

In the firing line

Javan rhinos survived the recent Krakatoa tsunami, but the species might not be so lucky next time

Given how endangered some species are, it might seem a good idea to gather them all together in one secure location, where professionals can take care of them and keep them safe from poachers and disease.

For example, the critically endangered Javan rhino was once widespread across Southeast Asia. Now, the 68 individuals left in existence live together in Ujung Kulon National Park, on the far northwest corner of Java, in the largest remaining tract of lowland forest left on the island.

As sensible as it might sound, the area is a very exposed location in which to corral a single species. On 22 December 2018, the northern coast of Java was

hit by a tsunami created by underwater landslides on the nearby Anak Krakatau volcano – the ‘son of Krakatoa’ – killing more than 430 people, including some Ujung Kulon park officials.

While the rhinos escaped unharmed on this occasion, they might not be so lucky next time the volcano becomes active. A study authored by the Ujung Kulon National Park Authority, WWF-Indonesia, the Indonesian Rhino Foundation, the Global Wildlife Conservation and Colorado State University found that waves caused by a tsunami reaching 10 metres high would inundate 80 per cent of the park, while waves over 30 metres would wash away the rhino habitat entirely, potentially wiping out the species.

The incident has reignited the argument that the Indonesian government should proactively relocate

some rhinos to a second, less vulnerable location. ‘We are not advocating for all the rhinos to be moved, rather for a small number of breeding individuals to be translocated,’ explains Nicola Loweth, Asia Regional Programme Manager for WWF. ‘Removing eight individuals would be sufficient to seed a new population without having a negative impact on the founding population, provided that additional supplementation remains an option further down the line.’

But land is at a premium. Over 140 million people live on Java, more than half of Indonesia’s entire population, and the need for high security is a necessity. ‘It goes without saying that any second site needs full protection from poaching to secure the establishment and growth of a viable second population, particularly when the founding population is so small,’ continues Loweth. ‘It’s perhaps too early to say whether this will indeed happen, however recent public statements by government officials indicate they may be willing to speed up the process.’ ●



The Javan rhino, a critically endangered species in a vulnerable location