

# Sighting of a rhinoceros in Upper Myanmar in 1996

Kees Rookmaaker and Erik L. Klee

Rhino Resource Centre, c/o IUCN Species Survival Programme,

219c Huntingdon Road, Cambridge CB3 0DL, United Kingdom; email: rhino@rookmaaker.freeserve.co.uk

The northern part of Myanmar is within the known historical range of the Sumatran rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*). The animals were seen occasionally in these remote areas and some sightings were reported in the 1950s (Tun Yin, 1954, 1956). The rhinos in this mountainous habitat are notoriously elusive, often climbing a high mountain merely to go down the other side (Hubback 1939). Rabinowitz (2002) saw no trace of rhinos on his journey to the region of Mt. Hkakabo Razi in the far north of Myanmar bordered by India, Tibet and China. Some 350 km further south, in the Tamanthi Wildlife Sanctuary, Upper Chindwin District, rhino tracks were recorded in 1991 despite the fact that at least nine animals were poached here during the 1980s (Rabinowitz et al. 1995). It is still estimated that '6–7+' rhinos exist in Myanmar (Foose and van Strien 1997). For that reason, any recent sighting is worth recording, especially from the border areas, which are closed to researchers due to insurgent activity.

One day in 1996, Colonel Ian John Travis (born 1953 in New Zealand) visited a small village of the Kachin people in the north-central part of Myanmar. It was located between the Nmai-Hka and Mali-Hka Rivers, at about 27°N 97°E. The villagers were keeping a small rhinoceros in a makeshift enclosure. Travis was told that the rhino just showed up one night, was caught, and then kept for a period of two to three months. During this time the animal became quite tame, the villagers petting and feeding it, in general treating it like a pet cow. It grew somewhat during the time it was with the villagers, and eventually the rhino was released into the forest.

There is no doubt that the animal was a rhinoceros. Travis took at least one photograph that ELK has seen. When we recently tried to retrieve this rare piece of evidence, we learned that Travis was murdered near his home in Bangkok on 28 February 2002. His

possessions were scattered and our efforts to trace the photograph have been unsuccessful. Still, the possibility of a small tame rhino in a remote Karen village, in a period when the rhinoceros in Myanmar is close to extinction, is worth placing on record.

## References

- Foose TJ, van Strien NJ, 1997. *Asian rhinos: status survey and conservation action plan*, new edition. Gland: IUCN.
- Hubback T. 1939. The two-horned Asiatic rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*). *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*, 40 (4):594–617.
- Rabinowitz A. 2002. *Beyond the last village*. London: Aurum Press.
- Rabinowitz A, Schaller GB, Uga U. 1995. A survey to assess the status of Sumatran rhinoceros and other large mammal species in Tamanthi Wildlife Sanctuary, Myanmar. *Oryx* 29(4):123–128.
- Tun Yin U. 1954. A note on the position of rhinoceros in the Union of Burma (1953). *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*. 52(1):83–87.
- Tun Yin U. 1956. Rhinoceros in the Kachin State. *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*. 53(4):692–694.