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The fate of the Sumatran rhino is in the Indonesian government's hands

A fragile consensus to capture more rhinos has finally been reached, but one major roadblock remains: Indonesian officials. BY [JEREMY HANCE](#) ON 10 NOVEMBER 2017

Mongabay Series: [Asian Rhinos](#)

- *As the Sumatran rhino edges closer to extinction, aggressive interventions have stalled. Even ongoing efforts like ranger protection have been undercut by lack of government support.*
- *As of May, conservation groups are united in their calls to ramp up captive-breeding efforts in Indonesia, but the government has not yet responded.*
- *Frustrated conservationists cite bureaucracy, risk aversion, opaque and arbitrary decisions, and territorial squabbling as barriers to progress — but remain hopeful the government will act in time.*

This is the final article in our four-part series “Is Anyone Going to Save the Sumatran Rhino?” [Part One](#), looked at how many rhinos remain in the wild and [Part Two](#) focused on Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park and the Rhino Protection Units. [Part Three](#) explored the debate over captive breeding versus protecting rhinos in the wild.

WAY KAMBAS NATIONAL PARK, Indonesia — At 16 months, Delilah is growing fast. So fast, in fact, it's difficult to tell her apart from her mother, Ratu, to whom she closely sticks. Delilah is slightly smaller than her mom, has stubbier horns and a bit more of a baby face. Other than that, the two are practically twins as they eat their morning breakfast. Delilah was ceremoniously named by Indonesian President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo; but if ever the Sumatran rhino needed attention from the president and government, it's now.

Yet while I was visiting some of the last survivors of this species in Indonesia, the government was not talking about their nearly extinct rhino, but about pandas.

“People in the government are still busy with the panda ... Everyone is so excited about that,” Wulan Pusparini, a scientist at the Wildlife Conservation Society, told me over coffee.

The exciting pandas would arrive a few weeks after I left Indonesia, but the nation was already abuzz about the new exhibit being set up in their honor, which Jokowi was set to inaugurate alongside Chinese President Xi Jinping.

The giant panda, a species not native to Indonesia and considered on the upswing, was receiving far more media attention than the Sumatran rhino, which is hanging on by a frayed thread.

So was saving the latter urgent for the government? “Of course not,” Wulan said. “Conservation is not a priority [for the Indonesian government].”

Paralysis

Sumatran rhino conservation has been repeatedly punctuated by meetings, declarations, and 12-point plans. What it has lacked, in recent years at least, is action. As experts have come to realize just how close the species is to extinction, aggressive actions have been either delayed or halted. Even on-the-ground actions like better protection by rangers have been undercut by lack of government support and bureaucracy.

“There has been no inspired and rational leadership on the species,” said John Payne, the head of the Borneo Rhino Alliance (BORA). “Up to around maybe mid-20th century, such leadership could come from charismatic individuals. Now, to gain traction, leadership has to come from governments or senior individuals in institutions that are deemed politically acceptable.”

Those I spoke to said action on rhinos has long been hampered by fear, overwrought bureaucracy, concerns over funding, and, finally, government ambivalence.

A meeting in May in Jakarta, however, promised a breakthrough: a fragile consensus was reached between experts that more rhinos must be captured from the wild and brought into places like the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary (SRS), where a captive-breeding program is underway. The recommendations include taking all rhinos out of Indonesian Borneo and Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park, in southern Sumatra and Kalimantan. “Even more important,” according to a meeting document, is catching fertile rhinos from the Way Kambas populations. All of these recommendations were passed to officials.

Six months later, though, nothing has happened.

“It seems those recommendations went to [Environment and Forestry] Minister Siti Nurbaya, but that the dire urgency of the situation was not understood,” Payne said.



The Danum Valley Borneo Rhino Sanctuary, which sits empty in anticipation of rhinos conservation groups hoped to capture for breeding. Most experts now believe there are no more wild rhinos in Malaysian Borneo. Photo by John C. Cannon/Mongabay.

The most recent capture of a wild rhino was that of Najaq in Kalimantan in March 2016. She died several weeks after her capture in what has been repeatedly [characterized](#) as a deeply botched operation.

Widodo Ramono, the executive director of local rhino conservation NGO YABI, said officials are reluctant to risk more wild captures. “It is a challenging activity. It’s also costly,” he said. There is a “fear of failure” among the top players, he added. This, of course, is a legitimate fear, as Najaq’s case proved.

However, the bigger concern at this point is that doing nothing is leading to the ultimate failure: extinction.

