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Cincinnati Zoo Mourns Death of Sumatran Rhino

CINCINNATI, OH (September 6, 2009) - “Emi”, the world’s most famous endangered Sumatran rhino, passed away yesterday morning at the age of 21 at her home at the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden. The female Sumatran rhino lived at the Cincinnati Zoo for the past 14 years and produced three calves, Andalas (2001), Suci (2004) and Harapan (2007). In 2001, years of breakthrough research by scientists at the Zoo’s Lindner Center for Conservation and Research of Endangered Wildlife (CREW) resulted in the first captive birth of a Sumatran rhino since the 19th century.

“No animal has been more beloved than Emi in the 134 year history of the Cincinnati Zoo,” said Thane Maynard, Director of the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden. “She is the most famous rhino in the world and has led the way in the effort to establish a successful captive breeding program for this critically endangered animal. My fondest hope is that we now build on Emi’s legacy and increase our efforts tenfold to continue the global effort to save the Sumatran rhino.”

In March, the Zoo’s Animal Care Staff first noticed that Emi’s appetite was inconsistent; she had less energy and had lost some weight. Concerned Zoo Veterinarians performed a complete physical exam with blood work in early April. Her examination was unremarkable, but blood work indicated some subtle changes in her liver function. Veterinary staff continued to conduct a battery of diagnostic tests and consulted with numerous rhino experts worldwide in an attempt to determine a cause for her clinical signs. In May, Emi’s attitude improved, her appetite picked up, and she gained some weight back. However, overall, her appetite and attitude had been inconsistent and despite various treatments administered, her condition continued to deteriorate. On the day of her death a thorough post mortem exam was performed. Tissue samples will be submitted to a veterinary pathologist to help determine a cause of death.

“It is always devastating when an animal reaches the end of its life, especially those that are so special, but Emi could not have been in better hands all these years,” said Dr. Terri Roth, Director of the Cincinnati Zoo’s CREW. Our Veterinary staff has been working tirelessly for months to identify the source of Emi’s illness, and our keeper staff has done everything possible to support Emi on a daily basis during our struggle to save this rhino.”

A decade ago, little was known about caring for the critically endangered Sumatran rhinos in captivity, let alone their mating habits and reproductive cycles. But Cincinnati Zoo staff, led by Dr. Terri Roth, have relied on the use of ultrasound, close monitoring of hormone levels and years of patient observation and trial-and-error to learn how to successfully breed the Sumatran rhinos.

Emi's first calf, Andalas, was the first Sumatran rhino bred and born in captivity in 112 years. Repeating that success with the birth of a second calf, Suci, in 2004, was absolutely essential to validate the scientific methods developed at the Cincinnati Zoo and for the continued progress of the captive breeding program. In 2007, Emi gave birth to an unprecedented third calf, Harapan, again raising hopes among conservationists that the captive breeding could play an important role in the species' recovery.

Andalas, now almost 8 years of age, was transported to the Way Kambas Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary in Indonesia in 2007 to take part in an international breeding program. The Sanctuary has been in close consultation with the Cincinnati Zoo. The methodology that has proven successful at the Cincinnati Zoo is being adapted to the conditions at the Sanctuary. With the arrival of Andalas, the options for reproduction have increased dramatically and the Sanctuary is poised for success. Rhino experts are hopeful that he will successfully breed with the females at the Sanctuary to achieve pregnancies and offspring.

The Cincinnati Zoo is the only place in the world to successfully breed this critically endangered species in captivity. Two out of the three Sumatran rhinos living in the United States, five-year-old Suci and her father, Ipuh, reside at the Cincinnati Zoo. Harapan moved to the White Oak Conservation Center in Yulee, Florida in 2008. Emi and Ipuh were both sent to the U.S. by the Indonesian government as part of a cooperative agreement developed between Indonesia and four U.S. zoos (Cincinnati, Bronx, Los Angeles and San Diego).

Considered the most endangered of all rhino species and perhaps the most endangered mammal species on earth, it is estimated that at least 60 percent of the Sumatran rhino population has been lost in the last two decades. The primary cause is conversion of rhino habitat for agriculture, even in some national parks, and poaching for its horn which some Asian cultures believe contains medicinal properties. Today, there are only nine Sumatran rhinos living in captivity worldwide and fewer than 200 animals exist in isolated pockets of Sabah, Malaysia and the island of Sumatra in Indonesia. Sumatran rhinos can live 35-40 years.

The Cincinnati Zoo is working closely with the Indonesian Ministry of Forestry, the Indonesian Rhino Foundation, the IUCN Asian Rhino Specialist Group and the International Rhino Foundation, to protect this species in the wild, and also propagate Sumatran rhinos in captivity. Both approaches will be necessary to secure the future of this critically endangered species for future generations.

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The world famous Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden was rated the #1 attraction locally and one of the top zoos in the nation by Zagat Survey. It was recognized by Parents Magazine as #7 on the "Top 10 Best Zoos for Kids." It has also been recognized by Child Magazine as one of "The 10 Best Zoos for Kids." Over one million people visit the Zoo's award-winning exhibits, and more than 500 animal and 3000 plant species annually. The Zoo is an accredited member of the American Zoo & Aquarium Association (AZA) and the American Public Gardens Association (APGA), is internationally known for its success in the protection and propagation of endangered animals and plants, and engages in research and conservation projects worldwide.