

A co-operative effort to save the Sumatran rhino

The Critically Endangered Sumatran rhinoceros may be the most threatened of all land mammals. Fewer than 275 Sumatran rhinos remain, primarily on Indonesia's Sumatra Island, where the population has declined at a rate of 50% over the past 20 years. Over the past five years, however, losses of Sumatran rhino have been nearly eliminated in Indonesia through intensive anti-poaching and intelligence activities by Rhino Protection Units (RPUs).

Susie Ellis, Ph.D
Executive Director
International Rhino Foundation



This image: Andalus the young male who we hope will sire offspring, pictured here with Susie Ellis of the IRF



This image: The motorbikes purchased with the grant from the BBC Wildlife Fund allow a much faster response



INTERNATIONAL RHINO FOUNDATION

RPUs vigorously patrol forests to destroy snares and traps and apprehend poachers. By gathering intelligence from local communities, RPUs also proactively prevent poaching attempts before they take place. The RPUs consistent presence and patrolling benefits other species, such as Sumatran tigers and elephants, as well as the ecosystem as a whole. Eight patrol units operate in Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park (BBS), one of the highest priority areas for Sumatran megafauna. Approximately 60-85 Sumatran rhinos (the second-largest population in the world) inhabit the Park, along with 40-50 Sumatran tigers and around 500 Asian elephants. Five patrol units operate in Way Kambas National Park (WK), which has a resident population of 40+ Sumatran rhinos and is also home to the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary. Each RPU patrols from between four and seven days, with a day of rest, a day of reporting, and a day of preparation for the next patrol. In conjunction with ten days' leave every three months, each RPU spends at least fifteen days per month on patrol.

Being able rapidly to respond to poaching and other threats from illegal activities is essential to the RPUs' success. Upon discovery of poaching or other infractions, sometimes more than one RPU must quickly rally to the site, subdue suspects, make arrests and confiscate equipment, including guns, snares and chainsaws. Suspects are then turned over to local police along with evidence. The RPU teams cover an area of 1,300km², in a region where public roads are few and usually unpaved.

This year, SRI made possible two grants that will increase the RPUs' effectiveness. The BBC Wildlife Fund provided £12,520 to purchase and provide fuel and maintenance for eleven motorbikes. A grant of £25,000 from the Rufford Maurice Laing Foundation enabled purchase of a 4WD vehicle, plus fuel and maintenance for one year for WK. Both of these generous awards will enhance the effectiveness of the RPU teams, in that their ability to be more mobile enhances patrolling and allows a more rapid response to poaching and other illegal activities.

In the heart of WK, the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary (SRS) is home to five rhinos that are part of an intensively managed research and breeding programme. At the SRS, the rhinos reside in large, open areas where they can experience a natural rainforest habitat, while still receiving state-of-the-art veterinary care and nutrition. With the recent addition of Andalus (the first Sumatran rhino born in captivity in over 112 years) to the SRS's population of one male and three female Sumatran rhinos, the SRS is well-poised to breed rhinos in the coming years, and to contribute in a major way to our understanding of the basic biology of this species. The BBC Wildlife Fund also provided £7,460 to support veterinary and laboratory equipment, medicine and food for the SRS rhinos, thereby helping to ensure that the animals at the Sanctuary remain in prime health. Next year, the International Rhino Foundation (IRF) and SRI will be working with David Back, of horny@50, to raise more funds for Sumatran rhinos.

The IRF (www.rhinos-irf.org) is fortunate to work in partnership with SRI. Our open and collegial relationship benefits the rhino conservation programmes we are working to support, keeps our administrative costs to a minimum and helps to achieve maximum value. Our productive partnership makes us stronger together than we would be working independently.

Thanks

The BBC Wildlife Fund and Rufford Maurice Laing Foundation for their wonderful grants.

Getting my hands dirty in Sumatra

As a new Trustee, I jumped at the chance to go on my first field trip and join the "Bowling for Rhinos" group, a party of four American zookeepers touring National Parks in Indonesia. They had won their places through their fundraising efforts for rhinos (organising ten-pin bowling events) and were being taken around by Susie Ellis, Executive Director of the International Rhino Foundation.

Mark Sainsbury
Trustee

The fact that the week before the rhino tour started, I happened to be on a family holiday on Bali, an hour away from Jakarta where I met the rest of the group, was a happy coincidence. Slightly less happy was the contrast between the plush Balinese villa that I left behind and the state of the hotel room in Kota Agung in southern Sumatra on the first night of the trip! It wasn't the stained sheets, lack of mini-bar and no air conditioning that jarred with me; it was the dead and dying cockroaches around my bed and mice droppings in my basin that made me miss a bit of Balinese luxury.

However, by the next night I was feeling like the spoilt traveller that I guess I am.



Demonstration of the best way to plant a cacao seedling



Mark with one of the rhinos in the SRS



Children of the cacao farmers living around the border of BBS

ALL PHOTOGRAPHY MARK SAINSBURY

I had spent the day with the heroic rangers of the Rhino Protection Units in Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park. Sitting and talking with them, and walking together through the jungle, I got a taste of what their everyday conditions are like. Hearing of their experiences in the forest, their armed skirmishes with poachers, and brushes with leeches and marauding elephants, I decided to keep my complaints from the previous night's hotel experience to myself.

As I spent more time with them over the next few days, I realised that the job of the RPUs is not only tough, it is amazingly varied. As well as seeking out snares, poachers and loggers on their patrols, the RPUs collect field data, logging every tree marking, midden and footprint they find; run workshops in villages teaching school children and villagers the value of the wildlife that surrounds them; and gather intelligence on illegal activities and local corruption through a network of informers and contacts.

Most of this work is only possible with the trust and goodwill of the local communities that surround the National Parks. I was enormously impressed at how the RPUs, lead in BBS by the wonderful Arief Rubianto, had forged positive links with these groups through their community programme. A cornerstone of this is a very successful scheme to train local farmers. Participants are taught about the latest appropriate agricultural practices and the use of organic fertilizers, and are introduced to new crop varieties and grafting techniques. Farmers are told how and where to plant their crops so as to minimise potential crop raiding and damage by mega-herbivores. The RPUs take the damage rhinos - and for that matter elephants - can do to villages and their crops extremely seriously, knowing the harm that can be done to local attitudes towards wildlife.

Through their holistic approach to conservation, the RPUs have overcome the initial wariness of some villages to win their confidence and support; the RPUs now have eyes and ears everywhere.

Before my trip, I had of course read several SRI Trustee reports on the wonderful impact of the RPUs throughout the National Parks of Indonesia and was familiar with the impressive statistics describing their spectacular successes in driving down incidents of poaching, logging and encroachment. But reports and stats can only tell you so much, and now that I've seen the successes for myself, I feel both humble and proud. Humble because I still flinch at a cockroach, let alone the sight of an armed poacher, and proud that as a Trustee of SRI I am lucky enough to be able to play a small part in the continued success of the courageous RPUs.