

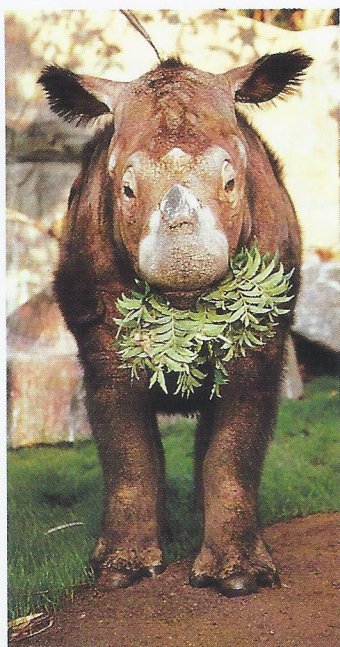
A Shaggy Rhino Story

BY
SHARON ELAINE
THOMPSON



Only a few hundred Sumatran rhinos survive today. Even those animals that live in parks and reserves are not safe from poachers.

Petite (by rhino standards), the Sumatran is also the most primitive of the rhinos.



A love of rhinoceroses is usually acquired, not inbred. After all, few people have an immediate fondness for an animal that looks like something built by a committee with a hangover. But then there is the Sumatran rhino (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*). Small (by rhino standards), bright-eyed, light on its feet and furry, the Sumatran can melt the heart of even the most latent rhino fan. For rhino lovers, the Sumatran is irresistible.

While most rhinos calm down quickly once caught, "this one beats all," says Dr. Warren Thomas, former Species Survival Plan coordinator for the Sumatran rhino. "They'll take food out of your hand while they're still in the trap! Within a relatively short period of time, they'll come when you call them to get food. After they're in captivity for a while, I think you could just put leashes on them and take them any place." At 5 feet tall at the shoulder and weighing just over a ton, a rhino on a leash would create a sensation in any neighborhood.

The Sumatran rhino is more vocal than other species. It reportedly makes a variety of snorts, brays, squeaks, grunts and blows. Michael Penny, in his book *Rhinos: Endangered Species*, says that it has also been heard to hum while it wallows, "one of the few animal species, other than Man, which sings in its bath."

Although solitary in the wild, Sumatrans seem to develop a ready fondness for people. Thomas, who has also held the post of Los Angeles Zoo director, reports that "Mahatu," a female rhino who wintered in Los

Angeles on her way to the Cincinnati Zoo, enjoyed the California zoo's visitors. "She would talk to anyone who'd listen to her," says Thomas. But when the weather turned chilly for a few days, keepers decided to keep her inside. Mahatu stopped eating.

"There didn't appear to be a damn thing wrong with her," Thomas recalls. "She just wouldn't eat. Finally we realized she was lonely. We had to get volunteers to stand there and talk to her and feed her. Once we did that, she'd eat a normal amount. She just wanted company."

Of the five living species of rhinos, the two-horned Sumatran rhino rivals the Javan as the least-known due to the denseness of its rainforest habitat and the animal's shyness. Researcher Nico van Strien spent three years tracking the rhinos, following them through the hilly rainforest of Sumatra's Gunung Leuser National Park—Indonesia's largest natural reserve. Dr. von Strien learned about the rhino's distribution, its daily habits, and how long it cared for its young, all by studying the footprints the animals left in the mud. After making hundreds of plaster casts, van Strien was able to distinguish 39 individual animals by their footprints. In three years of intense study, he observed rhinos just three times.

