

An Inside Look at IRF's Indonesian Rhino Protection Units

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Rhino Protection Units (RPU) that patrol the tropical forests of Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park, Way Kambas National Park and Ujung Kulon National Park in Indonesia are generously supported by the American Association of Zoo Keepers annual Bowling for Rhinos program. These anti-poaching programs are managed collaboratively by the International Rhino Foundation, our local counterpart Yayasan Badak Indonesia (YABI), and Indonesia's Ministry of Forestry.

RPU are well-trained, four-man teams who patrol habitats critical to the survival of rhinos, tigers, elephants, tapirs and a variety of other threatened Asian wildlife. Seven RPU (28 men) are assigned to Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park, which covers approximately 3,600 km² and harbors Indonesia's second largest population of Sumatran rhinos, 40-50 tigers and as many as 500 elephants. Five RPU (20 men) are assigned to Way Kambas National Park, which covers approximately 1,000 km² and harbors the country's third largest population of rhino, 30-40 tigers, and between 150-200 elephants. Ujung Kulon is the smallest of the three national parks at about 760 km² of tropical forest habitat. Its forests are patrolled by four RPU (16 men) and are home to the last remaining population of Javan rhinos – perhaps 40-50 animals – on the planet. Javan tigers vanished from this region more than 40 years ago.

In total, more than 60 men work as RPU team members, which means that at least that many households have a vested interest – are considered stakeholders - in the conservation of native Indonesian wildlife. Each team member commits to between 15 and 20 days per month in the field. These are days away from their families, since the homes of most are quite distant from the parks they patrol, so commuting to work each day is out of the question. Anti-poaching patrols are also



(Left) RPU with a wire snare. (Right) Poachers in Way Kambas National Park.
Photos courtesy of the International Rhino Foundation.

total immersion experiences if they are to be successful, so RPU team members must be comfortable living in the forest much of the time. In the course of their work, this relatively small group of dedicated individuals is responsible for protecting threatened wildlife over an area of more than 5,000 km², which is greater than half the size of Yellowstone National Park. On an average day's patrol, an RPU will cover nearly 18 miles of forest - much of it on foot!

One of the highest priorities during patrols is the detection and destruction of traps. Poachers traditionally set snares made of heavy metal cable and dig pit-traps in hopes of catching Indonesia's large terrestrial mammals. For example, in 2011, RPUs covered essentially all of Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park, finding and inactivating a rhino snare, eight tiger snares, five deer snares, and four large pit traps. As a result, 43 people were convicted of poaching and served time in jail.

RPU members are also always on the lookout for rhino sign – footprints, wallows, dung and plants that have been fed upon – which they encounter on a fairly frequent basis. Direct sightings of rhino, by comparison, are rare, as they remain among the most elusive of the world's large tropical forest mammals. To give you some idea of how cryptic Asian rhinos can be, RPUs saw only two Sumatran rhinos last year in Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park and one in Way Kambas National Park. They did not see a single Javan rhino in Ujung Kulon National Park, despite finding footprints in more than 300 localities, happening upon more than 30 wallows and piles of dung, and detecting nearly 70 instances of rhino feeding on vegetation.

Despite the lack of direct contact with the animals they are hired to protect, RPU team members serve as faithful ambassadors for native wildlife to local communities that border the parks. An important part of their job is to engage the public and reduce human encroachment on protected areas. In 2011, RPUs met with approximately 260 families in nine villages, spoke to at least 700 students at 10 schools, and gave two formal presentations that drew audiences of more than 1,300 people. The field team and the PR department are essentially one in the same.

It's easy to sing the praises of such dedicated individuals, but it's also important to hear how they regard their work in their own words. Dr. Bibhab Kumar Talukdar, IRF's Asian Program Coordinator, and Sectionov, IRF's Indonesian liaison, recently interviewed several RPU members. Their profiles and stories provide an inside look at the life of a rhino guardian.

