

# ANIMAL KEEPERS' FORUM

*We touch the future. . . .*

**SEPTEMBER 2008**

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34th Anniversary - 1974 - 2008

## MISSION STATEMENT

American Association of Zoo Keepers, Inc.

To provide a resource and a forum of continuing education for the animal care professional and to support zoo and aquarium personnel in their roles as animal care givers, scientific researchers, public educators and conservationists. To promote zoos and aquariums as cultural establishments dedicated to the enrichment of human and natural resources; to foster the exchange of research materials, enrichment options and husbandry information through publications and conferences which will lead to a greater understanding of the needs and requirements of all animals.

# BFR Winners See Rhino Conservation Close-up at Indonesian National Parks

By  
Rana Bayrakci, Keeper  
Woodland Park Zoo, Seattle, WA

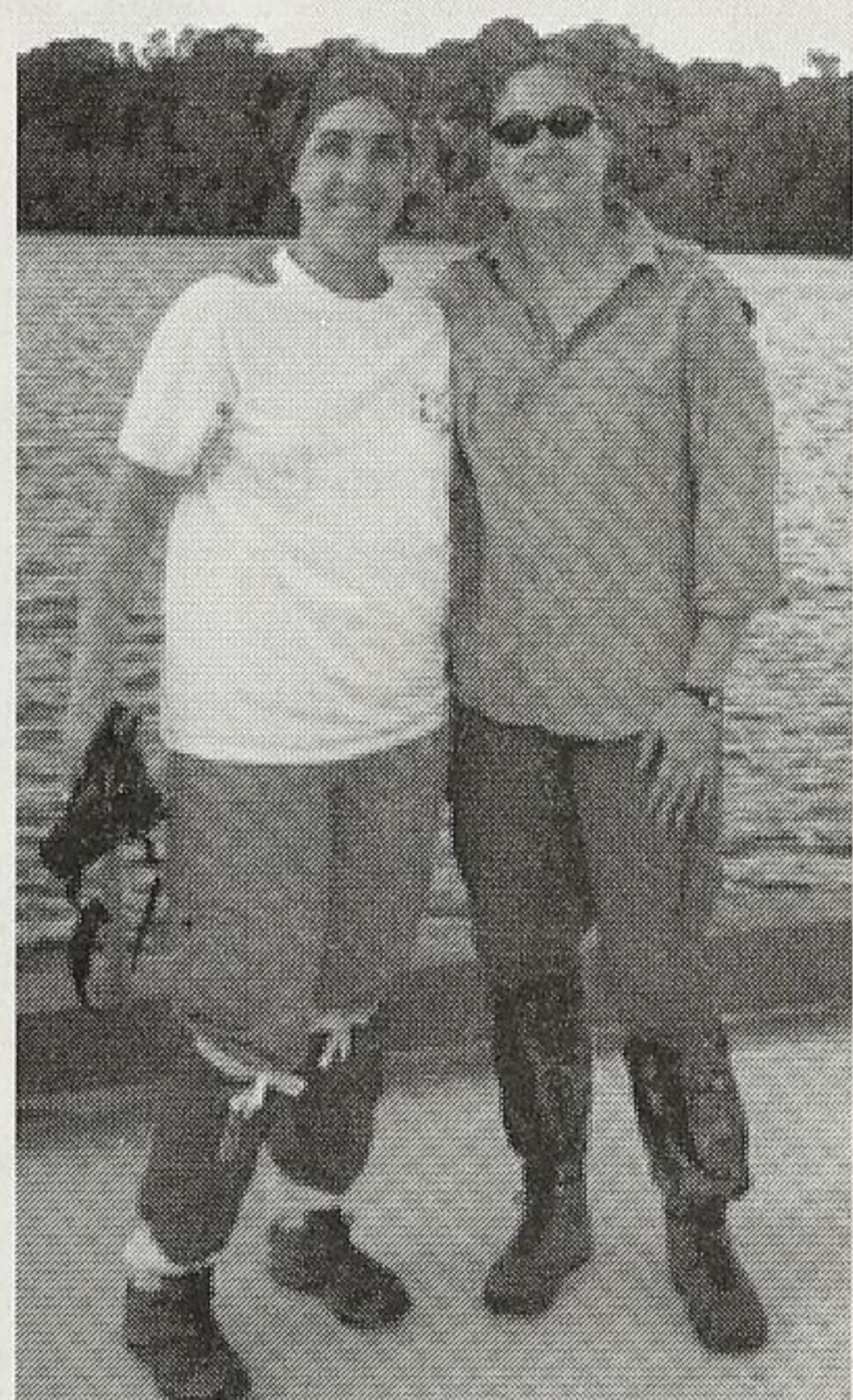
After several years raising money for Bowling for Rhinos (BFR) through Woodland Park Zoo's Puget Sound AAZK Chapter, I was stunned to learn that I had placed third in the nation and was going to Indonesia for two weeks in April and May of 2008. Along with Heather Strawn, a keeper from the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, I would see firsthand how BFR funds support *in situ* rhino conservation. I couldn't have been more excited – or more unprepared for what this trip really meant.

