

RHINO POACHING
IN THE UPPER MAMAS VALLEY
OF GUNUNG LEUSER NATIONAL PARK

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By: Michael Griffiths

This report is based largely on the experiences and observations of the writer, who has spent almost one and a half years photographing for the WWF Indonesia Programme in the Upper Mamas area. Additional information was obtained from discussions with assistants of Nico van Strein, who worked on a rhino research project in the valley from 1975 through 1980. These assistants have subsequently made trips to the area, and their observations on poaching are incorporated here. Use also has been made of van Strein's monograph on "The Rhinos of Gunung Leuser National Park".

Rhino poaching in the upper Mamas began almost 40 years ago, so we really have no indication of what the original population in the area might have been. During the five years that van Strein was carrying out his research in the upper Mamas, rhino poaching was effectively eliminated. In the early 1980s, however, rhino poaching once again became rampant. Initially, poaching activities were concentrated around the salt springs in the southern headwaters, but as the rhinos there were hunted out, the poachers began moving downstream and trapping in areas around other salt licks. Intermittent poaching continued in the southern headwaters, however, particularly by armed hunters.

By the late 1980s, the rhino populations in the upper regions of the upper Mamas had been decimated, falling from an estimated twelve animals to about five.

At the same time, poachers began using a norther entrance route into the Upper Mamas valley, and for at least two years they were able to trap rhinos there without interruption. During that period, they effectively wiped out the best rhino population in the valley.

Around the beginning of 1990, the poachers moved upstream and to the west, and began to trap the last known unmolested group of rhinos in the Mamas. Four of their traps were discovered and triggered by the author's party, but at least one rhino was killed -- a female with a calf.

In addition to trapping, several groups of armed hunters have entered the valley with the intention of killing rhinos. At least three parties of armed hunters entered the valley in 1990.

When van Strein did his studies, there were an estimated 39 rhinos in the Upper Mamas. Today, there are only 13 at most. This is significant because it means the chances of the population building again are becoming increasingly remote. If the present rate of poaching goes unchecked, then we can expect to lose at

least another three rhinos by the end of 1991 - almost 25 percent of the remaining population.

Conclusion

Very few people derive a living from hunting rhinos (perhaps six men in the west of the Alas). Therefore, it is not a significant social problem, but rather an ecological one. Armed hunters are not considered to be dependent on rhinos for making their living. In fact, they may represent a class rather better off than most.

If it is desired to stop rhino poaching, it is also necessary to catch the perpetrators of these acts. These men are a storehouse of information, and if poaching is merely suspected through a series of fear campaigns, then in time the poachers will return and carry on with their business. To be caught, there must be proof of their activities, and perhaps here a person's illegal presence in the valley would be proof enough, since there appears to be no other source of wealth (such as rotan, birds nests, or fish) other than rhinos that might attract people to the valley.

Careful monitoring of who enters and leaves the valley would ultimately bring dividends, but ideally evidence of man actively hunting in the valley would be more convincing.

Finally, if all the pawangs (master hunters) are known and their activities stopped, then in time the knowledge they have gained of both the land and the techniques of trapping will be lost. With no trained apprentices to carry on, this vicious cycle of death and ultimately extinction could be broken.