And these constant delays and quibbling are costly. Even if all partners decided to go ahead with more wild captures tomorrow, and the government signed off on it, that doesn’t mean rhinos could be rounded up on command. Bibhab Talukdar, chair of the IUCN SSC Asian Rhino Specialist Group, said capturing a single rhino could easily take a year; in that time, a few determined poachers could wipe out any remaining individuals.

Another reason for the seemingly constant delays, according to sources, is that there are just too many cooks in the kitchen.

“In former times, there used to be only one, two, three, four experts. Now there are a lot of experts. A lot of opinion,” Haerudin R. Sadjudin, the YABI program manager, told me.

“The rhino in Indonesia nowadays has become sexy,” agreed Inov Sectionov, the Indonesia program manager for the International Rhino Foundation (IRF). “And many NGOs pay attention to the rhinos nowadays.”

Groups such as WWF, WCS, the IRF-funded YABI and BORA have all chimed in; meanwhile, African and Indian rhino experts routinely show up for meetings, further muddying the waters. Experts from Germany and US also make frequent appearances.

The government has also set up an advisory council known as the Joint Rhino Conservation Secretariat of Indonesia. Any decision has to move from the ground up to the advisory council and then to the government.

“Why [does] it take so long?” YABI’s Widodo asked. He said even when experts make a decision, such as the need for quick wild captures, the government takes a “very long” time to act. In some cases, he added, conservationists will make a recommendation, the government will approve it, and things will move forward — until an official shows up and says “no.”

All these delays mean the status quo is maintained and no one is able to react quickly or effectively to the rapidly deteriorating situation.

Even within the government, action is hampered by differences between what the federal authorities might want and what regional officials will allow. For example, the administration in Aceh, in northern Sumatra, has decreed that no rhinos may be taken out of the province. This means they cannot be moved from Gunung Leuser National Park to the SRS or elsewhere, essentially isolating the Leuser population. If the population there is no longer viable — an open question — it could mean having to build another sanctuary for captive breeding, assuming someone acts in time.

More ludicrous still, some government officials involved have very little understanding of the issue, even as they are required to sign off on decisions.

“The people who still believe in hunting ... they say ‘oh, this is an animal to be hunted,’” Widodo said.

Payne pointed to the paranoia over how to pay for any aggressive action.

“If you look how the world works, you get old, conservative men guarding their power and image and money sources ... There’s always this conservatism about worrying about the money ... So when I look, sometimes, it’s not that surprising,” Payne said. “Irritating, though it is.”

Indeed, Payne noted that it was a woman who really turned things around. At the international summit in May, Margaret Kinnaird of WWF-International argued eloquently that it was time to start ramping up captive-breeding efforts by catching rhinos in the wild before it was too late.

“We need babies,” Kinnaird wrote to me, adding that the situation in the wild has become so bad that the “likelihood of breeding is much higher” in captivity.

Still, even as experts begin to agree for the first time in a decade on a more aggressive approach, they can’t move forward without government approval. And, according to multiple sources, the Indonesian government is the biggest reason for the interminable delays and timidity bordering on paralysis.

“As an NGO our position is as a supporter, we are not the decision maker. All the decisions will come from the government,” Sectionov said. “[If we want to capture one more rhino] we can’t, we first have to go through them. If they said ‘OK, go ahead, take one or two,’ we will.”

Sunarto, a researcher with WWF-Indonesia, said the main obstacle to rhino conservation was “inadequate commitment from those who have authority.” He added, “Solving [that] will likely solve the rest.”

Big decisions, when they are made, are often done behind closed doors.

“Even I don’t have any access to that,” said Wulan from the WCS. This makes the process and debate totally opaque, leading to rumors and, often, confusion. Even experts at the highest levels in NGOs often don’t know why something is being held up, and can only speculate.

I reached out to several government officials, but all ignored requests to discuss the Sumatran rhino either in person, via phone or even email.



Tam, one of the two captive rhinos living in Malaysia, pictured here in 2009. Photo by Jeremy Hance.

It's just sperm

Perhaps no issue underscores just how absurd Sumatran rhino conservation has become than the fate of a vial of sperm sitting in a freezer at the SRS. The sperm comes from Andalas, Delilah's father, and Malaysia has been asking for it for two years.

There are two Sumatran rhinos left in Sabah, in Malaysian Borneo, both held in captivity. Tam is an old bull with a low sperm count, while Iman has cancer in her uterus. But technology may make it possible to conceive a new rhino.

