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Tapir watch

Peninsular Malaysia is the last stronghold of the Malayan tapir. Even so, the population here is dwindling. >2

The elusive tapir might not be as endangered as other animals but they need conservation care, too.

By **TAN CHENG LI**
star2green@thestar.com.my

THE stock arrived with a bundle of joy at the Sungai Dusun Wildlife Conservation Centre in Selangor in the wee hours of April 27. The latest addition to the menagerie is a baby Malayan tapir, the sixth to be born there.

The striped baby tapir, named Waja, weighed a healthy 9kg at birth and was parented by Rompin and Boy, two of the 11 tapirs at Sungai Dusun in Ulu Bernam.

The reserve, which once housed a population of five Sumatran rhinoceros until all of them died over an 18-day span from septicaemia in late 2003, is now a wildlife rescue and breeding centre of sorts. Apart from the Malayan tapir (*Tapirus indicus*), the centre has a collection of false gharial, slow loris and Malayan porcupine for captive breeding with a view of reintroducing them to the forests of Sungai Dusun or other natural areas where the species have become depleted.

Since 2002, the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (Perhilitan) has collaborated with Copenhagen Zoo on a tapir conservation programme where wildlife experts study the totally protected species in Krau Wildlife Reserve and Taman Negara in Pahang, and in Sungai Dusun.

The use of camera trapping and radio telemetry have yielded new knowledge on the little-studied animal. Through radio collars, scientists have been able to track the movements of tapirs in Krau to get a better idea of their home range. The nocturnal animal has also been found to eat the leaves and fruits of over 100 species of plants.

"They are extremely alert and difficult to spot in the field. We've also discovered that you can identify individuals from the wrinkles on

Saving the tapir

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Tagged: Ecologist Dr Carl Traeholt attaching a radio to a tapir. Through radio telemetry, the animal will be tracked to see its movements and range in the forest.

their neck, which are unique to each animal," says programme coordinator Dr Carl Traeholt.

"The breeding programme in Sungai Dusun is to see how to breed tapirs and this appears to be fairly straightforward," he says.

With the arrival of Waja, there are now 12 tapirs in Sungai Dusun – four males and eight females. The birth of Waja is the first for Rompin,

aged about five to seven years old, which was trapped in October 2007 after it had ventured into a village in Rompin, Pahang. Boy, which was sent to Sungai Dusun from Singapore Zoo where he was born, has proven to be the most fertile male at the centre, having previously sired Ai and Suraya.

Traeholt says having captive-breds makes it unnecessary to

capture wild tapirs to stock zoos. In fact, one-year-old Ai was sent to Perhilitan in Terengganu in March, presumably for a zoo there.

Endangered

The population of the Malayan tapir in its entire range has decreased drastically in recent years, mainly due to habitat destruction. The evergreen forest that used to cover large parts of southern Thailand, Peninsular Malaysia and Sumatra are mere fractions of its previous size, depleted by logging, expanding farms and plantations.

In Thailand, only about 200 tapirs are left. Tapirs are no longer found in northern Sumatra. Historical documents show tapir to exist in Borneo but the species has died out there.

All of which makes Peninsular Malaysia the last stronghold of the Malayan tapir. And yet, tapir numbers are dropping here, too. Perhilitan estimates that between 1,500 and 2,000 tapirs remain in our forests. Unlike other large animals such as the tiger or elephant, tapirs face less hunting pressure as it is not usually eaten or used in folk cures. But it is threatened by the loss of habitat as forests are exploited and fragmented into isolated parcels.

Tapirs are also victims of road-kills, knocked down by cars when they attempt to cross roads that bisect their forested homes. After a highway was built through the forests at Bukit Cheraiah near Shah Alam in Selangor, at least seven tapirs were knocked down by motorists, according to the Malaysian Nature Society.

And although tapirs are not targeted by hunters, they get caught in snares set up for other animals like deer, wild boars and tigers. Many of the tapirs that end up in Sungai Dusun bore injuries from being caught in snares.

The number of tapirs displaced by development or rescued from ditches, wells, road sides and snares, is growing. "We are seeing more wildlife-human conflict



A 2006 file photo of Fire and Rescue Department personnel trying to capture a tapir which had ventured into Kampung Gerai, near Jerteh in Terengganu. As settlements and farms edge closer to forests, tapirs are being displaced.

involving tapirs. We have even trapped tapirs just beside homes," says Mahathir Mohamad, assistant director of Perhilitan Selangor.

