

# Javan rhinos

## Things are looking up



Living on the brink of extinction, the critically endangered Javan rhino (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*) numbers 57–61 individuals, and exists only in 76,300 ha in Indonesia's Ujung Kulon National Park (UKNP).

**Susie Ellis, PhD** | Executive Director, International Rhino Foundation

**I**t is perhaps earth's most threatened terrestrial mammal, and one of two Asian rhino species in serious trouble. Javan rhinos have been monitored and protected by the UKNP park authority, WWF Indonesia, and Yayasan Badak Indonesia (YABI or the Rhino Foundation of Indonesia) for the past three decades, with no recorded instances of poaching.

In addition to the poaching risk, the species' single-site location is the greatest threat, making it susceptible to disease and/or natural disasters such as volcanic eruption and earthquakes.

There has been good news for Javan rhinos this past year. Previous population

estimates suggested that between 38 and 44 animals lived in the Park.

Using camera

traps donated by the International Rhino Foundation and WWF so that full coverage of the Park could be achieved, UKNP camera trap experts documented between 58 and 61 rhinos. An independent team from the IUCN Asian Rhino Specialist Group verified these figures.

For the past three years, YABI has employed >120 local people to remove Arenga palm in a 5,000-ha area in the eastern portion of the park called the Javan Rhino Study and Conservation Area (JRSCA). Arenga palm is an invasive species that chokes out rhino food plants. Working in the JRSCA area allows local people to benefit from the Park and to learn more about Javan rhino conservation efforts. Without the sun-blocking effect of Arenga,

rhino food plants can regenerate rather quickly. Even with only 78 ha now cleared, the JRSCA area already has attracted nine new rhinos, including a cow and her calf.

The rest of the JRSCA project is nearly complete. An 8 km fence has been constructed at the border of the project to protect the rhinos from diseases carried by domestic cattle, which still wander into the Park to graze. The JRSCA is planned as the launching site for rhinos that will be moved to establish a second population in the species' historic range. Assessments of potential promising habitats have just been completed and the report is being finalised.

The challenges in UKNP are not unlike those facing many other protected areas – with limited resources and growing human populations,

there inevitably will be conflict. The buffer zone around the Park is home to 4,693 people in two communities. Currently, 50–81% of the buffer zone population lives in poverty. 46% depend on forest resources to survive and 90% of those are farmers. For conservation to be successful, alternative livelihoods need to be developed and efforts made to synergise stakeholders as new income-generating activities are developed. And, it must be done in a way that decreases the pressures on the Park's resources and also enhances the relationship between Park officials and local communities. Without good relationships, there is a risk of disturbance and potential rhino habitat degradation.

Four, four-man Rhino Protection Units (RPU) funded by the International Rhino Foundation (including contributions from Save the Rhino) and managed by YABI, are the backbone of protection for this species. RPUs comprise three local people hired after a rigorous selection process, and one park guard who has the authority to make arrests and carry a weapon. There are still significant illegal activities within the Park, including fishing, hunting / trapping and encroachment. There are four operational

RPU teams in place, this coming year, we hope to add two more units so that the new cleared area can be adequately patrolled and illegal activities further decreased in the Park.



Above: A Javan rhino and her calf caught on a camera trap

Main: Between 58–61 Javan rhinos are now estimated to survive

CAMERA TRAP IMAGE UJUNG KULON NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY AND THE INDONESIA MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT FORESTRY