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## Forest fires set by poachers threaten a refuge of the Sumatran rhino

by **Tri Purna Jaya** on 21 August 2020 | Adapted by **Basten Gokkon**

- *Fires set by poachers are a top cause of habitat degradation in Way Kambas National Park on Indonesia's Sumatra Island.*
- *The park is home to critically endangered Sumatran rhinos, tigers and elephants, among hundreds of wildlife species.*
- *The burning on the fringes of the park spurs the growth of fresh grass, which draws the deer and boars that the poachers target.*
- *Park officials and conservationists are engaged with local communities to dissuade people from poaching, as well as replanting burned areas with hardier vegetation.*

EAST LAMPUNG, Indonesia — It was 42 years ago when Suratno was first asked by a friend, armed with a pack of mongrel dogs and several wooden spears, to go with him into Way Kambas National Park. And so, at the age of 17, he embarked on what would become a long career as a poacher inside this protected area in Sumatra, Indonesia.

In 2009, Suratno decided to call it quits; he said he felt ashamed about what he was doing, a sense that was exacerbated by the fact that he knew many of the people from the park's patrol team. He eventually sold his hunting dogs and joined the park's community-based team that works to keep wild elephants away from nearby villages.

Suratno, now 59, says poachers typically set fire to the *alang-alang* grass (*Imperata* spp.) on the edges of Way Kambas during the dry season. When fresh grass sprouts, typically within a week, it draws deer and other animals targeted by the poachers. Suratno says that during his time as a poacher, he would burn up to five sites at a time.

He stopped doing it years ago, but the burning continues.



Suratno, right, was a longtime poacher in Way Kambas National Park who now works with a patrol team that keeps wild elephants away from villages. Image by Tri Purna Jaya/Mongabay Indonesia.



Forest rangers in Way Kambas National Park work with military and police personnel to put out forest fires. Image courtesy of Way Kambas National Park Agency.

Fires are one of the biggest threats to the park, which spans 1,300 square kilometers (500 square miles) of swamp and lowland forest, and is home to one of the last remaining populations of Sumatran rhinos (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*), one of the world's rarest and most endangered mammal species. Way Kambas also hosts populations of critically endangered Sumatran elephants (*Elephas maximus sumatranus*) and tigers (*Panthera tigris sondaica*), endangered false gharial crocodiles (*Tomistoma schlegelii*), and hundreds of varieties of birds.

In 2019 alone, the agency that manages the park reported more than 2,300 hotspots around Way Kambas; most of the fires were lit by bushmeat hunters looking for deer and boars.

Rhino experts say they fires are a top concern for the conservation of the small rhino population scattered around the park. While the hotspots rage mostly on the fringes of Way Kambas, their spread degrades habitats for wildlife such as rhinos, which need large swaths of unspoiled forest to live in.

Widodo Ramono, who heads the Indonesia Rhino Foundation (YABI), says burning by poachers is "a classic phenomenon." The solution, he says, is to provide



alternative sources of income for poachers, including as tour guides or homestay hosts supporting the ecotourism industry.

“Burning is still part of society. They may set fire on their own land, but the fires can spread into the park,” Widodo says.



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A female Sumatran rhino in Way Kambas, Sumatra, Indonesia. Image by Rhett A. Butler/Mongabay.

In the meantime, a conservation strategy to control and reduce fires in the park is to replace the alang-alang grass fire-resistant and “pioneer” plants — defined as hardy species that can thrive in damaged ecosystems — as well as fodder for elephants and rhinos.

Widodo says YABI, which runs the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary inside Way Kambas, is also working with local communities, who grow the vegetation preferred by rhinos and sell it to the sanctuary.

Sugiono, a conservationist with the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) Indonesia focusing on Way Kambas, says another important strategy to mitigating fires and poaching in the park is to engage in awareness-raising efforts with poachers. He adds this is a long-term approach.

“The impact is on the significant change of behavior [by poachers],” Sugiono says.

Sukatmoko, who heads the agency that manages Way Kambas National Park, says his team is working to educate younger members of neighboring communities about the importance of protecting the park’s ecosystem, to instill from a young age a respect for nature conservation.

*This story was first reported by Mongabay’s Indonesia team and published [here](#) on our [Indonesian site](#) on July 21, 2020.*