"All Malaysia needs is semen from Andalas, that's it," Payne said. "I know they won't give us any rhinos. That's a non-starter. All they can do is collaborate in terms of real exchange of knowledge and moving things along in general."

Payne's plan would be to combine Andalas's proven sperm with Iman's viable oocytes to produce a rhino embryo that could then be implanted into one of the females at the SRS. If successful, they could produce a rhino with a super shot of genetic diversity: Iman comes from a population that's been disconnected from the populations on Sumatra for eons (the rhinos of Borneo were once considered a distinct subspecies). Therefore, Tam and Iman represent one of the best opportunities for injecting genetic diversity into the small captive population — yet

they have languished unutilized for years due to the Indonesian government's stalling. Puntung, another rhino in Borneo, died waiting in June.

Zulfi Arsan, the head veterinarian at the SRS, says the sperm is ready to be sent — all that's pending is permission from the government. But for some inexplicable reason, the government won't give the go-ahead. Malaysia has even agreed in recent years that it would *give* any resultant offspring to Indonesia. Still, no approval is forthcoming.

There are few parts of this story more baffling than the Indonesian government's inability to work with Malaysia on saving the Sumatran rhino.



YABI Executive Director Widodo Ramono. Photo by Rahmadi Rahmad/Mongabay-Indonesia.

The two governments have different approaches: Indonesia is largely focused on natural breeding, while Malaysia, out of sheer necessity, is now focused on high-tech IVF. Payne is convinced the latter can work, noting that the technology has advanced rapidly in the past decade.

Others, like IRF director Susie Ellis, doubt high-tech reproductive techniques will be ready in time “to save the species,” but still believe it's worth the effort. “It's a very important scientific technique to keep developing while we're doing the other things,

while we're doing natural breeding, and even artificial insemination, but those techniques will not be ready in our lifetime and the species could be gone in our lifetime, sadly," she said.

Still, she notes that the SRS is working to "hedge its bets": it is routinely collecting sperm from male rhinos and stem cells from females for potential future use. "There is no reason that we can't send semen to Malaysia, even in a gesture of goodwill," Ellis said.

Cultural differences and a lack of trust may have made it difficult for Malaysia and Indonesia to collaborate, even on something so simple and seemingly apolitical as Sumatran rhino sperm.

Many in Indonesia fear appropriation on the part of the Malaysians, Widodo suggested, citing past controversies when Malaysia was accused of claiming Indonesian traditional songs and dances as its own.

"So some people say 'Oh, Malaysia is going to steal all the Indonesian nature,'" he said, noting that he didn't know if it was true that Malaysia was intentionally adopting Indonesian culture and calling it its own. "But maybe that's one of the reasons."

According to Widodo there is also an imbalance between the groups.

"Malaysia has two unviable specimens and we still have quite a few viable specimens. If we work together... You have two, I have two. You have ten, I have ten... If we want to help them what's the payback?"

The payback, really, is taking every measure to keep the Sumatran rhino from going extinct. Malaysia's rhinos, unlike the SRS's, house a genetic goldmine for the species — if only they would be utilized. Maybe it won't work, but where's the risk in trying?



Rhino being cared for at the Borneo Rhino Sanctuary in Malaysia. Photo courtesy of the Sabah Wildlife Department.

Malaysian officials can't understand why the two countries aren't able to collaborate more.

"Malaysia is ever ready to work with Indonesia on this," said Augustine Tuuga, the Sabah government's wildlife department director. "We ourselves do not understand the real reason for Indonesia not to proceed. However, there is a renewed interest on their part to proceed, so we [are] hopeful that this will materialize very soon."

Tuuga said Sabah authorities will do "whatever it takes to prevent the species from becoming extinct," including loaning either Tam or Iman to the SRS for breeding efforts.

But all efforts to save the Sumatran rhino appear to be constantly hampered by things that have nothing to do with the situation at hand, such as national pride, cultural sensitivities and distrust.

"It is down to the human urge to divide and manage lands into nations, provinces, districts and protected areas, that have no relevance to management of wildlife populations, but are instead all based on essentially random human events and emotions," Payne said. "In the case of Indonesia and Malaysia, the underlying problem is the way in which the Dutch and British apportioned territories during the 19th century."

The Wiratno Factor

To date, the Indonesian government has not acted fast enough to stem the bleeding of Sumatran rhino populations or to establish a captive population that is truly an insurance against extinction. But there is a new hope this might change, according to several experts I talked to. This is because of the appointment of Wiratno (who goes by one name) as director general for ecosystem and natural resource conservation at the Ministry of Environment and Forestry.