RPU Profile – Meliaro Hulu, Senior RPU Member, Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park

Age: 44

Marital Status: Married with two children

Home: Labuhan Ratu (500 km from Bukit Barisan Selatan)

Years of Service: 17; hired by first RPU on August 31, 1995 and stationed at Kerinci Seblat National Park

Previous Employment: Keeper, Sumatran Rhino Trust (1988-1995)

As a keeper for the Sumatran Rhino Trust, Meliaro took part in the capture of seven rhinos to establish captive breeding programs. These included Emi and Ipuh, who were sent to the Cincinnati Zoo and produced three offspring; Torgamba, the male who died at the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary last year; and Bina, one of three females currently at the sanctuary.

Meliaro notes several challenges to being an RPU team member. He and his co-workers often encounter poachers who have greater numbers and superior weapons. There is also the challenging mountainous topography of the region in which they work. Finally, there's always a danger of encountering elephants and tigers during their patrols. Records at Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park include human deaths attributable to these species.

Meliaro is very proud of his many years of service and considers his RPU as the "best team ever on patrol for wildlife in Indonesia." His family is also very proud that he was selected for this very important and sometimes dangerous job.

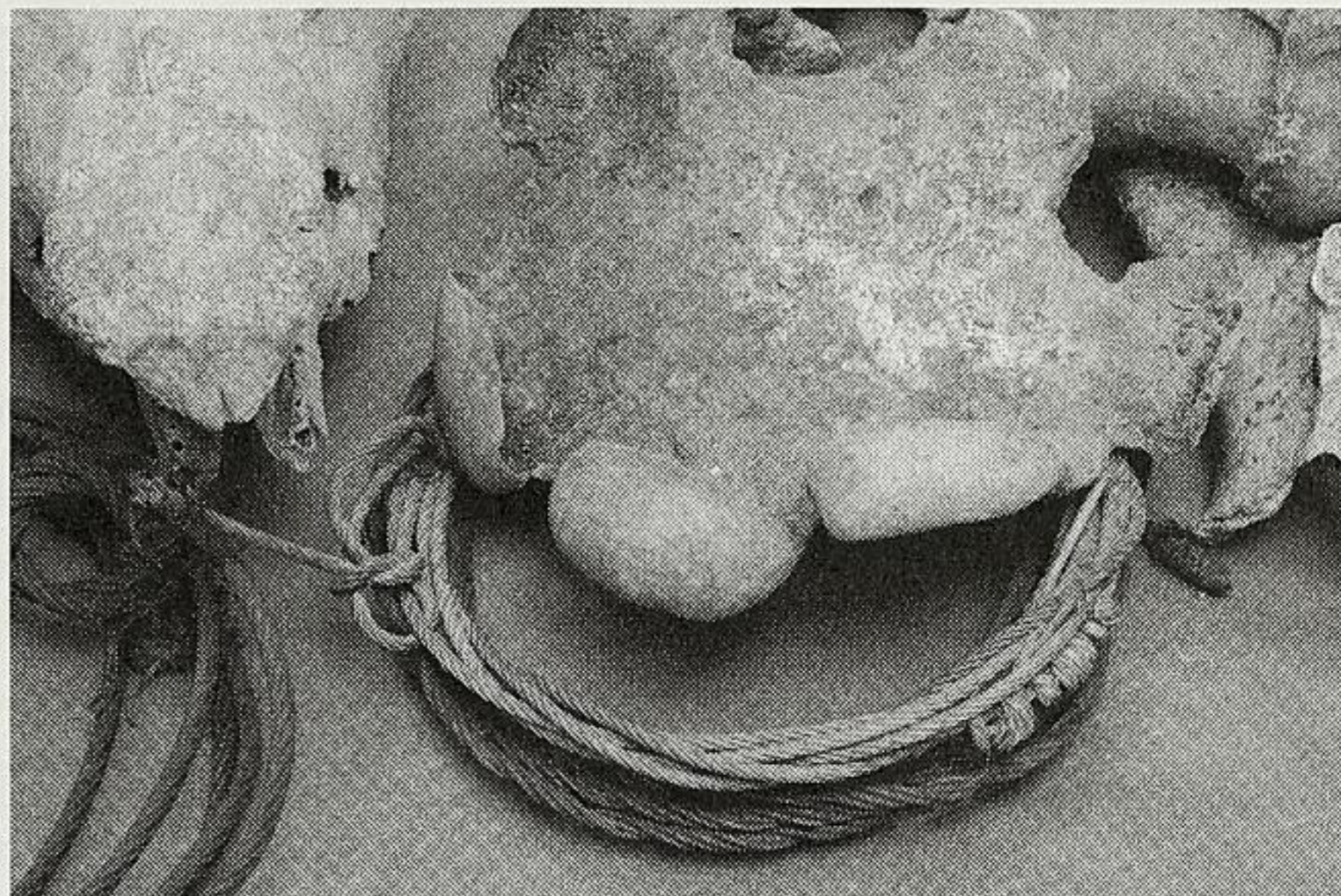
Fighting with Poachers

A story told by Muslimin and Agus Riyadi (Way Kambas National Park), translated by Sectionov

Last year we were on patrol in the area of Way Kambas National Park known as Tompul RPTN

Susukan Baru. We received information from an intelligence unit that they had identified a group of six poachers from the village of Rantau Jaya Udik. These poachers were special. They used dogs, which is a technique only used in Way Kambas, not Bukit Barisan Selatan or Ujung Kulon.

As we normally do, we started our patrol from the road and hiked into the forest. It took one full day of walking to reach the location we were given, so it was getting dark and we had to decide the best strategy for catching the poachers. We knew that they would begin to hunt in the evening and continue until morning. After finding a trail through the forest that the poachers might use, we decided to spread out along it and wait for them.

