's Malaysian programme eventually succumbed to infections and died.

Add to this the fact that rhinos – which produce just one calf every four to five years, and suckle it for another two – are not exactly the Hugh Hefner's of the animal kingdom, and you can see that human intervention in breeding is probably not going to work.

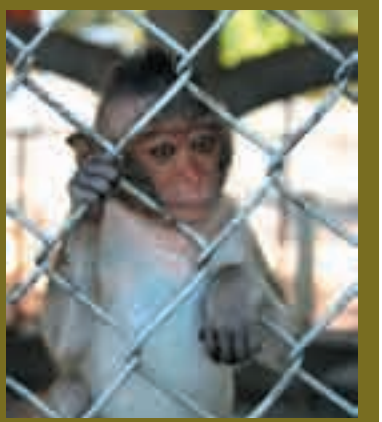
What does work is giving the rhino space and peace to do their own thing, at their own pace, in the wild. Take India, for example: in 1908 there were only a handful of the massive Indian rhinos left in the wild. When the country instigated a policy to protect tiger reserves – where, coincidently, rhinos also thrive – they placed heavily armed, efficient and incorruptible wardens around wide open spaces to discourage poaching. As a result, there are over 2,000 Indian rhinos in the wild today. Nevertheless, wildlife is always one of the first casualties of human conflict. One

Freed from Captivity

Bears, macaques, gibbons, and pythons were being kept in appalling conditions at the entrance to the Cu Chi tunnels outside Saigon. After **lifestyle + travel's** Editor-in-Chief, Peter Myers brought this squalid roadside menagerie to PETA's attention, a representative of the animal welfare group travelled to Vietnam to investigate. When he arrived, none of the animals were found to have food or water, and trash and faeces littered every cage (all very small). Some of the beasts had been completely alone with no enrichment for three to four years. PETA's supporters around the world were contacted and the Vietnamese government soon received a flood of angry messages.

The exhibit has now been shut down! PETA's investigator recently returned to Cu Chi and found that flowers have been planted in what used to be the base of the primates' cage, a sight that brought tears to his eyes.

The Vietnamese Forest Protection Dept had seized the animals in response to complaints from 'foreigners'. According to a representative of Education for Nature-Vietnam, "The rangers implanted microchips into the bears and then released all confiscated animals into a semi-wild habitat nearby." This example goes to show that speaking up can really make a difference, and we urge readers to contact a group like PETA *(www.peta.org)* if you observe any animal cruelty during your travels.



'Beauty', a baby rhino in Chiitwan National Park, Nepal.

only has to look at the present Maoist insurgency in Nepal, which is a significant threat to the continuing sanctity of reserves there.

As long as there exists demand for (and profits from) rhino horn, there will always be poachers, often poor villagers living near the reserves who are just trying to feed their kids. Organisations like the global environmental NGO WildAid (*www.wildaidasia.org*) are running extensive, celebrity-based advertising campaigns in Asia using the slogan, "When the buying stops, the killing can, too." This, and projects like SOS Rhinos (*www.sosrhino.org*), and the International Rhino Foundation (*www.rhinos-irf.org*) which sets aside heavily protected reserves to allow safe breeding of wild rhinos, are probably the only real hope.

Scientists believe it takes a population of 100 to 500 rhinos to allow sufficient breeding pairs to maintain long-term survival in the wild - so we really are down to our last chance with this wondrous beast. While DNA mapping may offer hope for producing future zoo specimens, we have to act now, or wild rhinos will be gone in 20 years.

If you go onto the websites mentioned above, you and your children can actually adopt one of the few remaining rhinos in the wild and make a significant contribution to its continuing survival and possibility of reproducing. There can be few more worthwhile ways to teach a youngster about the preciousness and precariousness of life on our planet.

Ecotourism or Eco-Trespassing?

Story by Rick Gregory
Picture by Reza Azmi/wildasia.net

Though they live in the remotest parts of the jungle, the Orang Asli are still not hidden far enough from tourists.

Unlike their Bornean counterparts, such as the Iban and Penan, the Orang Asli tribes of Peninsular Malaysia are not nearly as well known. Although strongly tied with the jungle, they are not seen so much as traditional people rather than another type of forest animal to gawk at. And people do: the current practice, whereby a flotilla of orange-vested holidaygoers are offloaded on an Orang Asli settlement shore, smacks of an invasion, not a cultural experience.

As part of an outing to the unspoiled surroundings of Temenggor Lake in Perak, 30 of us rode in three boats for almost an hour through forested hills and dozens of hilltop islands – land remnants from the damming of the Perak River two decades ago. We passed slopes dotted with thatched roof huts and cassava plants, the mark of indigenous communities now settled on the embankments of the 15,000-hectare man-made reservoir. We finally rounded a small bay with pencil-like stumps sticking above the waterline to reach Kampung Tebang, a Jahai community of less than 150 people.

Lead by Haji Silah, our guide whose primary instruction was 'to respect the culture,' we waited for the headman's official greeting. I was uncomfortable. The excitement of the tourists was not reciprocated by the Jahai adults or children, who remained at a distance squatting in the shade of their simple homes. For us it was a new experience with a new people; for the Orang Asli it was routine.

Calvin, the 31 year-old headman dressed in a T-shirt and shorts, fielded the barrage of questions thrown at him like a diplomat: we use the water from the lake; our staple food is tapioca; health care and schooling are provided by the government; and yes, we still use blowpipes to hunt small mammals. He was calm and polite, an adept leader.