The Sumatran is the most primitive of the rhino species, managing to survive into the 20th century virtually unchanged for millions of years. It is a direct descendant of the extinct woolly rhino. In captivity,

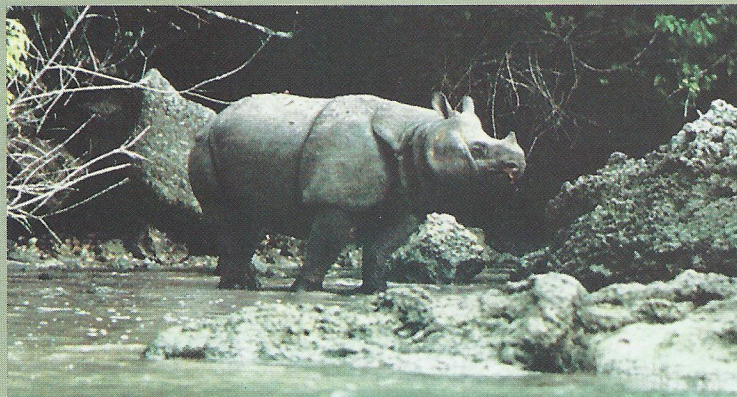
The Rarest Rhino

Just as the Sumatran rhinoceros was not confined to Sumatra, the Javan rhino (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*) was once found not only in Java but also in Sumatra and throughout Southeast Asia as far as Bengal and southwestern China. The only known Javan rhinos—an estimated 65 animals—live in the Ujung Kulon National Park on the western tip of Java. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War, all evidence pointed to the Javan rhino's disappearance from that country until a tribal hunter killed one in 1988. Now it is believed that 10 to 15 rhinos may survive in the region.

Probably the least known of the five rhino species, the Javan or lesser one-horned rhino is similar in appearance to the greater one-horned Asian rhino and was often mistaken for it. (The two species were scientifically differentiated only in 1822.) The Javan is smaller with a scaly-looking skin and a segmented appearance; it is the only rhino species in which the female lacks a horn.

The Javan rhino has a prehensile upper lip, like that of the black, Sumatran and greater one-horned Asian rhinos, which it uses to browse on its favorite trees and shrubs. The surprisingly agile animal can "walk down" small trees to reach the tasty crowns. Witnesses have sighted it in the park high in the mountains and down on the seashore munching on mangroves.

A story is told that soon after World War II poachers entered Ujung Kulon to kill the few remaining Javan rhinos, but one of the last Javan tigers (now an extinct species) got one of the hunters first. The poachers fled. Score: Tiger 1, Poachers 0. The beleaguered Javan rhino needs a few more tigers on its team if it is to survive. □



ALAN COMPOST

Only a handful of Javan rhinos survive—perhaps as few as 65 animals.

Sumatran rhinos have shaggy coats of hair; in the wild, much of the fuzz is worn off by everyday scraping against the trees in their brushy habitat. This little rhino survived the catastrophe that drove much of the fauna of the Pleistocene to extinction. But, like all rhinos, it is having a difficult time surviving man's soaring population growth and demand for animal products.

Experts estimate there are between 500 and 800 Sumatran rhinos left, the largest concentration in parks and reserves. But even in protected areas, poachers manage to find them. Van Strien went to great lengths to reach his study area, choosing to fly in rather than blaze a trail that could later be used by poachers. On reaching what he thought was an undisturbed area, he found his efforts had been wasted. The poachers had already been there.

The Sumatran rhino once roamed throughout Southeast Asia, from Myanmar (Burma) down to Sumatra and Borneo. Today its major strongholds are in Indonesia and Malaysia. There, however, the rainforest is being carved up by logging and commercial plantations. Bulldozing and cutting are fragmenting the forest and driving the animals out of their territory. Those that are left may be isolated from other animals and unable to breed. Even if they survive, their numbers may be too small to harbor the genetic diversity necessary for a healthy population.

About eight years ago, the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums proposed a plan to rescue Sumatran rhinos from unprotected, fragmented areas, and formed the Sumatran Rhino Trust, a consortium of four North American zoos—Los Angeles, Cincinnati, New York and San Diego. Single zoos working alone can do little, says Ed Maruska, director of



CINCINNATI ZOO

the Cincinnati Zoo, "but collectively ... it's amazing what you can generate both in expertise and in financial assistance."

