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Sumatran rhinos to get a new sanctuary in Leuser Ecosystem

by **Basten Gokkon** on 18 June 2019

- *A third captive-breeding sanctuary for the nearly extinct Sumatran rhino is set to be built in Indonesia, according to a top official.*
- *The facility, scheduled to open in 2021, will be located within the Leuser Ecosystem in northern Sumatra, home to what's believed to be one of the largest populations of the critically endangered species.*
- *Global and local rhino conservation groups have welcomed the plan and pledge to help with financial and technical support for the new facility.*
- *Indonesia currently has two captive-breeding centers for the rhinos: in Sumatra's Way Kambas National Park, which holds seven rhinos, and Borneo's Kelian forest, which has a single rhino.*

JAKARTA — The Indonesian government plans to build a third sanctuary for the captive breeding of Sumatran rhinos, a species on the brink of extinction.

The proposed facility will be located within the Leuser Ecosystem in Aceh province, at the northern tip of the island of Sumatra, according to Wiratno, the head of conservation at the Ministry of Environment and Forestry.

"This is a top priority in our emergency action plan to rescue the Sumatran rhinos," Wiratno told Mongabay on the sidelines of an event in Jakarta last week. "We are soon to discuss this plan with the government of Aceh to get their support."

Scouting for the site where the facility will be built has been completed, and officials are working on the design and permits, according to Rudi Putra, a director of the Leuser Conservation Forum, who is involved in the plan.

"The plan is to complete [the facility] by 2021," he said in an email to Mongabay. He added that an initial batch of at least five rhinos would be captured from the wild in Aceh and translocated to the sanctuary to kick off the program.



Researchers recently surveyed three forests in Sumatra for signs of Sumatran rhinos: the Leuser Ecosystem or Landscape, Way Kambas National Park, and Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park. Image courtesy of Wulan Pusparini/Wildlife Conservation Society.

Indonesia currently has two captive-breeding centers that hold a total of eight Sumatran rhinos (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*): one in Sumatra's [Way Kambas National Park](#), which holds seven rhinos, and one in the [Kelian forest, in Indonesian Borneo](#), which is home to a single rhino.

The plan to open the Leuser sanctuary was described in a [decree issued by Wiratno last December](#), which also included proposals to [double the capacity of the Way Kambas sanctuary](#); partner with Malaysia, which has a stock of harvested eggs for fertilization; and boost efforts to capture more rhinos from Borneo and house them in the Kelian sanctuary.

Rhino experts from around the world agreed in 2017 that the captive breeding of Sumatran rhinos, from both Sumatra and Borneo, was the only viable way left to save the species, believed to number between 30 and 100 individuals. The new initiative follows a similar effort in the 1980s to capture Sumatran rhinos for breeding. That program, however, collapsed a decade later after [more than half of the animals died](#) without any calves being born. But a string of successful captive births in both the United States and Indonesia, and a [growing consensus](#) that the species will go extinct without intervention, have laid the groundwork for the latest captive-breeding effort.



A female rhino at the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary in Indonesia's Way Kambas National Park. Image by Rhett A. Butler/Mongabay.

Rudi said the establishment of the new sanctuary would boost the captive-breeding program by mitigating the risk of concentrating nearly all the captive rhinos in Way Kambas.

"Putting all [captured] rhinos in one place (Way Kambas) is not a good solution for the sustainability of the population. If there's a sudden spread of disease, it might kill all of the rhinos there," he said. "Developing three sites with integrated management will be better for rhino conservation."

Many experts tout Leuser as the most promising habitat for wild Sumatran rhinos, given that it holds one of the largest populations of the species. Recent camera-trap photos from the ecosystem taken by conservationists appear to identify at least 12 individual rhinos. However, the mountainous area remains poorly understood by conservationists, and poaching there is considered to be worse than elsewhere.

"The security for this sanctuary will need to be as strict as that in Way Kambas," Wiratno said.

Rhino conservation groups have agreed to provide financial and technical support to establish the facility.

“Our support for and involvement in this project is due to our conviction that this must be a priority to save the Sumatran rhino from extinction,” CeCe Sieffert, deputy director of the International Rhino Foundation, said in an email to Mongabay.

She said it was crucial to capture and bring “small, straggler populations, into conservation breeding programs while keeping the larger populations protected in their habitat.” The new facility would hold additional animals and breed them, she added.

“The aim is to grow the captive population so that animals can be released back into the wild to supplement the wild population,” Sieffert said.



A female rhino with her calf in the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary in Way Kambas. Image by Rhett A. Butler/Mongabay.

The Aceh provincial conservation agency, or BKSDA, has called for all stakeholders to support the establishment of the Leuser sanctuary. “Bringing the rhinos from small populations together is important to help them breed,” said BKSDA head Sapto Aji Prabowo. “Otherwise these populations will go extinct because they don’t breed.”

Rudi said the program would require a lot of funding, human resources, and time. “Not only are we racing against time, we are also racing against poachers who at any time can kill the rhinos,” he said.

“The condition of the Sumatran rhinos is very critical, that’s why radical steps must be taken, like capturing and rescuing the remaining individuals,” he added.

Sumatran rhinos were once found across Southeast Asia, from the Himalayas in Bhutan and India, to southern China and down the Malay Peninsula. But the species has been decimated by a series of factors, from poaching to habitat loss and, more recently, insufficient births.

In 1986, the same year the species was declared endangered on the IUCN Red List, the estimated population was between 425 and 800 individuals. Ten years later the estimate had dropped to 400 and the Sumatran rhino was uplisted to critically endangered. In 2015 it was declared extinct in the wild in Malaysia, leaving Indonesia as the only country with known wild populations of the species.