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Jackson the Rhinoceros

Posted by [JONATHANSAHA](#) on [AUGUST 4, 2015](#)

One of the exhibits to be included in the up-coming *[Buddhas and Bird-Skins](#)* online exhibition that I am working on with the Bristol Museum, is Jackson the rhinoceros. Here's a brief biography.

He was probably born in the Burma Delta roughly around 1880. He was captured on 27 March 1884 in the Bassein (or Pathein) District, whilst his mother swam out to sea to escape. The celebrated Scottish zoologist, John Anderson, happened to be in Rangoon at the time, on his way to Japan. He was familiar with Burma having taken part in a number of expeditions there, gathering specimens in his role as the first curator of the Indian Museum in Calcutta. Upon meeting Jackson, he immediately acquired him for the Calcutta Zoological Gardens. At this time, the young rhino was only two feet tall, with pinkish skin covered with soft, pale grey hair. His two horns were still small. Two years later, whilst the Indian Army fought to 'pacify' the widespread rebellions against the imposition of British rule in Upper Burma, Jackson was sent from Bengal to London Zoo.



A young Jackson at the London Zoo.

Source: <http://www.zoochat.com/43/sumatran-rhino-jackson-144566/>

He was a photogenic creature. This image of Jackson appeared in the beautifully illustrated *The Living Animals of the World*, published in 1902. More pictures of Jackson during his time in Regents Park have been published more recently in *London Zoo from Old Photographs 1852-1914*. He was only the second hairy-eared Sumatran rhinoceros to arrive in Britain, and the last one to make the journey from Asia until 1986. He lived at London Zoo until his death on 22 November 1910. But this was not the end of his travels. After being worked on by taxidermists, his body was displayed in Bristol Museum. Although the Museum was bombed during the Second World War, he managed to escape with only singed ears and the partial loss of a horn. He still resides there today.



Whilst the captive Jackson was encountering famous Imperial naturalists, photographers, and British zoo-goers, the fate of rhinos in Burma was becoming precarious. In the mid-nineteenth century, [British natural historians commented on their abundance](#). Yet, by the early-twentieth century, as a result of hunting and the destruction of their habitat, they were recognized as an endangered species. This was part of wider ecological transformations as the delta went from being covered by vast mangrove forests, to be turned into continuous tracts of paddy fields. In the thirty-odd years between the date of his capture and the date of his death, officials in southern deltaic districts went from recording the frequent deaths of people and cattle from wild animals, to simply reporting that there were no wild animals left. The history of Jackson's appearance in Britain should cause us to reflect on the on-going (but not inevitable or irreversible) history of the disappearance of his species.