“[Government] support is better than before,” said YABI’s Haerudin. He knows Wiratno personally and is hopeful that Wiratno is already shaking things up.

“Wiratno has already said [to me], ‘Here, let us do [more] and I would like to talk with our president [and] with our ministry.’”

Payne, who has not met Wiratno, also has high hopes in a change at the top. “He’s quite highly regarded as someone a bit younger and bolder than many of the previous” officials, he said.

But Payne also fears that Wiratno may be hampered by other officials and the general malaise that appears to plague Sumatran rhino conservation. To Payne, more aggressive action on the Sumatran rhino has been held back for years by people like Bambang Dahono Adji, the environment ministry’s conservation director.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if Adji is advising against capture to his boss Wiratno,” Payne said. “What [Adji] says is key. He is the man in charge of biodiversity conservation ... He’ll be the person blamed if something goes wrong or if there’s a public outcry.” Adji did not respond to a request for an interview.

Payne said if Widodo, who is on the advisory secretariat, would push for captures, it would “count so much” because he “has that gravitas and stature.”

Still, not everyone is as pessimistic as Payne.



Sumatran Rhinos at the SRS. Photo by Rhett Butler/Mongabay.

Terri Roth, the vice president of conservation at Cincinnati Zoo and the researcher responsible for [cracking the code on how to breed Sumatran rhinos](#), said that overall things are moving, and faster than before.

“There is some new energy, commitment and funding funneling into the effort to save the species that gives us all reason to remain hopeful, but it is so frustrating that efforts only really ramp up when it is almost too late,” she said.

Although no government officials agreed to talk with me, an Indonesian colleague was able to ask Wiratno a few rhino-related questions at an event at my request.

“For Sumatran rhinos, well, we need increased patrolling and protection of the areas, also a safe potential second habitat,” Wiratno said. While the first is a typical official response — even as guarding has not been boosted or aided by the government — the second confounds. What potential second habitat? The rhino is already scattered through four habitats, and maybe even disconnected in some of those.

When asked about capturing rhinos in the wild, Wiratno was not nearly as aggressive as the experts I talked to.

“We’re certainly moving toward intensification and rescue at a second habitat if the threat is high in the natural habitat. This includes in Bukit Barisan Selatan. We are also deploying a team to camera-trap and monitor developments,” Wiratno said. He added that the government is open to more captive-breeding sanctuaries if the “concept is like [the SRS]” in that the facility lies in the rhino’s natural habitat.

He said partnering with Malaysia, including giving them semen, was “still in progress.”

Kinnaird said she was optimistic that the Indonesian government would act on the recommendations of the meeting in May, noting that government officials who attended were “supportive” of such actions. But since that meeting, the government has given little sign it is ready to act.

“It would be extremely helpful if the president of Indonesia publicly pushed rhino conservation,” Kinnaird added. “I do not believe he or the Indonesian people would want to feel responsible for the extinction of one of the most iconic large mammals on Earth.”



A rhino calf photographed in 2016 at the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary. Photo by Rhett A. Butler/Mongabay.

Ultimately, nothing can happen for the Sumatran rhinos without the government.

“No matter how much international NGOs like ourselves put money in, if the government isn’t on board, you’ve been really spinning your wheels,” says the IRF’s Ellis.

Legally speaking, the government of Indonesia, not the people, owns the rhinos. They are both a state treasure and a burden. No rhinos can be taken from the wild without government approval, and no additional facilities can be set up without the same.

“The decision is on them,” Sectionov said.

If the past is any guide, however, what awaits is more indecision and delay. But the past does not have to dictate the future and if we’re going to have a shot of saving this species – it better not. At this crucial point, the blame for the Sumatran rhino’s extinction, whether fairly or not, will fall at the feet of the Indonesian government – no one else’s.

But if the government chooses to act and act wisely, so too could credit for the species’ salvation.

Missed an article? [Part One](#), looked at how many rhinos remain in the wild and [Part Two](#) focused on Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park and the Rhino Protection Units. [Part Three](#) explored the debate over captive breeding versus protecting rhinos in the wild.



A portrait of Ratu. Believed to have been born in the wild in 1999, Ratu was the first rhino to give birth in captivity in Indonesia. Photo by Jeremy Hance for Mongabay.

Mongabay staff writer Basten Gokkon contributed to this report.

Banner Image: Mother and daughter Ratu (right) and Delilah (left), at the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary. Photo by Jeremy Hance for Mongabay.