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OPINION NATIONAL INDONESIA

The 'lovably weird' creature facing extinction

By Jeremy Hance
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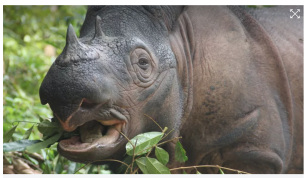

A Sumatran rhinoceros, arguably the most imperiled large terrestrial mammal on the planet.
Photo: Jeremy Hance

In Rudyard Kipling's classic story of how the rhino got his skin, the titular character is an unmannered lout. This is how the public imagines rhinos: aggressive, dumb and grumpy – charge first, ask questions never. But in 2010 when I met my first Sumatran rhino, a fellow named Tam, he whistled at me like a curious dolphin and rubbed his horn against my shirt like a cat. I've been in love ever since.

The Sumatran rhino is arguably the most imperiled large terrestrial mammal on the planet. Indonesia – where the last of the species survive – says there are 100 left in the wild. But the real number may be closer to 50 – and it could be as bad as 30. I've been told by some conservationists it's too late for this species, but as someone who's had the pleasure of spending a few precious hours with Sumatran rhinos I'm not ready to throw in the towel.

Sumatran rhinos are lovably weird. It's as if Mother Nature combined a big pig, a yak, and an oversized dog. Then, as a joke, she stuck a couple horns on her creation. Unlike other rhinos, Sumatran rhinos sport a coat of hair, sometimes resplendently red. They are small – compared with other rhinos – but large compared with most everything else. And they are the most vocal of all the rhinos – they sing like whales and snort and puff in a manner that says "hello, I'm hungry". They are nearly constantly chattering. Dumb? Hardly.

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Evolutionarily, Sumatran rhino are unlike any other rhino on earth. They belong to an ancient genus – *Dicerorhinus* – that split off from other rhinos around 25 million years ago – long before we ever walked the earth. Researchers also believe they may be the last living relative of the famous woolly rhino.

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But why should we spend effort and money on trying to save a species when we may fail in the end? There are number of practical reasons.

The multitude of species – called biodiversity – underpins every ecosystem on earth and humans won't survive without functioning ecosystems. Every species play a role. Little ecological research has been done on the Sumatrans rhino, but we can make some guesses. When Sumatran rhinos make wallows, they likely create habitat for smaller species. When they poop, they deliver important food sources for nature's cleaners like beetles and fungi. And when Sumatran rhinos eat – and they eat a lot – they can change the understory of the forest.

When we lose a species – any species – we are essentially taking a brick out of the foundation of life on Earth. How many bricks can we lose before the walls start coming down?

But I don't really care about all these arguments, no matter how convincing. We should save the Sumatran rhino because we can. Humans have become the dominant species planet-wide: we are altering the climate, razing forests and acidifying the oceans. We are bending the ecology of the Earth in ways that would have been unimaginable just 50 years ago. So, we have a moral obligation to do whatever is possible to mitigate any damage and save as much life on our little planet as possible, small or large, grumpy or chill.

There could be as few as 30 Sumatran rhinos left in the wild.
Photo: Jeremy Hance

Despite how close Sumatran rhinos are to extinction, there is one bright spot. The Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary, located in the island's Way Kambas National Park, has produced two hairy, big-eyed babies in the last six years – Andatu, a boy, and Delilah, a girl. Sumatran rhinos are notoriously difficult to breed – but we've cracked that nut.

The solution then according to numerous scientists I've talked to over the last year is to bring more Sumatran rhinos into sanctuaries and breed the hell out of them. Make more babies like Andatu and Delilah. There is precedent for this: aggressive captive breeding programs saved both the European bison and the Arabian oryx from oblivion during the 20th century.

The biggest obstacle to doing just this for the Sumatran rhino is the government of Indonesia. Nothing concrete can happen for the species without the government's approval, but it has dragged its feet for years – wasting critical time. So, I am calling on President Joko Widodo, who is now visiting Australia, to take the initiative and call for a bold, new action plan for the species that goes into effect immediately. Not for ourselves, but for our children and the countless generations to come. Not even for humanity, but because there's nothing in all the universe quite like the littlest rhino.

Jeremy Hance is a freelance journalist. He recently wrote a four part series on the species for *Mongabay*.

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