

Sumatran rhinos

A 10-year plan for recovery

Fewer than 100 Sumatran rhinos survive on Earth, restricted now to Sumatra's Bukit Barisan Selatan (perhaps 24 animals), Gunung Leuser (approximately 24–30 animals), Way Kambas National Parks (perhaps as many as 35 animals), and a tiny handful of animals in central Kalimantan, Indonesia.

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Intensive Protection Zones are meant to be 'no go' zones, where people are not allowed to enter. Such areas have significantly enhanced security and monitoring

Poaching for horn for use in traditional Asian medicine caused the initial decline of the species, but now populations are primarily threatened by small

population effects, human encroachment, the potential for catastrophic events and increasingly, invasive plant species. And, the threat of poaching still looms large.

The 2013 estimate of Sumatran rhino numbers, based on surveys and density data, is now down to around 100 from an estimated 413–563 in 1995. A small population was lost from Kerinci Seblat National Park as recently as 2001; in Bukit Barisan Selatan, the range distribution has collapsed with the rhinos occupying no more than 30% of their former area. Only the population in Way Kambas appears to be slowly growing, but that is speculative and needs to be verified by surveys.

The 100 remaining Sumatran rhinos are distributed within 10 subpopulations; four of these number only between two and five animals, and none is thought to be larger than 35 individuals (Miller et al., 2015). No population is out of danger.

Concerned over the future of the species, over the past one-and-a-half years, stakeholders have convened a series of meetings to develop a ten-year strategic plan for the recovery of the Sumatran rhino in Indonesia, its last stronghold. The meetings were funded by Disney's Reverse the Decline fund. The plan lays out ambitious goals:

- By 2025, Sumatran rhinos will have experienced no net loss to the meta-population and the population is increasing at the three Intensive Protection Zones (Way

Kambas, Gunung Leuser, and Bukit Barisan Selatan National Parks) and the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary (SRS), relative to baseline data from the 2015 Population Viability Analysis (Miller et al., 2015) and confirmed by surveys to take place in 2016–17

- From 2016–2025, no additional forest cover is lost in rhino habitat, including park lands (including Intensive Protection Zones) and in rhino habitat outside of national parks in Aceh

Achieving those goals will involve a range of activities, including developing an alliance for Sumatran rhino conservation that works together to implement the strategy. A first step has been the development of a Sumatran Rhino Consortium, which meets quarterly, either in person or by telephone, to apprise all parties of progress and new developments. The partners are also raising funds to conduct intensive surveys in all the rhino areas.

A communications campaign has just been launched with the aim of building a constituency for rhino conservation in Indonesia. The campaign, targeting millennials, was launched by Disney 'Makers' visiting the SRS to see Sumatran rhinos, including new calf Delila ('Gift from God'), pictured above with Ratu. The Makers took lots of photos and recorded videos about rhinos that are posted on Instagram (see links opposite).

A critical part of the Sumatran rhino strategy is to continue and amplify protection and to try to reduce threats within the Parks, particularly the potential for poaching and human disturbance. Currently, Rhino Protection Units are operative in Way Kambas and Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park under IRF's partner Yayasan Badak Indonesia, and in the Gunung Leuser Ecosystem under Forum Konservasi Leuser and the Leuser International Foundation. There is a need for more protection units throughout the rhinos' range.

A fourth component, no less critical, is the need to manage Sumatran rhino

populations to optimize breeding and to produce as many babies as possible. This includes a range of activities from expanding the facilities at the SRS, utilising natural breeding and, as appropriate, artificial reproductive techniques, and enlarging the captive programme. It is also essential to monitor populations and translocate animals living in fragmented populations into larger populations or, if animals show a high reproductive potential, moving some individuals to the SRS to increase the programme's genetic diversity.

Using lessons learned in the conservation of African rhinos, creating Intensive Protection Zones within existing parks will also be critical for the species' recovery. Intensive Protection Zones are meant to be 'no go' zones, where people are not allowed to enter. Such areas have significantly enhanced security and monitoring systems in place, and would allow animals to live undisturbed and unharmed. In addition, the strategy calls for developing and implementing national and landscape level standards and capacity for rhino and forest status monitoring.

This is a critical time for Sumatran rhinos, and their future will be determined within the next decade. None of the activities laid out in the strategy will be sufficient on its own to recover the Critically Endangered Sumatran rhino. But if we can implement the plan as designed, we have a good shot at beginning to reverse the decline. It's an all-hands-on-deck crisis, requiring cooperation among government and private sectors, NGOs, local people, and utilising a wide variety of disciplinary expertise. Building on lessons learned in the recovery of other rhino species, such as the white and greater one-horned rhino, we know what must be done. Now, we just need the commitment of the Indonesian government and the international community, as well as the funding to implement the strategy.

References

Makers Links on Instagram:

www.instagram.com/p/Bira04uAooY/?hl=en

www.instagram.com/p/BlpTJFegye-/?hl=en

www.instagram.com/p/Blo9h_gZJM/?hl=en

www.instagram.com/p/BloLmhjAmsN/?hl=en

Miller, P.S., Lees, C., Ramono, W., Purwoto, A., Rubianto, A., Sectionov, Talukdar, B., and Ellis, S. (Eds.) 2015. *Population Viability Analysis for the Sumatran Rhino in Indonesia*. Apple Valley, MN: IUCN/SSC Conservation Breeding Specialist Group.



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