

## Rhino Protection Units: the front line for ensuring survival of Indonesia's critically endangered rhinos

The Rhino Protection Units (RPUs) are a unique collaboration of government officers and community members that work in Bukit Barisan Selatan, Way Kambas and Ujung Kulon National Parks to ensure the security and management of ecosystems. These brave and committed individuals leave their families behind and sometimes put their lives on the line to protect rhinos.

Sectionov (Inov) | Rhino Protection Unit Programme, International Rhino Foundation

### OPERATION JAVAN RHINO: Providing A Safety Net For A Species

#### Update... Update... Update

In late 2010, working in conjunction with the International Rhino Foundation, Save the Rhino ran an appeal to raise funds for the creation of 4,000 hectares of extended habitat for Javan rhinos. We're delighted to report that the appeal raised over £7,500 (including €5,000 from Stuttgart Zoo, €2,000 from the Foundation Friends of the Safaripark Beekse Bergen in Hilvarenbeek, £118 from ZSL Whipsnade and a number of individual donors). We added £5,000 from our own core funds and were able to send £12,558 for the development of the Javan Rhino Study and Conservation Area.

**A huge thank you to everyone who donated to the appeal.**

The Rhino Protection Units (RPUs) face challenges and dangers on a daily basis. In completing their patrols, RPUs must often walk for days on end and face an ever-present risk from hunters. A few years ago, for example, an RPU working in Way Kambas National Park was shot at by hunters. Equally perilous can be efforts to deliver poaching suspects from the base camp to the police station. One RPU member recalls: 'Each of us used a big plastic bottle to help us float and swim across the river. We started to cross the river at 6 pm, almost dark. Unfortunately, as we started to cross, we realised that the current was much higher and stronger than we had thought. We were swept down the river and we just had to float along, using the plastic bottles, trying to survive. We were in the river for more than five hours before we were able to climb out and make it to the checkpoint. It was terrifying'.

Encountering rhino, whether Javan or Sumatran, is not a common occurrence for the RPUs; both species are solitary and very rare. When sightings do occur, it is like a bonus for the RPUs but it can also be dangerous, especially if the rhino's arrival is somewhat unannounced. One of the RPUs working in Ujung Kulon National Park recalls an encounter with a Javan rhino that visited their fly camp twice in one night: 'At midnight a Javan rhino came to the camp looking aggressive. As a reflex, we all tried to climb the nearest tree. For about 20 minutes the rhino explored our camp until it slowly decided to leave. After waiting to be sure it was gone, one by one we came

down from the trees. But it was not long before, suddenly, from behind our camp the Javan rhino came again this time with even more aggression'. The RPUs take such occurrences in their stride acknowledging that, whilst it's not an easy job, they are proud to be a member of the RPUs.

In Indonesia there is a rainy season and a dry season and in the past this has brought a whole other set of challenges for the RPUs. During the rainy season, it is relatively easy for the RPUs to find fresh, clean water to drink, but during the dry season, it is very hard to find fresh water. The water that the RPUs had to use during the dry season was often muddy and polluted. There was no choice. They had to use that water to survive. As a result, every dry season, at least one or two members of the RPU become sick, and have to miss patrol days. In 2009, however, with the help of Save the Rhino, we obtained water filters and the RPUs can now easily turn muddy, polluted water into clean water that is safe to drink. They don't get sick anymore.

In spite of these challenges, the RPUs have had some major successes. For example, through intelligence operations, the RPUs are able proactively to prevent poaching attempts before they take place and closely cooperate with the police to ensure the prosecution of wildlife criminals whilst the RPUs' community outreach initiatives are working hard to increase the incentives for habitat and rhino protection so that everybody, especially rhinos, wins.

### Grants

Save the Rhino has given a series of grants to Indonesian rhino programmes over the last few months: a total of £12,376 for RPUs protecting Sumatran rhinos (£3,055 raised by David Back for giving up alcohol for six months; \$5,000 from the Taiwan Forestry Bureau, £5,000 from our own core funds, and the remainder from the Simon Gibson Charitable Trust, Silver Jungle and other donors).



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