

PROTECTING What you can't see

Java is the world's most populous island, with around 141 million inhabitants, and one of the most densely-populated places on the globe, yet it also contains the only place in the world that the Critically Endangered Javan rhino can be found (if you can spot them): in the remote Ujung Kulon National Park (UKNP). The existence of Javan rhinos here is nothing short of a miracle. Only about 40% of the island is considered suitable Javan rhino habitat. The lack of space combined with poaching pressure has meant that this rare species has hovered at fewer than 100 individuals for decades. UKNP is also home to other endangered plants, mammals, and birds.

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Despite the odds, the Javan rhino population is relatively stable, due in no small part to the watchful eye of professional anti-poaching teams: the Rhino Protection Units (RPU).

In fact, with their improved monitoring techniques, we now know that the Javan rhino population has been slowly increasing in recent years.

For 19 years, RPUs have patrolled the dense Ujung Kulon rainforest looking for Javan rhinos. Each RPU squad is comprised of four men, all highly trained in tracking, surveillance and survival skills. On average, they are out in the field for 15 days each month. The days are long and the nights camping out under the forest canopy can be oppressively hot, but these dedicated rangers are proud of what they do and wouldn't have it any other way.

Like their ranger counterparts in Africa, RPUs prevent trespassing, poaching, trapping and other illegal activities, while also monitoring the rhino population and other large mammal activity. But there is one big difference in their work – the RPUs rarely see rhinos. Every rhino footprint or wallow discovery creates a ripple of excitement throughout the entire team because it indicates how the rhinos are using their habitat.



67 Javan rhino population

Right: The rangers are out camping for 15 days straight each month

Below: The team rarely see rhinos, but are dedicated to protect them



RPUs IN 2017

More than 5,400 km covered in patrols

Three direct rhino sightings

110 cases of illegal activity found

114 rhino footprints

30 wallows

RPUs also keep tabs on the rest of the threatened species within the Park. Most importantly, they are constantly on the lookout for signs of poachers. They are true experts when it comes to discovering and dismantling the cleverly disguised snares that can prove deadly to rhinos.

Spending 15 days on patrol in Indonesia's dense rain forests requires quite a bit of planning and almost genius-level-in-Tetris packing skills. Each squad must carry not only all the equipment needed for recording signs of rhino activity, but also tools to dismantle poaching snares; all this in addition to their camping gear, food and tools, and all in one backpack. Everything included, an average RPU member's pack weighs between 60–80 pounds.

For relief from the unrelenting insect bites and the afternoon heat, Javan rhinos often spend time cooling off in quiet river waters. Units often paddle canoes up and down these rivers searching for rhino signs. More often than not, while the rhinos themselves remain elusive, they find illegal

poachers, fishermen and loggers. At this point they have to transform from rhino monitors into law enforcement officers.

Catching and prosecuting poachers is a difficult business. The RPUs take special care to work with surrounding communities to gather information and maintain a positive presence – this is vital to obtaining leads on the location of traps and acts as a deterrent to would-be poachers.

Without the presence of RPUs, the Javan rhino would certainly have been lost from Ujung Kulon long ago. As the Javan rhino population expands, it is critical that this intensive protection continue.

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