

A TRICKY RIVER CROSSING

Rhino Protection Units (RPU) are unique collaborations that combine government officials and community members in the effort to patrol and secure some of Indonesia's most important national parks. In addition to being critically endangered, Javan and Sumatran rhinos are 'flagship species' that represent other threatened wildlife such as tigers, elephants, tapirs, leopards and gibbons. By protecting rhinos, the RPUs help protect other threatened species and their habitats too.

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One day, while on patrol in the northern section of Way Kambas National Park, RPU #1 received a report of illegal logging activity. This was not unexpected, since similar reports had been received several days before from that area of the Park, which contains important Sumatran rhino habitat. Arriving at the reported location, the RPU team members heard the sounds of chainsaws, but they were quite far away. They followed the sounds, proceeding slowly, carefully, and crossing a small river along the way.

After three hours, the unit came upon the loggers. They could see that three people were cutting trees, each using a chainsaw. Unfortunately, two of the men heard the RPUs approaching and escaped into the forest, but the remaining logger was still cutting a tree when the team apprehended him. In interrogating him, they learned not only where he had come from, but also who was in charge of these illegal activities.

A member of RPU #1 used his walkie-talkie to contact the base camp and request to be picked up at an assigned check point. It would take at least four hours to reach the location, the route would not be an easy one and they would also be transporting their suspect in handcuffs, so the team decided to take a shortcut. The shortcut, however, would require crossing two rivers, the Way Nibung and Way Pegadungan. The second river was quite deep.

Fortunately, among the items confiscated from the suspect were a small boat and several large plastic gasoline containers. Seven people had to

cross the two rivers, but the boat could only hold three. Two RPU members accompanied the suspect in the boat, while the others were forced to swim, using the plastic containers as floats to help them cross the rivers. It's important to understand that the RPUs hate having to swim across rivers because they always seem to be infested with mosquitos and leeches. Unfortunately, there was no alternative.

The first river crossing began at six o'clock, just as the sun was setting, and it didn't help that the water was deeper and the current was stronger than they had expected. The swimmers were swept down the river and forced to float along, relying on the plastic containers to survive until being able to climb out on the opposite shore. In all, they spent more than five hours crossing both rivers, and finally reached the checkpoint at midnight. They were exhausted and, I'm willing to bet, the handcuffed suspect was probably terrified.

But the ordeal wasn't over. After arriving at the checkpoint, there was another three-hour boat trip – this time in the official RPU patrol boat – to the base camp, and then a drive to the National Park headquarters, where the suspect was handed over to the police.

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