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Sumatran rhino horn, pangolin parts seized in Aceh wildlife trafficking bust

by Junaidi Hanafiah on 27 July 2017 | Adapted by Basten Gokkon

- *Police in Aceh detained a male villager who had allegedly been trading wildlife parts for about a year.*
- *Authorities confiscated a Sumatran rhino horn, a deer head and bags filled with pangolin tongues and scales.*
- *The alleged trafficker faces five years imprisonment and a fine of up to \$7,500.*

ACEH, Indonesia — Police in western Indonesia are investigating an alleged wildlife trafficking network after a recent raid confiscated the hacked horn of a Critically Endangered Sumatran rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) along with body parts of other protected animals.

Police from Aceh province posed as potential buyers before arresting a 53-year-old local man, who has only been identified by the initials A.S., on July 12 at his home in Batu Hitam village in the South Aceh district.

In addition to the rhino horn, officers seized the head of a deer (*Rusa unicolor*) and two preserved deer fetuses, along with plastic bags filled with pangolin (*Manis javanica*) tongues (29 pieces) and scales (four kilograms). These species are listed as Vulnerable and Critically Endangered, respectively, by the International Union for Conservation Nature (IUCN).



Aceh Police display a deer head, Sumatran rhino horn and pangolin parts seized in the South Aceh district. Photo by Junaidi Hanafiah/Mongabay-Indonesia.

"The suspect claimed that the deer head and rhino horn don't belong to him, that he was only the middleman," said Senior Commissioner Armensyah Thay, chief of the special crimes department at the police.

The detainee had allegedly been trading protected animals, which he obtained from the locals, for about a year, Thay added.

The police will charge A.S. with violating the country's 1990 Conservation Law, under which he will face a maximum sentence of five years imprisonment and fines of up to 100 million Indonesian rupiah (\$7,499).

Sapto Aji Prabowo, head of the Aceh Natural Resources Conservation Agency, suggested that the confiscated Sumatran rhino horn was not a result of a recent poaching as the detainee admitted that he had actually inherited the piece.

"As far as we know, rhino poaching in Aceh is gone because there are patrol teams from various institutions, including from WCS [Wildlife Conservation Society] and FKL [Leuser Conservation Forum], that protect the forests intensively," said Prabowo.

Aceh's Mount Leuser National Park is one of the last remaining habitats for the Sumatran rhino, a solitary creature that usually lives in dense forests and lowland swamps.

Massive poaching and habitat loss, combined with low rates of reproduction, have decimated the animal's global population by more than 80 percent within 60 years to fewer than 100 of the Critically Endangered creatures, the smallest and hairiest of the world's five rhino species.



The hacked horn of Critically Endangered Sumatran rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) that was seized from police bust. Photo by Junaidi Hanafiah/Mongabay-Indonesia

Rudi Putra, conservation manager at FKL, said his team has observed signs of activities by poachers at Mount Leuser National Park. However, he said, hunters never manage to capture any animals.

"Our patrolling team limits the space for hunters of endangered fauna, like rhinos, tigers, elephants, Sumatran orangutans," said Putra, noting that poachers in the area also include people coming from outside Aceh who hire locals to guide them to wildlife habitats.

“Sumatran rhinos are very shy and sensitive animals, and cannot be hunted by just anyone. It takes a long time and a lot of capital, and requires perpetrators to spend a long time in the forest,” Putra said.

Meanwhile, weak sentencing for illegal wildlife traders has been widely blamed for the persistence of poaching in the northern Sumatran province, said Muhammad Nasir, head of campaign and advocacy at the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (WALHI) in Aceh. “The low sentences given by the courts, two or three years, do not frighten perpetrators,” he said.

Nasir also noted that prosecutions for wildlife crime in Aceh have so far been limited to hunters and low-level intermediaries, while bigger players like buyers and collectors remain untouched. “If they’re not arrested then this trade chain can never be broken and poaching will continue,” he said.

The Indonesian government and parliament are drafting revisions of the 1990 Conservation Law, with green groups pushing for harsher sentences, provisions on online trading and more.

Indonesia in 2013 [targeted at least three percent annual population growth of Asian rhinos](#) species, including the Sumatran rhino, until 2020 — a tall order given that Sumatran rhinos are estimated to give birth to one calf at a time, every 3-4 years.

Efforts to breed Sumatran rhino in captivity are currently taking place at the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary near the southern tip of the island. The 100-hectare (0.77 square mile) complex located within Way Kambas National Park currently houses seven of the species, including two calves born on-site.

Banner image: A Sumatran rhino hides in the bushes in the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary. Photo by Willem v Strien via [Flickr](#).

This story was reported by Mongabay’s Indonesia team and was first [published](#) on our Indonesian site on July 22, 2017.