

Mongabay Series: [Asian Rhinos](#)

Search for a new home for Javan rhinos put on hold

by **Basten Gokkon** on 2 July 2019

- *The Indonesian government says plans to establish a second habitat for the critically endangered Javan rhinoceros have been put on hold.*
- *The species numbers an estimated 68 individuals, all of them corralled in a national park on the western tip of the island of Java.*
- *Conservationists had for years considered finding a second habitat outside the park to establish a new population of rhinos, given the risks they currently face from disease and natural disasters.*
- *However, the top contender for a second habitat currently serves as a military training ground, leaving conservationists to find ways to expand the rhinos' suitable habitat within the national park.*

JAKARTA — Indonesia has put on hold a plan to establish a second habitat for the Javan rhinoceros beyond the single site on the planet where the critically endangered species lives.

An estimated 68 Javan rhinos (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*) live in Ujung Kulon National Park, on the western tip of the island of Java. With the entire species crammed into the 1,230-square-kilometer (475-square-mile) park, conservationists and government officials have for decades mulled the idea of establishing a second habitat to mitigate the risk of catastrophe from disease or natural disaster.



Two Javan rhinos deep in the forests of Ujung Kulon National Park, the species' sole remaining habitat. Image courtesy of Sugeng Hendratno/WWF.

That task gained urgency last December, after a [tsunami](#) struck the coast near Ujung Kulon, killing two park officials but leaving the rhinos unharmed.

Conservationists' top pick for a second habitat has long been a 5,000-hectare (12,360-acre) wildlife reserve in Cikepuh, on Java's southern coast and away from the tsunami-prone northern coast. But the area is also the site of a military training ground, and looks to remain that way, according to a top official.

"We are putting [the establishment of a second habitat] on pending," Wiratno, the conservation chief at Indonesia's environment ministry, told Mongabay in Jakarta.

"Cikepuh is still too risky. Rhinos are very sensitive," he added, suggesting the live-fire training would put too much stress on the animals.

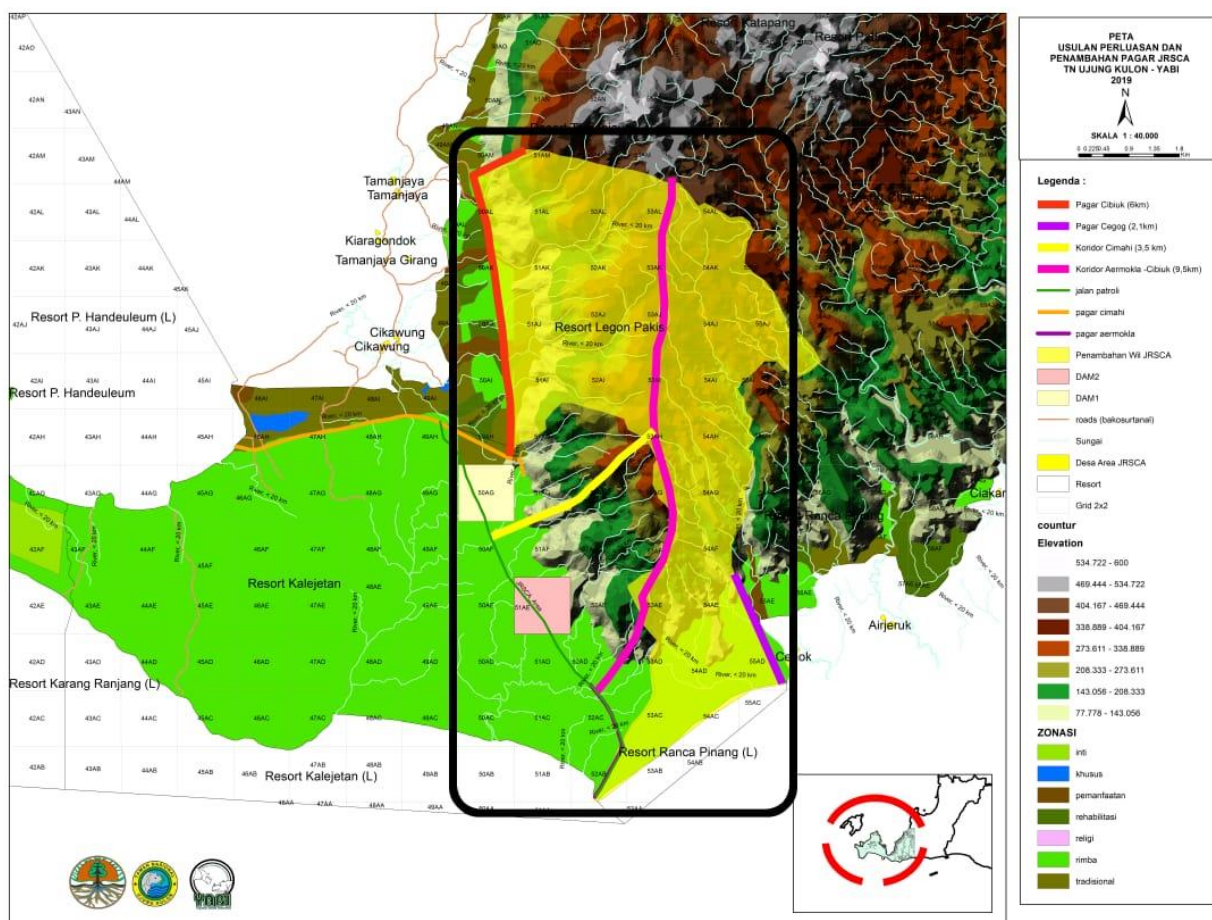
"We are looking at other alternatives," Wiratno said.

