

Indonesian Rhinos: How Bowling for Rhinos is Conserving the Most Critically Endangered Mammals on Earth

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Four out of the five species of rhino face extinction within our lifetime. As part of its mission to ensure the survival of rhinos through conservation and research, the International Rhino Foundation (IRF) operates field conservation programs both in Africa and Asia. IRF focuses expertise and resources in areas where rhinos are in the most need of attention and where conservation efforts will have the most significant impact.

Fewer than 80 critically endangered Sumatran rhinos now remain on Earth, only in Indonesia. The population declined at a rate of 50% in the 1980s and 1990s from deforestation and habitat fragmentation, and despite protection, numbers still are decreasing across their range.

Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park (BBS) and Way Kambas National Park (WK) in Sumatra, Indonesia, are two of the three major habitats for Sumatran rhino, and are also two of the highest priority areas for other threatened megafauna, including the Sumatran tiger and Sumatran elephant.

The Javan rhino is also critically endangered, with around 67 animals in only one location: Ujung Kulon National Park in west Java. Ujung Kulon was Indonesia's first UNESCO World Heritage Site -- is the largest remaining lowland forest site on the island of Java. Ujung Kulon also is home to a number of other endangered species, including the Javan gibbon, ebony leaf monkey, Javan leaf monkey, leopard, fishing cat, Javan hawk eagle, and the banteng, a species of wild cattle.

With our partner, Yayasan Badak Indonesia (YABI or the Rhino Foundation of Indonesia), the IRF funds and co-manages a comprehensive program aimed at protecting and increasing the populations of Sumatran and Javan rhinos. Rhino Protection Units (RPU) are the backbone of this program. Both of these rhino species still survive largely because of long-term funding provided by the AAZK Bowling for Rhinos program, which for more than 20 years has been a major source of funding for their conservation.

The initial decline of Javan and Sumatran rhinos was due to poaching for horn, which is used in traditional Chinese medicine to reduce fever. Now, the populations are primarily threatened by small population effects, such as the Allee effect, inbreeding, and other issues. They also are limited by available suitable habitat, which particularly in BBS, is

continuously being encroached by human populations and converted for small-scale agriculture.

RPU's are highly-trained, four-man anti-poaching teams that intensively patrol key areas within Indonesia's national parks. Each RPU is led by a park guard who has the authority to carry a weapon and make arrests; the other three members are recruited from local communities. RPU's monitor threatened wildlife, deactivate traps and snares, identify and apprehend illegal intruders, including poachers, and investigate crime scenes, thus preventing or reducing the loss of wildlife. Each unit spends at least 15 days per month on patrol. In 2018, the majority of illegal activities encountered included non-mammal poaching (fish, birds), illegal logging, and encroachment, often in the form of small plots of illegal coffee crops, especially in BBS. In Way Kambas, seasonal forest fires are a common event; RPU's often assist park authorities in putting them out.

As part of their continuing efforts to turn back encroachment, in partnership with BBS park authorities, the RPU's also have helped to removed nearly 150 squatter settlements from within the park boundaries this year.

Thanks to the RPU's, there has been no evidence of poaching of Sumatran rhinos in BBS and Way Kambas National Parks in Sumatra for the past 18 years, or of Javan rhinos in Ujung Kulon National Park in Java for more than 20 years. The RPU's also protect numerous other threatened species, including Sumatran tigers, elephants, tapirs, sun bears, gibbons and siamangs, clouded leopards, fishing cats, and numerous bird species.

India

Greater one-horned, or Indian, rhinos now number about 3,550 and the population slowly continues to increase. IRF's ambitious project, Indian Rhino Vision 2020, implemented in partnership with the government of Assam, WWF-India, and the Bodo Territorial Council, aims to increase the rhino population in India to 3,000 by 2020 by moving animals from concentrated populations to areas where rhino populations are not as dense.

Since the project's inception, we have translocated 18 animals to Manas. Another eight rescued rhinos have also been released. Post-release, animals have been closely monitored using radio-collars and direct observation, both from elephant back and on foot. IRF was awarded an AAZK BFR Conservation Resource Grant in 2010, which helped to fund the purchase of five radiocollars to assist daily monitoring of the translocated rhinos.

Thus far, we have had ten rhino births, and, sadly, eight rhinos were lost to poaching. The last poaching event was in 2015 and, as were several others, was attributed to Maoist insurgents coming across the border. The park's population now stands at 32 animals and the population continues to grow.

Conclusion

The IRF is grateful for the steadfast investment that the AAZK membership, through the Bowling for Rhinos program, has made towards rhino conservation. Asian rhino species continue to face enormous challenges, but without a doubt, they are in much better shape than they would be without the support of this dedicated organization. And, in particular, we might have already lost the Javan and Sumatran rhino had the AAZK not had the foresight to heavily invest in their protection many years ago.

The IRF is grateful for our partnership with AAZK, and for the dedication of all of its members to conservation of rhinos as well as this planet's other magnificent species. In the face of the enormous challenges facing Indonesian rhinos, AAZK's support for their conservation has never been more critical.