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Provide funds for rhino conservation too, M'sia told

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KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia should contribute funding besides just offering the eggs of its last remaining female Sumatran rhinoceros to Indonesia to help conserve the species, says international rhino expert Dr Terri Roth, from Cincinnati Zoo's Center for Conservation and Research of Endangered Wildlife, pointed out the chances of success of producing a calf from the eggs was "very low".

"It's a long shot that we will be able to create calves with eggs from the rhinoceros. It is good that we are going to try but the chances of success are very low."

"So, wouldn't it be great if the Malaysian government contributed some funds to help support the wild rhinoceros in Indonesia, or even the sanctuary or the breeding programme in Indonesia."

"We need the funding so that would be

something that the government could bring to the table and that would be very useful," she said on the sidelines of the 29th International Congress for Conservation Biology yesterday.

Roth, a central figure in the breeding of Sumatran rhinoceros, had spearheaded breakthroughs of captive breeding of the animal in the United States.

Her work at the Cincinnati Zoo led to the first Sumatran rhinoceros calf produced in captivity in 112 years.

"When you reach out to a country you want to work with where there have been conflicts in the past, it is really important that both have something to bring to the table to offer," said Roth.

"Indonesia has a lot to bring to the table because all the rhinoceros are there. I would ask the question of what is Malaysia bringing to the table. I think that is going to help pull Indonesia into the agreement."

The Sabah government has offered Indo-

nesia the eggs of its last remaining female Sumatran rhinoceros, Iman, for fertilisation with its male rhinos.

Iman is Malaysia's last surviving rhinoceros following the death of Tam which died of old age and multiple organ failure in May. Sumatran rhinoceroses have not been seen in Sabah jungles for over a decade.

Looking at the possibility of total extinction of the Sumatran rhinoceros in Malaysia, Roth said if Malaysia could not locate any more rhinoceroses in its territories, then it was going to be "very tough" with the only remaining one.

"With just this one animal, hopefully we can rescue something from her and those genes would exist," she added.

WWF Wildlife Practice Leader Margaret Kimrud said there would be "far less opportunity for genetic diversity" in the pool of rhinoceroses if there was no collaboration between Malaysia and Indonesia.

"Malaysia has a Bornean sub-species that

has the potential to add a lot of genetic diversity to the pool that we have in Sumatra, which is a different recognised sub-species.

"So, it would be a shame (if it did not materialise) but it certainly does not keep the programme from moving on," she said.

Meanwhile, International Union for Conservation of Nature Species Survival Commission chair Dr Jon Paul Rodriguez said that instead of focusing on the past, both countries should look to the future to see it as an opportunity to preserve the rhinoceros population.

"Malaysia has said it would contribute eggs to artificial insemination efforts that we hope it would take place in the future."

"That is very important because it adds a lot of genetic variation to the (rhinoceros) population," he said.

At the same time, Rodriguez said Malaysia must ensure the habitat for future reintroduction is there.

He added that he was very hopeful that both countries would cooperate soon.