

## **Sumatran Rhino Protection In Leuser Ecosystem, Indonesia**

### **Rudi Hadiansyah Putra**

#### **Introduction**

The Future for Nature award for me was given in recognition of work done in protecting the largest remaining population of Sumatran Rhinos and in the expectation that I will continue to work on building the Sumatran Rhino populations in the Leuser Ecosystem in the northern part of the Sumatra Island. I dedicate this award to my team who continue to strive to save the rhinos of Leuser.

#### **The Sumatran Rhino**

The Sumatran Rhino is one of the rarest animals in the world. It now survives in just a few isolated populations in Sumatra and northern Borneo. The total world population is considered to be less than two hundred individuals, of which approximately 100 live in the Leuser Ecosystem – an expanse of forest covering almost 3 million hectares in Aceh and North Sumatran Provinces.

The Leuser Ecosystem is one of three places in Sumatra where there are still rhinos left. Several other areas in Sumatra, notably Kerinci Seblat National Park, which formerly had healthy populations, are now devoid of these iconic mammals. Poaching and habitat conversion have caused the decline in number of Sumatran rhinos in Indonesia, just as elsewhere in the world where formally they were abundant.

#### **Status**

The reason that the number of rhinos in Leuser have fared better than elsewhere is that for the last thirty years there has been a dedicated group of local people protecting the rhinos from poaching in its core area in the western mountain ranges of the Leuser Ecosystem. This long term effort has increased its population from around 50 individuals in 1990 to around 80 today. In other parts of the Leuser Ecosystem there is an estimated rhino population of 10-20 individuals. This number means that the Leuser Ecosystem supports the highest population of Sumatran rhinos in the world.

#### **How do we know?**

Counting rhinos is difficult owing to the remoteness of the terrain and the denseness of the forest in which they survive. But over the last decade the rhino patrol teams working under my supervision have shown definite indicators of an increasing population. When I began work only half of the core rhino area showed signs of rhinos. Today the entire core area shows regular rhino sign and in addition there are clear footprints of young rhinos. This last indicator was confirmed recently with the first video footage (taken by one of my anti-poaching teams) of a female and adolescent calf in the Leuser Ecosystem. With expanding range, increase in the density of rhino sign, and regular evidence of young rhinos it can safely be said the rhinos of Leuser are increasing in number and in range.

### Secrets of success

In carrying out rhino protection, monitoring, and research I have had to overcome considerable obstacles – especially in recent years – with uncertainty of funding always being a serious concern. The fact that I have managed to maintain a regular anti-poaching program is at least partly due to the great loyalty among my field staff and their willingness to work hard in a challenging environment, despite temporary shortages of resources.

Patrolling rhino habitat in the Leuser Ecosystem is currently the best way to protect these rhinos from poaching. Guarding poachers' entrance sites is not entirely effective because of the vast area of the ecosystem and its numerous points of access. From 2000 until today we uncovered several poaching attempts. These attempts were foiled by our team's quick response, the destruction of traps, and chasing the poachers out of the forest. I have been blessed with a highly dedicated team.

### The future

The key challenge now is to survey the forests beyond the core area and to work out how to deal with any remnant rhino populations that are as yet unstudied. I am currently conducting a study in northern Leuser, where I have successfully recorded rhino tracks but am still working to estimate the minimum rhino population in the area. There is also another area, in the east, which is believed to have a small rhino population. Hopefully the population can be protected and will gradually grow.

In addition, I will intensify the anti-poaching work. This is now even more important as publicity from a third party, concerning the rhinos of Leuser, has attracted the interests of poachers from as far away as Vietnam. Publication without intensive protection can only bring harm to the rhinos of Leuser. To this day we have been very careful to screen our publications until we can assure that the entire Leuser Ecosystem is well and intensively protected and the Sumatran rhinos are truly safe from poaching.

I sincerely hope that the work I am engaged in will result in a steadily increasing population of one of the world's rarest species, eventually to as many as 2000 individuals. That would truly be a great conservation success.



*Photo: Sumatran rhino in Leuser Ecosystem.  
Rhino population is growing well and it is imperative to protect the species.*