

Borneo Rhino Sanctuary (BRS) Programme 2018 Report

The hot breath of extinction draws closer



Tam in the new Borneo Rhino Sanctuary facility

This is the tenth Sabah Forestry Department Annual Report containing a report on the Borneo Rhino Sanctuary (BRS), a programme and facility based in Tabin Wildlife Reserve, operated by Borneo Rhino Alliance (BORA) on behalf of Sabah Wildlife Department. These reports represent a unique decade-long, public-domain chronicle of the various trials and tribulations of governmental and NGO efforts to do whatever can be done in Sabah to prevent the extinction of the most critically endangered mammalian genus in the twenty-first century. Less explicit are the disconcerting lessons that can be drawn in the global and regional context, some of which are noted below.

Despite claims to the contrary, the Asian Two-horned rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*), commonly known as Sumatran rhino, is not on the verge of extinction as a result of poaching or habitat loss. Instead, extinction of this genus is imminent because many institutions responsible and the people involved failed to recognize that insufficient breeding success, and not excessive deaths, was the basic issue to be addressed since the 1930s. In 2018, the need for a single programme, necessarily centered in Indonesia, designed and operated by dedicated experts to maximise Sumatran rhino births, has still not been realized. This is 34 years after an IUCN-brokered agreement was reached in Singapore in 1984

to develop a captive managed meta-population for the species. Instead, in 2018, the continued absence of understanding of this need within some key institutions, coupled with no decisions, decisions by majority consensus rather than by experts, withholding of information, wrong advice, chauvinism, and misplaced funding allocations outside Malaysia, have together led to a sorry state of affairs.

The last two remaining Sumatran rhinos alive in Malaysia, male Tam and female Iman, were maintained throughout 2018, as previously, under constant, high-quality care by BORA veterinarian Dr Zainal Zahari Zainuddin and his team at Tabin. Both rhinos remained as fit as could possibly be expected given that Tam is old while Iman is younger but has incurable leiomyoma tumours, which bleed from time to time. The bleeding is moderated – successfully to date - by nutritional, medicinal and hormonal treatment. The rhinos were moved into facilities, custom-designed in 2010, only in September 2018. There were many reasons for the delay, not least that the irresponsible building contractor left many sources of health hazards to rhinos, including nearly 100 kilograms of rusting nails and metal objects scattered in the soil through the 20-hectare Sanctuary paddocks. Despite the best efforts of the Eastern Sabah Security Command (ESSCOM) and BORA, using specialist metal detectors, Iman incurred a puncture



(Left) A selection of leaves harvested daily for the rhinos at Borneo Rhino Sanctuary. (Right) A rhino dentist's view of Iman's mouth.

wound in November, which became infected and almost led to her death. 2 litres of pus were drained from her right thigh on 21 December.

Due to a combination of Iman's fragile health, limited dates for availability of the expert rhino oocyte removal team (from Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wildlife Research, Germany) and – most importantly – continued lack of interest from Indonesia for a joint in vitro fertilization (IVF) attempt, no eggs were taken from Iman during 2018. It is important to note that Tam's sperm were considered by the experts - who conducted intra-cytoplasmic sperm injection between 2014 and 2017- to be possibly of poor quality, and that high-quality sperm from Andalas, a male in the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary in Sumatra, should be used for the next IVF attempt after 2017.

In January, Dr Zainal and BORA executive director Dr John Payne visited Aceh (Sumatra) to assess the pros

and cons of several sites for a proposed Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary there. BORA attempted thereafter to engage with various relevant institutions in Indonesia through 2018, but without success. Unofficial news was received several times from Indonesia of a Memorandum of Understanding, Memorandum of Agreement, Materials Transfer Agreement and Implementation Arrangements but nothing materialized. Most frustrating was that Sabah was preparing to send oocytes to Indonesia at the end of May, but no assurance was provided that fresh semen from Andalas would be ready, and the necessary CITES import permit for the oocytes was not issued by Indonesia, so the attempt was cancelled. This situation remained the same by end of 2018. An old female Sumatran rhino was captured in Kutai Barat, East Kalimantan on 25 November (<https://news.mongabay.com/2018/11/first-wild-sumatran-rhino-in-borneo-captured-for-breeding->



(Left) One of the site options for a rhino sanctuary in Aceh - an abandoned oil palm plantation with rhino food plants growing naturally in the understorey. (Right) One of the sites visited in January 2018 in Aceh, Indonesia, to seek options for a rhino sanctuary.



Courtesy call on the head of Balai Konservasi Sumber Daya Alam (Natural Resources Conservation Office) of Aceh, January 2018.

campaign/), and Dr Zainal was informally invited to assist after capture. The Mongabay website continued to publish insightful articles by the indefatigable environmental journalists Basten Gokkon and Jeremy Hance, highlighting some of the issues of concern, including <https://news.mongabay.com/2018/01/indonesia-hints-rhino-sperm-transfer-to-malaysia-may-finally-happen-this-year/>; <https://news.mongabay.com/2018/09/1984-the-meeting-that-changed-everything-for-sumatran-rhinos/>; <https://news.mongabay.com/2018/09/a-herd-of-dead-rhinos/>; <https://news.mongabay.com/2018/09/the-great-rhino-u-turn/>; <https://news.mongabay.com/2018/10/the-rhino-reckoning/>; <https://news.mongabay.com/2018/10/indonesian-government-puts-off-sumatran-rhino-ivf-program>. On 20 September 2108, a partnership of IUCN, International Rhino Foundation, WWF, National Geographic and Global Wildlife Conservation (USA) launched “a groundbreaking effort to save and protect the

Sumatran rhino” (<https://www.nationalgeographic.org/projects/sumatran-rhino/> and <https://savesumatranrhinos.org/>). It is unfortunate that the effort is directed exclusively to existing institutions in Indonesia, rather than to what is needed to prevent extinction of the genus, and that the anticipated US\$30 million new funding over the next five years from USA for this species will be channeled to those same institutions. It is also unfortunate that no-one outside Indonesia and USA was consulted on this programme.

The year 2017 report in this series on Borneo Rhino Sanctuary closed with the sentence : “*It appears that 2018 will be the make or break year for Dicerorhinus.*” Prospects for success are certainly now broken. But whether irreparably or not remains to be seen.

Note : The opinions contained within this report reflect those of BORA, and do not necessarily reflect those of any other institution.



Visit of officials from Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment to the old BRS facility in February 2018.



Old photo of Tam appeared in the 2010 SFD Annual Report taken before his capture in a plantation in August 2008.