

# CONSERVATION HOTLINE

Garry Hamilton



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## Rarest of the Rare

**W**ITH HABITATS RANGING FROM JUNGLES OF DENSE RATTAN and leafy palms to pristine coral reefs, Ujung Kulon National Park is an important refuge for Indonesia's vanishing wildlife. The 190,000-acre reserve at the western tip of Java shelters 263 species of birds, five primate species, leopards, barking deer, flying lemurs, civets, crocodiles, and pythons. But Ujung Kulon's most valuable treasure, and the key reason it was named a World Heritage Site in 1992, is its population of Javan rhinoceroses, the rarest of the five living rhino species.

The Javan rhino (above) once ranged from India to eastern Java. Seventeenth-century explorers told of rhinos wandering the streets of Jakarta and lining the riverbanks. But hunting and human population growth took a drastic toll. By 1935, no Javan rhinos were thought to exist outside Ujung Kulon; today, 40 to 60 individuals are estimated to live there, and another 15 or so have been discovered in Vietnam's Nam Cat Tien National Park.

Efforts to protect the Java population have been hampered by a number of obstacles, including the rhino's shyness and its tendency to inhabit dense vegetation. In 1991, New Zealander Mike Griffiths began an elaborate two-year study in Ujung Kulon on behalf of the Indonesian branch of the

World Wide Fund for Nature. He set 34 self-activated cameras along established wildlife paths to photograph the animals in remote sites. Of the hundreds of photos that were produced, 165 were of rhinos, resulting in identification of 27 individuals. "The good news," Griffiths says, "is that most of the females we photographed had calves."

Still, the Javan rhino remains in a precarious position. Indonesia's human population of 110 million continues to creep ever closer to the once-remote Ujung Kulon reserve. How to ensure the species' survival is under debate. In 1991, Indonesia's Directorate General of Forest Protection and Nature Conservation announced plans for a captive-breeding program that would, with luck, help establish new rhino populations in the wild.

Griffiths, however, says his photo survey shows that Ujung Kulon hasn't reached its carrying capacity and that tampering with the existing population could cause more harm than good. In his final report, which was published in May 1993, he urged Indonesia to improve park security and to continue to monitor the rhino's numbers. "When you know you have a growing population," he explains, "then you can consider taking two or three animals away."

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