

Capture of rare Sumatran rhino gives hope for species

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The young female Borneo Sumatran rhino Puntung in her temporary enclosure in Tabin on the island of Borneo. Malaysian wildlife authorities said Monday the capture of the young female rhino had given them a last chance to save the highly endangered species from extinction.

Malaysian wildlife authorities said Monday the capture of a young female Borneo Sumatran rhino had given them a last chance to save the highly endangered species from extinction.

The female rhino, aged between 10 and 12 years old, was caught on December 18 and is being kept in the Tabin Wildlife Reserve in Sabah on the Malaysian area of [Borneo island](#) where it is hoped it will breed with a lone captive male.

"All of us in Sabah are relieved that we have been able to capture this

rhino after almost a year-and-a-half," Borneo Rhino Alliance director Junaidi Payne told AFP.

The female rhino, which has been named Puntung, was caught in a joint operation by the Borneo Rhino Alliance and the Sabah Wildlife Department.

"This is now the very last chance to save this species, one of the most ancient forms of [mammal](#)," Laurentius Ambu, director of the Sabah Wildlife Department, said in a statement.

Puntung had been specifically targeted since early 2010 as the mate for a 20-year-old, lone male rhino named Tam, who was rescued from an oil palm plantation in August 2008.



Young female Sumatran Rhino Puntung in her temporary enclosure in Tabin. Puntung had been specifically targeted since early 2010 as the mate for a 20-year-old, lone male rhino named Tam, who was rescued from an oil palm plantation in August 2008.

"It is an ideal age for breeding. Puntung and Tam are being kept in adjacent paddocks. They can see each other and there is some communication," Payne said.

Previous attempts in the 1980s and 1990s to breed Borneo [Sumatran rhinos](#) failed but Payne said he was "cautiously optimistic" the latest captive breeding programme would succeed.

The critically endangered Sumatran rhino is a mostly solitary animal except for courtship and rearing young.

Payne said the main threat to the survival of species "is there are so few and they do not mate in the wild."

The breeding programme is important because it is estimated only between 30 and 50 of the Borneo sub-species of the Sumatran rhinos are known to remain in the wild in Borneo -- a vast island shared by Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei.

It is distinguished from other Sumatran rhinos by its relatively small size, small teeth and distinctively shaped head.

Payne attributed the sharp decline in the population to previously being hunted for use in traditional Chinese medicine.

"My opinion is that palm oil plantations are not the main source of threat because there are significant potential rhino habitats in the natural forests in Borneo," he said.

Only 150 to 300 Sumatran [rhinos](#) are known to exist in the wild, making it one of the world's most endangered [species](#), with only small groups left on Indonesia's Sumatra island, the north of Borneo and peninsular Malaysia.

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