Back to the wild

Over at Sungai Dusun, a lifeline is being offered to the endangered species, in the form of reintroducing captive animals to the forest. On April 26, seven-year-old male tapir Mala was released into the forests of Sungai Dusun, where it will join the existing three to four wild tapirs in the protected area. Mala was born in Malacca Zoo but was transferred to Sungai Dusun for the breeding programme. Unfortunately, he never sired any babies.

The 4,330ha Sungai Dusun comprises primarily peat swamp and lowland dipterocarp forest.

The tapir release programme follows a procedure to ease the animal into the wild. First, they are kept in a 5ha fenced enclosure that adjoins the paddock. In the next phase of the reintroduction programme, the tapir goes to a 50ha enclosure.

"This site is considered wild as it

Tapirs of the world

The family Tapiridae has four living species. The closest living relatives of tapirs are odd-toed ungulates (hoofed animals), horses and rhinos. The young calves of all tapir species share a similar pattern of yellow stripes on a brown coat. Tapirs are herbivores best suited to primary or old growth secondary forest, and their reproduction is slower than most mammal species due to a long gestation period (13 months).

Malayan tapir: Where are they?



Malayan tapir (*Tapirus indicus*)

Range: Southern Thailand, southern Myanmar, Peninsular Malaysia and Sumatra

Characteristics: The largest tapir species, 1.8m long and 350kg

Status: Endangered

Conservation threats: Habitat destruction and fragmentation

Population estimate (2008): 1,500 to 2,000

Mountain tapir (*Tapirus pinchaque*)

Range: Hills of the Andes in Colombia, Panama, Venezuela, Ecuador and northern Peru,

Characteristics: The smallest tapir species, 1.8m long and between 150kg and 250kg.

Status: Endangered

Conservation threats: Warfare and habitat loss due to poppy farming, ranching and agriculture.

Population estimate (2008): 2,500



Lowland tapir (*Tapirus terrestris*)

Range: Rainforest and wetlands of South America

Characteristics: 1.8m long and 225kg

Status: Vulnerable

Conservation threats: Habitat loss due to deforestation, hunting for meat and competition with domestic livestock



Baird's tapir (*Tapirus bairdii*)

Distribution: Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Costa Rica, Colombia

Characteristics: 1.5m long and 250kg

Status: Endangered

Conservation threats: Habitat destruction and fragmentation, and hunting.

Population estimate (2006): < 5,500



has big trees and vegetation, which provide food for the tapir. We will also reduce the feeding frequency so the tapir will find food for itself. Once the animal can fend for itself, we will release it into the wild forest of Sungai Dusun," says Perhilitan wildlife officer David Magintan.

Aside from the recent release of Mala, there have been two previous releases of captive-bred tapirs – in 2008 and 2009 at Taman Negara. The tapirs, both over two years old, were born in the 150ha enclosure in Sungai Dusun and so were fairly wild, making them good candidates for the release programme.

However, it is unknown how these captive-breds are faring. What happened was that the animals escaped from their temporary enclosure in Taman Negara – which

was improperly built – and disappeared into the jungle before collar transmitters were put on them.

As a result, wildlife officers could not track their movements to see how they were surviving on their own. Although one tapir was eventually captured by camera trapping, it has not been photographed for a year. The other was spotted only once, feasting on fruits in a village.

Breeding right

As the captive breeding effort at Sungai Dusun has proven successful, Traeholt sees no necessity in continuing it; more so since the centre is already filled to capacity. "There is no point in continuing to breed the tapir as they will only be kept in captivity."

He is also against the idea of



A one-month-old tapir named Suraya lying next to its mother at Sungai Dusun Wildlife Reserve, Ulu

sending more captured or displaced tapirs to Sungai Dusun. "These animals should be sent to natural forests where the original tapir population has been depleted. For this, we need to draft a protocol on the translocation of tapirs. It should spell out what is supposed to be done if there is an injured or displaced tapir, and have guidelines to assist the release of tapirs into

wild, suitable habitats."

Traeholt says releasing tapirs into the wild would be relatively easier compared to releasing bigger mammals such as tigers and elephants as they are semi-wild, having been kept in the wild enclosures at Sungai Dusun.

Captive-bred tigers, on the other hand, have never hunted and so might not be able to survive on

their own. As for elephants, they are social animals and move in herds. So a newly translocated individual might not fit into the group.

But while research into the ecology of tapirs and efforts to breed and release them all offer a lifeline for the endangered species, the most crucial conservation measure is still to protect their habitat and give them space to roam.



This wild tapir wandered into a human settlement and could not get out of a canal in a padi field in Parit, Perak.



A radio collar worn around the neck of this tapir will enable scientists to track its movements in Sungai Dusun forest.