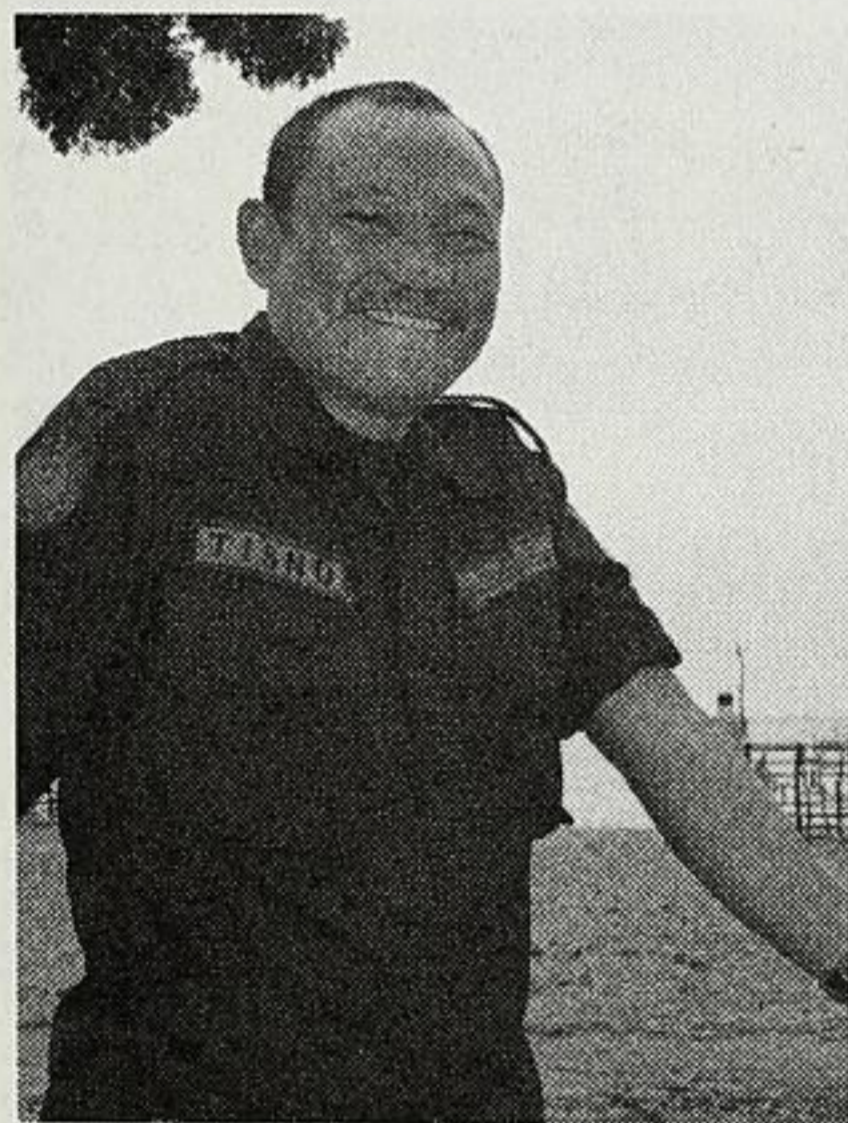


Heavy wire cable snare. Photo courtesy of the International Rhino Foundation.

We waited almost all night, mosquitoes swarming and biting us the entire time. We felt a bit afraid, since we believed the poachers outnumbered us, but being afraid is natural and probably made us more alert. We couldn't smoke because that would give away our position. After six hours of waiting, a team member on the west flank signaled that the poachers were coming our way.

We could tell right away that they had been successful, carrying the carcasses of deer and wild pig. There were six of them and four of us. When they got close enough, the head of our unit fired warning shots into the air. We all jumped out and the fight began. It was difficult fighting with the poachers while the dogs were trying to bite us, but we were prepared and they were surprised, so we were able to subdue them. Only one managed to escape and none of us were injured.

Our mission accomplished, we could smile, knowing that this is the life of an RPU.



Bibhab Kumar Talukdar's interview with Tisno, Ujung Kulon National Park

Talukdar: How old are you?

Tisno: 46 years old.

Talukdar: Are you married?

Tisno: Yes, my wife's name is Dedeh Narsiah.

Talukdar: Do you have children?

Tisno: Yes, I have four and will get a new baby next month, so I will have five children. I have one daughter 17 year old and three son (15, seven and five years old). I like to have big family. Next year, if possible, I would like to have one more baby ... if possible.

Talukdar: Where do you and your family live?

