

# Better future for Sumatran Rhinoceros

**KOTA KINABALU:** The future of the endangered Sumatran Rhinoceros may take a turn for the better, with promising findings by a team of Malaysian and Indonesian experts in the Tabin Wildlife Reserve.

Dr MS Thayaparan, the SOS Rhino programme officer at the Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) Institute for Tropical Biology and Conservation, said during the month-long survey which started June 7, they managed to track and photograph one rhino apart from finding evidence of seven others living in the reserve.

"This is the first time we took pictures of a rhino at a short distance, about four metres. We are excited by this development. It was an unexpected encounter," he said.

The team, comprising SOS Rhino volunteers, Sabah Wildlife Department rangers and officers from the Indonesian Rhino Protection Unit, also found evidence of three adult males, a mother and a juvenile, one female and another rhino of uncertified gender living in the reserve.

Indonesian Rhino Protection Unit officer Arief Rubianto said the survey was conducted mainly along the Tabin border but believes there could be between 15 and 20 of the animals living in the reserve, located some 200 kilometres from here.

"The rhino population at the 120,000 ha wildlife reserve is certain to increase over the next decade due to the suitable habitat at Tabin," he

said at a seminar on their findings.

Tabin could support up to 30 rhinos in the area, considering the home range for adult males is about 30 sq km while for females is about 20 sq km. Mothers with their juveniles require an area of about 15 sq km.

Arief added the survey team also found footprints and faeces of at least two more rhinos at nearby Kretam, possibly comprising at least one male while the gender of the second animal could not be ascertained.

He said the evidence from the survey indicates that the rhinos have become familiar with human presence as their footprints showed they were crossing roads cutting across the wildlife reserve.

"But it's not to a point where they have become tame," Arief said, adding that regular monitoring and patrols must continue to ensure the safety of the animals. He said urgent studies were needed to assess the situation of the two rhinos in Kretam where the remaining tract of forest was already surrounded by oil palm plantations.

Dr Thayaparan said SOS Rhino Borneo, a non-profit international foundation, is helping UMS to establish a club to focus on raising awareness of rhinos in Sabah.

"The club will focus on the rhino as a 'flagship species', using it to develop programmes that demonstrate the various principles of conservation. This will be the first conservation club to be instituted by UMS," he added.