

Sumatran Rhino Seen in Borneo Jungles

9 September 2006

(AP) -- Wildlife rangers have made the first-ever sighting of a Sumatran rhino deep in the jungles of Borneo, taking video and photos of a single male after a decade-long search, conservationists said Friday.

SOS Rhino, a Chicago-based wildlife foundation, hailed the recent sighting in Malaysia's Sabah state as a "major discovery" that suggested a growing population of the Sumatran rhino was present in the wild.

The foundation said rangers from its expedition followed tracks that led them to the male rhino, but didn't say exactly when it took place.

"We have been tracking these animals here in Sabah for almost 10 years now and although we have seen tracks and signs of the rhino, this is the actual first sighting of a rhino in the wild," it said in a statement.

"We are excited about the photos and video clip as it also helps us determine the sex of the animal and its health condition in its natural habitat, something that was dependent on guess work before."

The Sumatran rhino is the smallest and most endangered among five species of rhinos left in the world, and the only rhino species found in Malaysia.

They have rapidly vanished in recent decades as their rain forest habitat has been lost to logging, plantations and other development and poachers hunted them for horns used in aphrodisiacs and traditional medicines.

Sabah is the last preserve of the Borneo Sumatran rhino, a subspecies of the Sumatran rhino, a bristly, snub-nosed, smaller version of the African variety.

The subspecies has already become extinct in other parts of Borneo because of poaching.

Borneo island is divided between Malaysia's Sabah and Sarawak states, Indonesia's Kalimantan province and the oil-rich sultanate of Borneo.

Fewer than 300 rhinos of the second subspecies, the western Sumatran rhino, are believed to be living on Indonesia's Sumatra island and mainland Malaysia.

Hopes for the Borneo subspecies were boosted after Malaysian government wildlife officials and World Wildlife Fund experts found evidence of at least 13 of them in May last year. Rhino protection units have since launched patrols to deter poaching.

On the Net:

SOS Rhino: www.sosrhino.org

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