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Jungle camera catches endangered rhino on video for first time

CLARENCE FERNANDEZ IN KUALA LUMPUR

ONE of the world's rarest rhinos has been caught on film for the first time on Borneo island, wildlife officials said yesterday as they showed footage of the animal eating, walking about and sniffing the camera.

Malaysian officials of the global conservation organisation WWF said the two-minute video, recorded in February by a camera hidden in the jungle, was the first to capture the behaviour in the wild of the elusive two-horned Borneo rhino.

There are only between 25 and 50 of the rhinos left alive in the dense jungles deep in the heart of the Malaysian state of Sabah on Borneo, and the animals are so elusive that the first still picture of one was taken only last year, the WWF said.

"At the moment they're so rare, it's difficult even to get the video," said Mike Chong, team leader of the WWF's rhino conservation project in peninsular Malaysia. "Once we have more videos, we can study them in greater detail."

The video clip shows the huge animal foraging in undergrowth, then breathing heavily as it approaches the camera, going close enough for viewers to glimpse its eyes and long front horn, along with the individual hairs on its chin and the wrinkles on its neck.

"These are very shy animals that are almost never seen by people," Mahedi Andau, director of the Sabah Wildlife Department, said.

"This video gives us an amazing opportunity to spy on the rhino's behaviour."

Except for the sightings in Sabah, there have been no confirmed reports of rhinos on Borneo for almost 20 years, leading experts to fear the species may now be extinct on the rest of the island, the WWF said.

Major threats faced by the animals include poaching, illegal encroachment into their key home areas, and the fact that they are so cut off from each other that they may rarely meet to breed.

Rhino horns, made of hair-like keratin fibres, have reputed aphrodisiac qualities and are a prized ingredient of traditional Asian medicines.



Many females also have difficulty reproducing, and with many older animals in the population, the numbers of those dying could be exceeding new births, the WWF said.

Rhinos suffer from development because the clearing of forests destroys natural salt-licks that are crucial to their diet, Raymond Alfred, project manager for the WWF's rhino and elephant programmes in Borneo, said.

"Till now, we can still see the rhino, but if we cannot develop any kind of protection method, I think the rhinos will survive less than ten years," he said. "The rhino is very sensitive to the presence of human beings."

The footage and future videos will be used to study the condition of the rhinos in the wild, Mr Alfred said.

"One piece of good news is that we found a small footprint of a rhino followed by the parent, so that is a sign that the rhino is still breeding."

RARE BEASTS

SCIENTISTS consider the Borneo rhino to be a subspecies of the Sumatran rhino, with different characteristics from those found in Indonesia and the Malaysian peninsula.

The Sumatran rhino is one of the world's most endangered species, with small numbers found only in Indonesia, the northern end of Borneo and in peninsular Malaysia.

The smallest and hairiest of all the rhinos - they weigh up to 1,800lb - their numbers are said to have halved in the ten years to 1995, with fewer than 300 left today.

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