The International Rhino Foundation (IRF), the NGO that distributes BFR monies directly into the Indonesian-based rhino conservation programs organized our trip. IRF Director Dr. Susie Ellis was our charismatic trip leader. IRF's Indonesia Liaison, the talented Sectionov ("Inov"), expertly orchestrated all trip details. We were joined by several trustees of Asian rhino conservation groups as well as the head of the Asian Rhino Project, Kerry Crosbie, Auckland Zoo Keeper Nat Sullivan, IRF's veterinarian Dr. Robin Radcliffe, and IRF's new Asian Rhino Coordinator Dr. Bibhab Talukdar. YABI (Rhino Foundation of Indonesia) Protection Program Manager Waladi Isnain also traveled with us; his extensive knowledge of the flora and fauna was an invaluable addition to the trip.

We visited two national parks in Sumatra, Bukit Barisan Selatan (BBS) and Way Kambas, and one national park in Java, Ujung Kulon. We hiked in the hot, humid jungles of all the parks and traveled by boat along rivers in two of them.

The highlight of the trip was getting to know the "RPU's" or Rhino Protection Units. These uniformed men are the front lines of rhino conservation, believing so strongly in the preservation of the rhino that they put their lives on the line to provide Sumatran rhinos (*Rhinoceros sumatrensis*) the protection necessary to eradicate poaching. The RPU's are organized in groups of four; eight units patrol BBS, five groups protect Way Kambas, and three units guard rhinos in Ujung Kulon. The RPU's spend 15-20 days per month on patrol in the forest, constantly searching for signs of rhino, which they measure and record, and evidence of poaching and encroachment (illegal farming on park land). Through their constant vigilance, undercover intelligence work as well as education of and outreach to park neighbors, they have all but eliminated poaching and garnered well-deserved respect and support from locals. With the exception of one poaching incident in Way Kambas in 2006, no rhinos have been poached from any of these parks since 2003.

While in Way Kambas (1300 square km), we took a boat trip down the Way Kanan River and spent the night at an RPU camp on a narrow spit of sand between the river and the ocean. In Way Kambas, we saw signs of rhinos, tapirs, and elephant. We saw the claw marks of a sun bear climbing up into the forest canopy and the long scrapes from the slide down to the forest floor. We also attended a poignant memorial service for Dr. Nico Van Strien, a Dutchman who was very involved with rhino conservation since 1973 and the IRF Asian Rhino Program Coordinator.



Heather & Rana in leech socks while at Ujung Kulon

Within Way Kambas, we spent time at the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary (SRS), a 250-acre research and education facility developed in 1996 and currently housing five rhinos. The goal is to breed and reintroduce Sumatran rhinos into the wild. Staff collects data and conducts extensive research focused on behavior, breeding, and medical care while the rhinos enjoy large, fenced patches of natural forest and concrete stalls for daily baths, hand feeding, and any medical procedures. We even met the famous Sumatran rhino Andalas, the male born at the Cincinnati Zoo in September 2001, who will hopefully successfully breed so his offspring may be reintroduced into Way Kambas.

We reached our final park destination back on the island of Java by sailboat: Ujung Kulon, the last stronghold of the Javan rhino (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*). This small park (1200 square km) includes a marine sanctuary and perhaps only about 74,000 acres of possible rhino habitat. The current population estimate is 40-60 Javan rhinos, though more precise numbers will hopefully be obtained by camera trap surveys within the next year.

In Ujung Kulon, we hiked on Handeuleum Island, canoed down the Cigenter River, hiked across the narrow park isthmus to the Indian Ocean, walked to the Cidaon Grazing Ground (in the hopes of seeing banteng), and hiked around Peucang Island. We saw more than 50 rhino footprints, including prints from the night before as well as older prints, week-old rhino dung, banteng footprints and feces, a leopard footprint, flying hornbills and flying foxes, long-tailed macaques, peacocks, Timor deer, sea eagles, water monitors, a large subspecies of Prevost's squirrel, and many species of birds and insects. Following an RPU methodically clearing a trail by machete, I was amazed to see the tree notches "bleed" with a variety of sap colors, from stark white to blood red. Everything was fascinating, from the colorful butterflies to the deafening chorus of cicadas. The heat and humidity were overwhelming, and I couldn't fathom wearing the full-length black attire of the RPUs in the jungle, much less carrying a full pack through the forest for weeks at a time as they do. Even so, they made us honorary RPUs with the gifts of RPU uniform hats and T-shirts.

