

Rhino Conservation Awards

Since 2012, the annual Rhino Conservation Awards have served to recognise the remarkable individuals and organisations that dedicate themselves to protecting Africa's rhino populations.



As the website explains: 'The key to the success of protecting the rhino will lie in the dedication of all the people involved in the fight against rhino poaching in Africa. These people often do selfless and unrecognized work to save our natural heritage that is in danger of being lost forever.

'Sometimes this happens in the face of physical danger, political opposition and financial constraints. These factors make the contribution of each role player even more worthy of recognition – hence the reason for these awards

The primary objective of the awards is to give recognition to the winners, runners up and all nominees, and in doing so raise awareness of what is done in the war against rhino poaching thereby providing motivation to involved role players to keep fighting to ensure the rhino's survival'.

www.rhinoconservationawards.org

The state of the rhino

The daily gory reports of rhino poaching incidents have tailed off as the media grows jaded, and South Africa's Department of Environmental Affairs has stopped publishing fortnightly figures on poaching incidents and rhino-related arrests. It can be hard to step back and get an overall view of what's happening with rhinos. In this article therefore, we aim to provide a quick summary of what's happening in Africa and Asia.

Cathy Dean | Director, SRI



Africa

African rhino numbers are collated every two to three years by the IUCN SSC African Rhino Specialist Group (AIRSG), held in advance of CITES' Conference of the Parties. The last CoP was held in 2013, and therefore the most up-to-date rhino population numbers we have are correct as at 31 December 2012. Overall totals then were 20,405 Southern white rhinos and 5,055 black rhinos. Southern white rhinos are currently classified by the IUCN Red List as Near Threatened, though that seems likely to change next time the subspecies is assessed; black rhinos are Critically Endangered.

In view of the rhino poaching crisis, the AIRSG asks that country totals no longer be published. Some individual parks and reserves choose to publicise information about rhino numbers in their own areas, perhaps in order to attract tourists; however we prefer not to quote population sizes in specific locations. The next CITES CoP is in September-October 2016, and the next AIRSG meeting is in February 2016. That meeting will therefore collate rhino numbers as at 31 December 2015.

Until we have these data, it is not possible fully to assess the impact of the poaching crisis on overall rhino numbers. However, we do have a good estimate of the annual number of rhinos killed by poachers in each country throughout sub-Saharan Africa up to the end of 2014. It is clear that South Africa, which has by far the largest rhino population, is the hardest hit (with 1,215 rhinos poached during 2014), though Kenya is level-pegging in terms of the percentage of its rhino population that have been killed during the last two years.

From these poaching statistics, the AIRSG's Scientific Officer has calculated that if poaching continues to accelerate at the same rate it has done, then – depending on the underlying birth rate – 2015 could be the tipping point: the year in which poaching and natural mortalities overtake births, i.e. overall rhino numbers will go into decline. It is depressing to contemplate the careful work of the last two decades in building up African rhino population numbers and distribution being undone by the poaching crisis.

Asia

The picture for each of the three Asian rhino species differs

Greater one-horned rhinos

Greater one-horned rhinos, which are also known as Indian rhinos, are now found only in India and Nepal. As at 31 December 2012, there were 3,333 animals distributed across three locations in Nepal (Chitwan National Park, Bardia National Park and Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve) and in three states of India: Assam, West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. Greater one-horned rhinos are classified by the IUCN Red List as Vulnerable.

The strongholds for Greater one-horned rhinos are in Chitwan National Park and in Kaziranga National Park in Assam. Since the beginning of the 20th century, numbers have steadily grown in Kaziranga, although the Park has also been enlarged over the years, it has exceeded its ecological carrying capacity. In 2005, therefore, Indian Rhino Vision 2020 was launched, a partnership between the Assam Forest Department, the Bodoland Territorial Council, WWF, the International Rhino Foundation and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.



Its goal is to have a wild population of at least 3,000 Greater one-horned rhinos in the Indian state of Assam—spread over seven protected areas—by the year 2020: an ambitious rhino range and population expansion programme, that would translocate animals from Kaziranga and Pobitora Wildlife Reserve and restock areas that had lost all their rhinos during previous poaching crises. Substantial capacity building, infrastructure development and community engagement would be required in each new area.



Sumatran rhinos

Sumatran rhinos number only around 100 animals, of which three are living in captivity in Sabah (Malaysia) on the island of Borneo. The remainder are in Sumatra, Indonesia, although camera trap images show that at least one animal survives in Kalimantan, the southern (Indonesian) part of Borneo.

The Sumatran populations are distributed across three sites: Gunung Leuser, Bukit Barisan Selatan and Way Kambas National Parks.

No Sumatran rhinos have been recorded as poached since 2006, but the main threats to the species are habitat loss and population fragmentation. They are classified as Critically Endangered.

Javan rhinos

Javan rhinos have now been comprehensively surveyed and number between 58 and 61 animals; again, they are classified as Critically Endangered. They are all found in one location, in the western tip of Java (Indonesia), in Ujung Kulon National Park and the adjacent Gunung Honje area.

Perhaps the greatest risk facing them is a stochastic event such as disease or a tsunami, though with numbers so low, there is a risk of loss of genetic diversity.



Conservation award for Save the Rhino's Director



Congratulations to Cathy Dean, Director of Save the Rhino International, who is among the recipients of this year's Harry Messel Award for Conservation Leadership. Cathy is a member of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature Species Survival Commission (IUCN SSC) African Rhino Specialist Group (AFRSG). Pictured is Mike Knight (right), chair of the AFRSG accepting the award from Simon Stuart (left), SSC Chair, on her behalf.

Professor Harry Messel was the former long-standing Chair of the SSC Crocodile Specialist Group. The award, established in 2004 in his name, recognizes exemplary service to the SSC, especially from individuals who have made a specific contribution to species conservation on the ground or through their leadership, as part of the work of an SSC Specialist Group or Task Force.

Cathy's award is in recognition of her passionate and committed leadership of Save the Rhino International, greatly benefiting rhinoceros conservation in Africa and Asia, and her long-term support of the SSC African Rhino Specialist Group.