

Rhino Poaching: are we losing the battle?

The increase in rhino poaching has certainly been receiving some worthy media attention of late. It is so disheartening to see that even with an increase in conservation awareness and so many NGO's operating both in the field and at the education level that we could be witnessing such an alarming level of trade in rhino horn. It appears that years of progress and effective conservation efforts can be so rapidly undone. Of course it is not just rhinos, the demand for wildlife products continues to rise driven largely by Chinese and Vietnamese markets.

To highlight the economic drive behind such trade, the claimed benefits of products such as rhino horn simply evolve with new generations; whatever sells! The current claim that rhino horn can cure a hangover of course has no scientific basis whatsoever but this ridiculous marketing ploy is enough to drive poachers to desperate measures to source rhino horn from wherever they can.

For those working in Asian rhino conservation we have been very saddened to learn of the poaching of almost 10 Greater one-horned rhino already this year. Several of these occurred in Kaziranga National Park, one of the most highly protected rhino populations in India. One of these rhino was also killed in Manas National Park. This rhino was one of 18 translocated from Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary to Manas as part of International Rhino Vision 2020, a project for which the Asian Rhino Project has provided support. Considerable work has been undertaken to educate local communities and instill value in wildlife in an attempt to protect these species and

the teams will continue to work hard to prevent further poaching incidents.

Poaching does not come without risks however and we have also recently been advised that a poacher in Orang National Park, India was killed in an exchange with the park's forest patrol team. This is not an isolated incident and poachers face considerable threat of being injured or killed when they are attempting to kill rhinos in protected areas.

Rhino protection Units have been operating in Indonesia for almost a decade and in the last 7 years not one single rhino has been poached. These elusive rhinos present a greater challenge to poachers and they also have considerably smaller horns but with an increased demand we do have to wonder if we are on borrowed time with these populations as well. We were alarmed to hear that a group of Vietnamese poachers were arrested earlier in the year in Gunung Leuser National Park, Sumatra. Their likely target was rhinos. This area has recently been identified as potentially holding a considerable population of Sumatran rhino and an increase in RPU and protection strategies is urgent. ARP will be assisting to fund some of these initiatives and we hope that a poaching incident can be avoided.

With the current CITES convention underway, and the upcoming Sumatran Rhino Crisis summit, the issue of rhino poaching will remain hot on the agenda. The problem must be tackled at many levels and we hope that increased awareness, public support and NGO driven initiatives can help halt the trade.

Sumatran Rhino Crisis Summit

The summit, themed 'Last Chance to Act', has been organized to facilitate urgent discussion and regional collaboration for protection of Sumatran rhinos.

With numbers having steadily declined since the early 90s, the situation is now considered critical. Urgent efforts must be co-ordinated or we will see the eventual extinction of this species.

Funded by Sime Darby Foundation, Wildlife Reserves Singapore, WWF, Borneo Rhino Alliance, LEAP and Taman Safari Indonesia, the summit will be held in Singapore from April 1-4.

Asian Rhino Project will be represented by both Kerry Crosbie and Clare Campbell, with Patron Peter Hall also likely to attend.

The delegation will include stakeholders from all regions, including government and NGO's, scientists, field conservationists, breeding specialists and current and potential donors.

We hope to report significant outcomes from the meeting and to identify key areas for ARP's future support for Sumatran rhino projects.