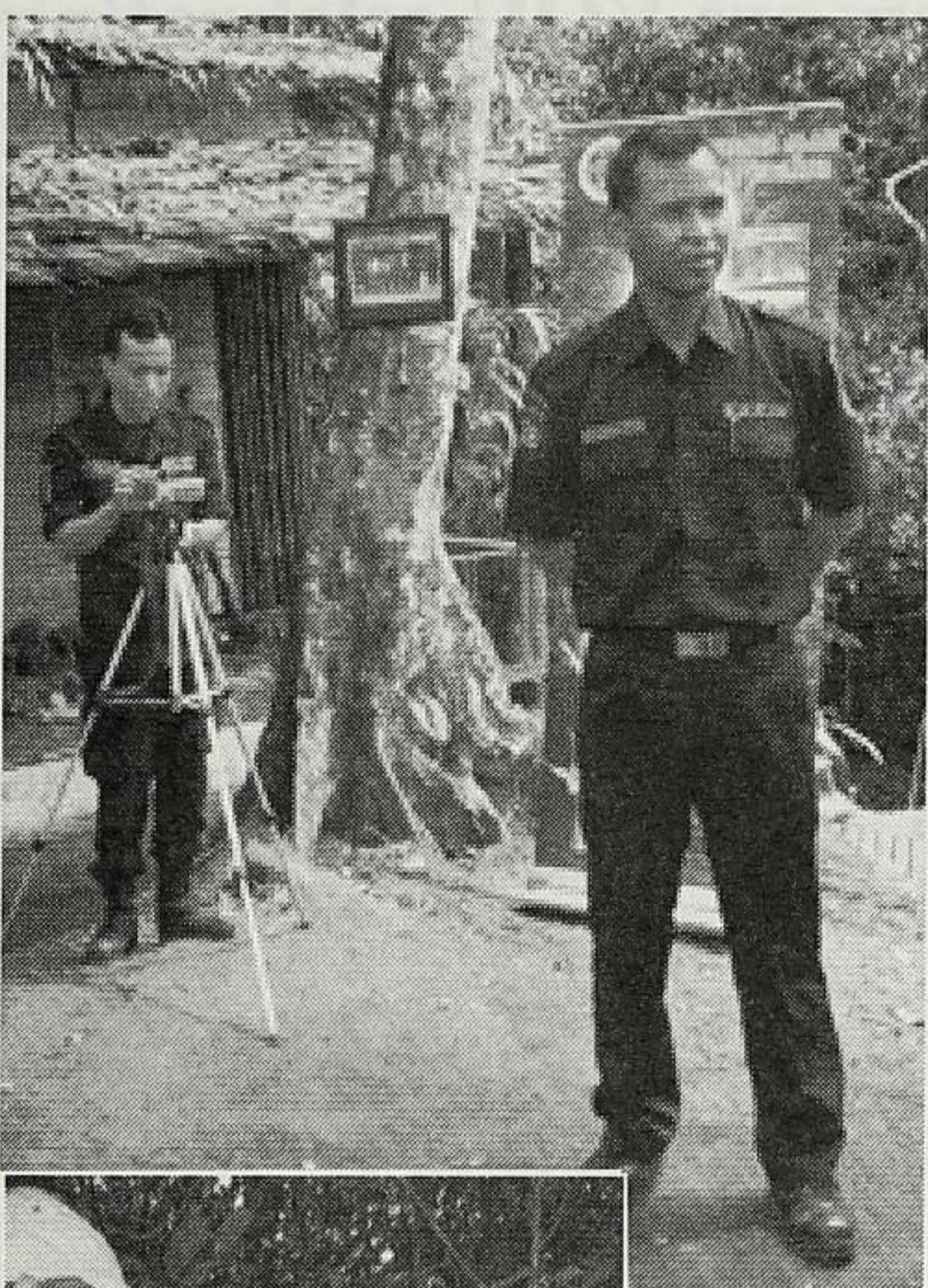


**Rana planting tree with RPU at BBS**

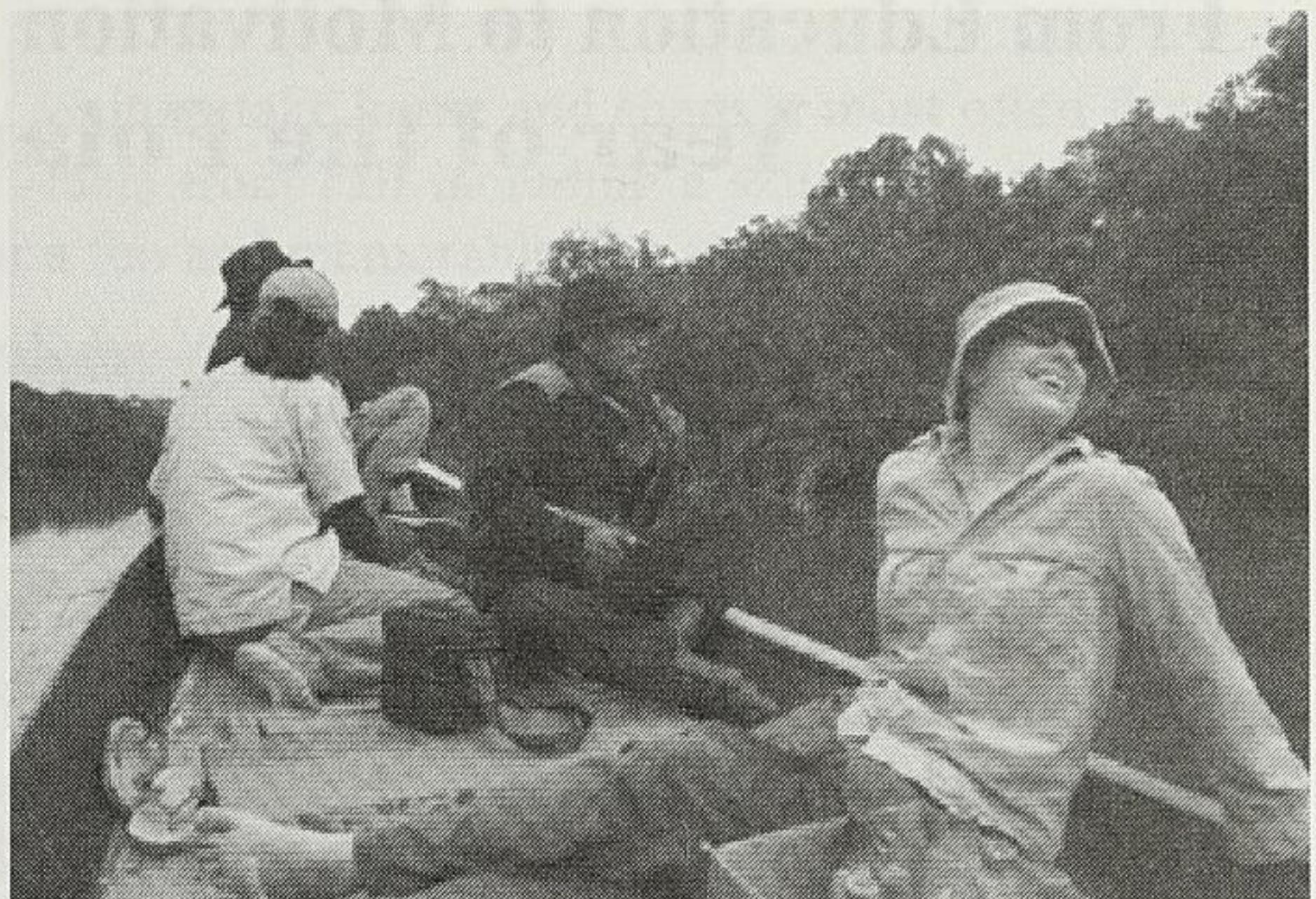


**RPUs measure rhino footprint in Ujung Kulon National Park**

Our visit was actually a morale boost for the RPUs. We were the fourth group of BFR bowlers to travel to Indonesia. They called us "The Bowlers" and documented our every step, stumble, and leech experience with both still and video photography. They entertained us with footage of last year's bowling trip experiences set to music (including Abba), and we worried about the movie we'd be starring in for next year's bowling trip! It is difficult for the average Indonesian to travel outside the country, so to have people from foreign countries make the long trip to their national parks to see their work is a pretty incredible demonstration of support for their daily efforts. The annual BFR trip is really more important for rhino conservation staff morale than for the individual BFR winners.