The awkwardness kicked in as we walked around giving sweets to shy kids and silent elders. The Orang Asli took the 'goodies' listlessly. It looked more like force feeding than gift giving. One participant, a Malaysian in her 60s, summed up the scene later: "I took a spot where I could observe the Orang Asli. At first I was ashamed. It was like going to a zoo. But then I realised that they were watching us as much as we watched them."

Malaysia has a wonderful 'open house' tradition that accompanies each ethnic or religious holiday. These cultural exchanges among Malays, Chinese, Indians or others re-establishes respect for all Malaysians. The visit to the Jahai village produced no exchange of values, nor any respectful outcomes; it was an invasion of privacy.

It is time for Malaysia to rethink these 'ecotourism' visits to Orang Asli villages. Indigenous forest dwellers already face difficulties providing for their families and retaining customary practices amid a settled lifestyle. So it is unrealistic and disrespectful to overwhelm these small communities with hoards of bag-toting tourists expecting ritual dancing and blowpipe demonstrations.

Tourists should meet the Orang Asli on their terms, not on a whim. Cultural survival first depends on improving community conditions while respecting traditions. Many of these tribes struggle to maintain a balance in the non-forest world. If ecotourism is to survive, tourists have to be prepared to sacrifice as well. Clothing and candies are short-term remedies that satisfy the visitor more than the recipient.

Above: The Jahai, traditionally nomadic, are a group of Orang Asli of northern Peninsular Malaysia. Although now settled on forest edges or in Government settlements, they continue to depend on forest products for their livelihood.

Going Herbal

It's expensive to be sustainable, but it's worth it, says Pieter van der Hoeven, Resort Manager at Evason Resort & Spa, Hua Hin.

Picture by Justin Eeles

A lot of resorts pay lip-service to the environment. They ask guests not to have their towels and bed sheets changed on a daily basis, for example; but how many are working to sustain their environment, and not just their own budget?

Evason Resort & Spa, Hua Hin *(www.sixsenses.com)* is the only Thai resort to have its own organic garden (with the exception of sister properties in Samui and Phuket) and at the adjacent Evason Hideaway Hua Hin the organic produce is being put to use. The executive chef at the resort, Remon Alphenaar, has got his hydroponic lettuces going crazy. Chillies, lemongrasses and Thai watercress are grown, and 8kg of mushrooms are harvested from a mushroom hut's feed stock every day. More huts are planned.

So far, so organic. But why is this organic garden working so well at a spa resort? Resort Manager Pieter van der Hoeven explains: "We incorporate the garden with our new clay-built Earth Spa. Say you have a cucumber/carrot facial. Well, we grow those ingredients, and your après-spa meal also includes our organic food. This is what our holistic journeys are all about. Guests arrive; they sit down with their holistic butler and plan their stay. This is no health farm – they have a glass of champagne then do some reiki to tone up. They might have a nice glass of organic wine in the organic garden. This is a journey that is good for you, but not restricting."

Sustainability – not just of the personal kind – is taken seriously at Evason. Five percent of annual revenue (not just profit) goes into a 'sustainable fund', and the company's Wellness Committee decides where best to channel the funds. A local school for deaf children now gets priority for back-of-house vacancies. The kids' art is also sold in the Six Senses Gallery.

The wider environment is not neglected here either, and the resort strives for carbon neutrality. Guests are invited to plant the number of trees required to combat the environmental cost of their plane ride over. All wet garbage that isn't mulched goes to a pig farm.

Accreditation from Green Globe 21 is currently being sought, and the resort's waste water treatment plant is an important part of this audit. Of course, Evason does consume a lot of water, but pool water can be treated for use on the gardens, which then drips down to a water table that re-fills the wells, and is treated again.

All this altruism is expensive, agrees Pieter, but it's also good for business. A lot of guests now demand responsible tourism practices at the destinations in which they holiday. – *Peter Myers*

A Fishy Shopping Centre

Siam Oceanworld recently opened in the monolithic new Bangkok shopping mall, Siam Paragon *(www.siamoceanworld.com; tickets: USD 11/USD 7 for children).*

Aquariums go down well with some and not so well with others, who worry that fish die a lot quicker in an artificial environment/seawater than they would in their natural habitat, an assumption strengthened by the sight of some sickly looking fish behind the plexi-glass. There is also a marked difference between research-based facilities and purely commercial ones like Oceanworld, where colossal signs from sponsors compete for attention with the sad-looking fauna.

Searching for an expert on the subject, we asked John Wildgrube, who has worked in aquarium shops and as a volunteer at aquariums in the US. He affirmed that most facilities will 'make' salt water using a salt mix and fresh water. Not only does this have all the same components as salt water from the sea; it is devoid of pollutants and parasites. As for the sick fish, Wildgrube explained that, "just like in people, 'stress' leads to a lowered immune system and sickness. The most common factors are poor water quality, due to tanks set up too fast and populated too fast." As time goes on, Wildgrube maintains, there will be less and less sick-looking fish as the creatures get used to their new environment.

Any aquarium, of any size, is not a natural habitat. Oceanworld is an impressive facility in scale and has done a good job with their collection. Now it is up to the public to decide if they can stomach an aquatic zoo in the midst of a shopping centre. – *Tom Vater, with additional reporting by Peter Myers.*


Picture by Aroon Thaewchatturat