

OPERATION JAVAN RHINO:

Providing A Safety Net For A Species

Have You Ever Heard of a Javan Rhino?

Raise your hand if you didn't know that there are actually five species of rhinos. Most people (even animal lovers!) know that there are black and white rhinos in Africa, but are surprised to learn that rhinos also live in the grasslands and jungles of Asia. There are three different rhino species in Asia, and one of these, the Javan rhino, is actually the rarest land mammal in the world!

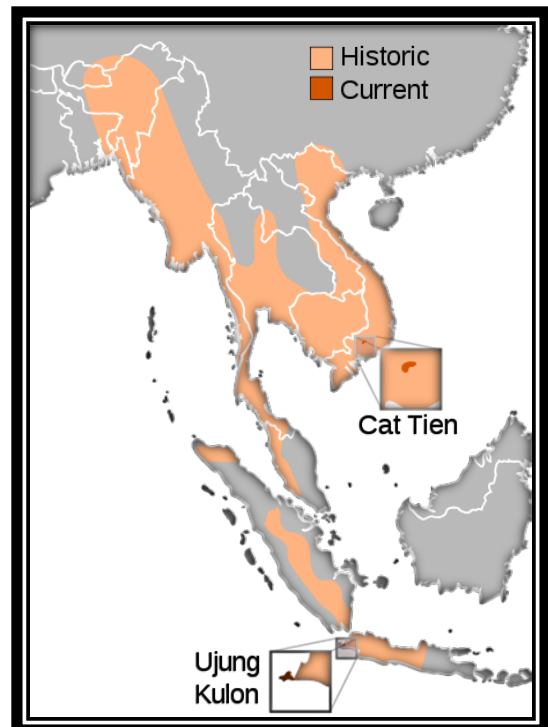


Do you know what type of rhino this is?

Where Do Javan Rhinos Live? How Many Are There?

The name "Javan rhino" isn't really correct – or at least, it didn't used to be correct. The Javan rhino's Latin name is *Rhinoceros sondaicus*, which means the rhino once lived throughout Sunda (a much larger area of Indonesia). But even that doesn't convey how widespread the Javan rhino once was. This little known species once ranged from Assam and Bengal in India, eastward through Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and southwards to the Malay Peninsula and the islands of Sumatra and Java.

Today, the Javan rhino is classified as Critically Endangered under the IUCN Red List, meaning that the species is facing an extremely high risk of extinction in the wild. There are just two known populations of Javan rhino remaining. Ujung Kulon National Park on the island of Java in Indonesia



holds between 38-44 rhinos, based on a 2008 census. The existence of a second population in Vietnam is less certain. The Cat Loc part of the Cat Tien National Park in southern Vietnam may hold another five animals, arguably a different subspecies, but there have been no reported sightings or photos in the last three years and one rhino has been found deceased (likely killed by a poacher) in the last year.

Javan rhinos are on the verge of extinction and most people don't even know they exist.

Why Are Javan Rhinos So Rare?

Like other rhino species, Javan rhinos are facing extinction because so many of them have been killed by poachers. Poachers kill rhinos to remove their horns, which are used in traditional Asian medicine as a pain and fever reducer. (There is no scientific evidence that rhino horn works for this purpose.) Selling and buying rhino horn is illegal, but people still do it because the price for illegal rhino horn is very high.

Poaching of Javan rhinos has actually been decreasing for a while, but at the same time, more and more people have moved into areas where Javan rhinos normally live. The small island of Java has more people living on it than any other island in the world. People have cleared land and destroyed large swaths of forest that the Javan rhino needs to survive, and this has also led to a significant decrease in the rhino population.

What Do Javan Rhinos Look Like? And How Do They Behave?

Because Javan rhinos are extremely rare and extremely shy, and because they mostly live in dense, rainforest, it is very difficult to find one in the wild. This means that the Javan rhino is the least studied of the five rhino species. There isn't a single Javan rhino in a zoo anywhere in the world, so scientists aren't able to study this species in captivity. Field researchers have to rely on indirect techniques like camera trapping and fecal analysis to monitor population and individual health and to learn about the rhinos' behavior in the wild.



Lowland Rainforest in Ujung Kulon National Park

We do know that the Javan rhino belongs to the same genus as the Indian rhinoceros. Like the Indian rhino, the Javan rhino has just one horn and grey skin folds that resemble armor. However, at between 2,000 to 5,060 pounds (900 - 2,300 kilograms) and standing 5 to 5.5 feet (1.5 - 1.7 meters) tall at the shoulder, the Javan rhino is much smaller than the Indian rhino. Hence, the Javan rhino is also called the Lesser one-horned rhino, while the Indian rhino is called the Greater one-horned rhino. The Javan rhino is the second smallest of all rhino species (after the Sumatran) – but of course, they're still much bigger than you and I!