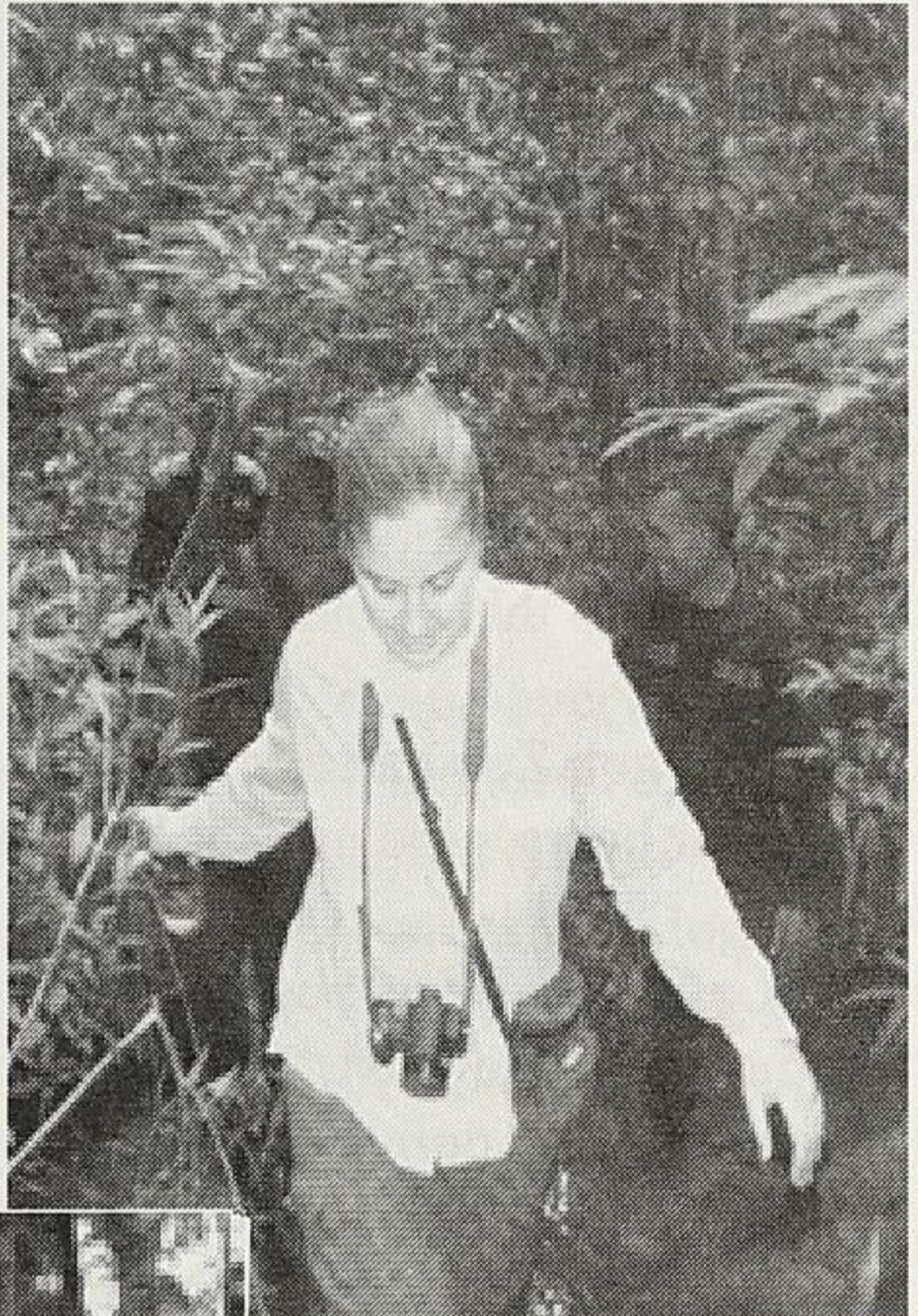


**At left: Susie Ellis and Supriyong with rhino grazed branch in Way Kambas**



**Author on boat in Way Kambas**

**Top left: Zen films Arief RPU at Rhino Camp BBS**



**At right: Author crossing rhino wallow with RPUs**



**Group photo with RPUs Rhino Camp BBS**

I was humbled to meet these men of action: people who are living the lives of dedicated conservationists in a way I can barely imagine. Whether we are caring for animals in captivity or studying them in the wild, our personal level of commitment often remains at a distance – our contributions tend toward the financial and educational. The RPUs are putting their lives on the line every day that they patrol the forests in the interest of rhino preservation. Our contributions and support are critically important for their work to continue with the success it has, and our gratitude is shown by the dollars we raise every year at our Bowling for Rhinos events. Long live BFR! Together, we are truly making a difference.

*Photos provided by the author and Susie Ellis*