The SRT would set up capture operations in the rhinos' habitat, rescue five pairs of rhinos for each zoo and two pairs for the host country. It would supply technical assistance and training to set up local captive-breeding programs. Eventually, as captive populations became viable and stable, animals would be re-released into secure reserves. Genetic material would be exchanged between the captive and wild populations by moving animals. It is also hoped that one day zoos will be able to employ embryo transfer and artificial insemination techniques to breed the rhinos.

The SRT is a "prime prototypic model" for conservation strategies of the future, says Dr. Tom Foose, executive officer of the Captive Breeding Specialist Group of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. According to Foose, "the natural world, or what survives of it, is, to a very great extent, becoming a mega-zoo" that will continue to be managed through intensive, coordinated efforts of governments, international organizations and researchers. Zoos, with their experience and expertise in managing and breeding animal

populations, are going to be a vital part of those efforts.

Before any rhino breeding program can start, however, you need to have the animals. To capture them, 8-foot-deep sloping traps are dug in trails used by the rhinos. Ten ion-loaded trap doors allow the animal to slide rather than fall into the pit, the floor of which has been padded with a pile of brush. Sometimes creatures other than rhinos



Little is known about the biology of the Sumatran rhinos; scientists have a difficult time locating the animals in their native forests.

Rugged life in the brush often takes a toll on the Sumatrans' naturally shaggy coats. In zoos, they appear hairier than in the wild.



BILL MENG/NEW YORK ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY

have found themselves caught in the traps, among them gaur, tapirs, pigs and one very surprised motorcyclist.

Warren Thomas recalls the time he, Foose and their rhino-capture contingent worked all night to rebuild a faultily constructed stockade for a trapped rhino. "By the time we finished," says Thomas, "dawn was just breaking and a fog had settled over the rainforest. Most of the light we had was from two lanterns that gave a kind of surreal look to the place. We opened the door, [the rhino] paused for a moment, then slowly walked up the ramp. It was as if he were walking out of the Pleistocene toward us. It was one of the greatest experiences that anybody could ever have."

Four Sumatran rhinos have been trapped in this manner for U.S. zoos. The Bronx, Cincinnati and San Diego zoos each have a female, while a male remains in Indonesia awaiting transport to Cincinnati.

In June 1990, the SRT received a serious blow when the Greater Los Angeles Zoo Association announced it would no longer support the Los Angeles Zoo's involvement in the project because of financial constraints. The remaining members of the SRT are in the process of recruiting a zoo with the financial resources, breeding space, experience and commitment to help continue the project. Foose has high hopes that others will step in to support the program that he describes as "absolutely essential" to the Sumatran rhino's survival.

"It's very hard for individuals to perceive . . . how we can have a strong influence on wild populations in distant countries," says Maruska, "but we can. We must."

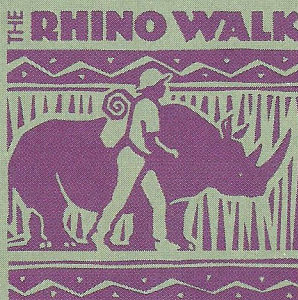
The shaggy little rhino is depending on us. □

Sharon Elaine Thompson is a free-lance writer based in Glendale, California.

Walk a Mile in His



This peaceful scene belies the fact that African rhinos are vulnerable prey to poachers.



If you doubt that a lone individual—the voice of one citizen—can make a difference in the world, then you've never met Michael Werikhe. This soft-spoken Kenyan has undertaken a gargantuan task: to help save Africa's rhinos from extinction.

Michael Werikhe, 34, is not the director of a conservation organization, nor is he a politician. He's not even a rock star. Michael Werikhe is an auto worker from Mombasa. In 1985 he took time off from his job (with the blessings of his employer and the support of his fellow workers) to walk 1,300 miles across Africa with a simple purpose in mind: to talk to people about the dangers that face the rhino.