Tisno: In Pandeglang, one of capital district of Banten Province, Indonesia.

Talukdar: How far away is your home?

Tisno: 140 kilometer or 5-hour drive by motorcycle or 6-hour by car.

Talukdar: How long have you been an RPU team member?

Tisno: Actually I am still new as RPU member. I have been working as RPU member four year.

Talukdar: What job did you have before this?

Tisno: *I was staff of Ujung Kulon National Park as forest guard. It is honor to me to join with RPU and be head of Unit.*

Talukdar: What is the most difficult part of your job?

Tisno: *The most difficult part of job is how to handle and solve the problem with local people inside the forest. Sometimes we need to protect the forest from encroacher but sometimes we need to understand they need a land for their life.*

Talukdar: What is the most rewarding part of your job?

Tisno: *To protect Javan rhino, the most critically endangered species around the world.*

Talukdar: How does your family feel about your work?

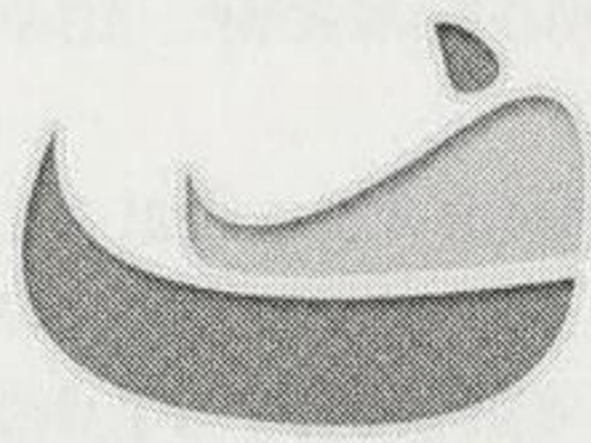
Tisno: *They are very support and they understood if I am far away from them 20 days per month.*

Talukdar: What do your friends and neighbors think about your job?

Tisno: *They are very appreciated because I work to protect Javan rhino and they know that Javan rhino is symbol of Banten Province.*

Talukdar: What would you like to say to the people who support the RPU program?

Tisno: *First I would like to say thank you so much to IRF as the major donor for rhino conservation in Indonesia and please always support us and understand what we have done in the field.*



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