For now, he said, Indonesia is focusing on expanding the usable habitat within Ujung Kulon, effectively doubling the size of a habitat-expansion program already underway. Doing so would be "more realistic" than establishing a new site outside Ujung Kulon, Wiratno said.

The existing habitat-expansion effort, known as the Javan Rhino Study and Conservation Area (JRSCA), was established in 2010 on 5,100 hectares (12,600 acres) within Ujung Kulon. It was launched as a joint project between the government and conservation groups, including the International Rhino Foundation, Indonesia Rhino Foundation (YABI), the (now defunct) Asian Rhino Project, and WWF. The work involves clearing invasive plants and working with locals to end encroachment in the area. At the latest count, however, only **nine** rhinos were observed to have used this newly expanded area.

The government now plans to set aside roughly 5,000 additional hectares of land to the east of the JRSCA for conversion into usable habitat for Javan rhinos, Wiratno said.

“We will beef up the security and involve the local people,” he said.



A plan for the expansion of the Javan Rhino Study and Conservation Area (JRSCA) in Ujung Kulon National Park. Image courtesy of the Indonesian Ministry of Environment and Forestry.

Although the JRSCA is adjacent to the rhinos' current habitat inside the national park, it lies on the Java mainland rather than the narrow peninsula of Ujung Kulon, where most of the population is concentrated. Widodo Ramono, the executive director of YABI, says the site is less vulnerable to natural disasters because it's further from Anak Krakatau, the active volcano that triggered the 2018 tsunami.

"The area is estimated to be relatively safe from the threats of Anak Krakatau volcano eruption and getting struck by a tsunami," he [wrote](#) in an article for Mongabay's Indonesian site.

Expanding the JRSCA might also spur population growth for the Javan rhino, said Barney Long, the director of species conservation at Global Wildlife Conservation.

"It appears as if the current area occupied by rhinos in Ujung Kulon is at capacity and so we need to provide the population space to grow," he told Mongabay in an email.

However, according to the [Asian Rhino Project](#), the JRSCA was designed to serve as a "staging ground" from which translocations to a second site could occur, and not as a substitute for such a site.

Expanding the JRSCA should be done in parallel with efforts to establish a second population outside of Ujung Kulon, and not be seen as an alternative, Long said.

"When rhino populations reach high density, their breeding rates decrease so we need to hold Javan rhinos in areas where lower densities are possible to enable higher breeding rates," he said.

"We don't want 70 Javan rhinos forever, we want the number to grow to 100, 200, 500 animals in the future, and for this we need to provide them with space," Long said, noting that second-site strategy has proved to work well for the Javan rhino's sister species, the greater one-horned rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) in India and Nepal, where their populations have grown rapidly.



A rare image of a critically endangered Javan rhino. Image by Robin Moore/Global Wildlife Conservation.

The rhinos in Ujung Kulon, although well protected, remain extremely vulnerable to disease and tsunamis. Having more than one stronghold for the species would reduce the risk of their extinction from any of those disasters.

Citing the 2018 tsunami, Long said, “we may not be so lucky next time.”

He added it would be “a real shame” if Cikepuh was definitively ruled out as the site of a second home for the rhinos, saying “the Javan rhino conservation community was united behind the site” despite its shortcomings.

The next step, Long said, is to immediately evaluate other options across Java and Sumatra for sites that meet the ecological requirements of the species, that are large enough to hold a viable population, that can be adequately protected, and that can garner the support of the Indonesian government and the Javan rhino conservation community.

“If we can find a suitable site, there would be strong support from the Javan rhino conservation community as it is a clearly identified conservation priority for the species,” he said.

“Eventually, the dream scenario would be to have growing populations in multiple sites, and while this may be a dream now, it could become a reality as [it] has for other rhino species,” Long said.

Clarification: This article has been updated to note that the International Rhino Foundation is involved in the JRSCA, and that the Asian Rhino Group is not currently active.

FEEDBACK: [Use this form](#) to send a message to the author of this post. If you want to post a public comment, you can do that at the bottom of the page.