Male Javan rhinos have a single horn that can grow almost one foot long. Females either have a very small horn, or not horn at all. Like all Asian rhinos, the Javan rhino has long, dagger-shaped lower incisor teeth which are very sharp and can be used in fighting.

We don't know exactly how long Javan rhinos live, but their life span is estimated at 30 – 40 years. Females probably reach sexual maturity at 5 – 7 years of age, and males probably reach sexual maturity around 10 years of age. Female Javan rhinos give birth to one calf at a time, most likely every two to three years. We believe that the gestation period is similar to other rhino species, which means that Javan rhino moms are probably pregnant for 15 or 16 months before giving birth!

Javan rhinos seem to be more willing to eat different types of plants than other rhino species. In the tropical rain forest where the species now survives, it is a pure browser, and plucks leaves and branches from a variety of trees to eat. But it is possible that the Javan rhino was a mixed feeder (eating both browse and grass) in other parts of its historic range where the species is generally believed to have occupied more lowland areas, especially along rivers.

The Javan rhino is largely solitary, although calves stay with their mothers after birth, for up to two years. And sometimes Javan rhinos gather in a group at a mud wallow or salt lick (a small hot spring where water full of minerals seeps or bubbles out of the ground).



Javan Rhino Mud Wallow

Wallowing in mud holes forms a large part of the Javan rhino's day. This helps the rhinos cool off in the hot jungle, keeps their skin in good condition, and helps to remove parasites and biting insects.

Based on research carried out in Ujung Kulon National Park, it is thought that males have larger ranges than females (up to 30 square miles!) and are much more territorial, although there is little evidence they actively defend their territory by fighting. Instead, male rhinos mark their territories with urine, feces, tree

scrapes, and twisted saplings. A rhino passing through a new area will then use its excellent sense of smell to detect these markings and will know that the territory "belongs" to another rhino.

What Are People Doing to Protect Javan Rhinos?

In Ujung Kulon National Park, the International Rhino Foundation, and our partner, the Indonesian Rhino Foundation, operate four Rhino Protection Units, elite anti-poaching teams that we call RPUs. RPUs are highly-trained, four-person teams. They spend at least 15 days each month patrolling and camping in the park. RPUs remove traps and snares set by poachers to catch animals, arrest illegal intruders, including poachers, and investigate crime scenes.

RPU members come from local Indonesian villages in the area surrounding the park. Many people apply to become RPU members, but it's a tough job and not everyone can handle it! People who apply to join the RPUs must pass running, swimming, and hiking tests before joining the training program.

Rhino Protection Unit members are extremely brave and dedicated to protecting rhinos. They have to spend lots of time away from their families, living and working in very difficult conditions, and are sometimes threatened by poachers. But because of their efforts, not a single Javan rhino has been lost to poaching in 14 years.

Even though the Rhino Protection Units have been very successful, the fact that there is only one main population in one location means that Javan rhinos face a significant risk of extinction from a single natural disaster or disease. Ujung Kulon National Park sits on a tiny peninsula, jutting into the sea between Java and Sumatra. To the west is Krakatau, one of the most active and destructive volcanoes on the planet. (Ujung Kulon and much of Java were wiped out by the eruption of Krakatau in 1883, one of the most violent volcanic eruptions in modern times.)

Several organizations (including the International Rhino Foundation, the Indonesian Rhino Foundation, World Wide Fund for Nature – Indonesia, and the Government of Indonesia) are working together to expand the habitat available to Javan rhinos. Our hope is that when we expand the amount of suitable habitat available to Javan rhinos, they will be able to breed more and the population will grow. We then plan to eventually take some rhinos out of Ujung Kulon and move them to a second, separate habitat. This will be an “insurance” population, meaning that if there is a disaster in Ujung Kulon and we lose a number of animals there, we will not lose the entire species.

To make the expanded habitat area more suitable for Javan rhinos, we will plant more of the rhinos' favorite foods, increase the supply of water and mud wallows, creating paths for rhinos to reach the area, and continue to monitor and protect the rhinos.



RPUs members look for rhino signs, including dung, to track and identify rhinos and to protect them.

How Can You Help?

Spread the word! In spite of being the rarest large mammal on earth, the Javan rhino remains the lesser-known rhino...except for you! Now that you know more about Javan rhinos and the threats they face, you can tell your friends and family members. When more people know about and care about Javan rhinos, they can tell their governments to crack down on illegal poaching and illegal wildlife trade, and can contribute money to help protect rhinos and other endangered species.

Visit www.rhinos-irf.org for more information on Javan rhinos and other species.