

The call I was hoping would not come

On a November evening in Indonesia, I was at home packing and preparing to leave for the United States for the International Rhino Foundation's (IRF) annual meeting. I was interrupted by a call. Fires, started by people, had been burning in Way Kambas National Park in Sumatra for weeks and, aided by a strong wind and dry conditions, they were approaching an area of the Park that we had recently replanted.

Inov Sectionov | Indonesian Programme Coordinator, IRF

Deforestation has been a leading cause in the increase of fires worldwide. Climate change has extended the dry season, increasing the risk of larger, more intense fires. In Indonesia, where deforestation has recently declined, reforestation and recovery efforts have not been able to keep up with past decimation, leading to many wildfires in degraded lands.

Unfortunately, fires are increasingly being set by people. In Way Kambas, poachers often use mosquito coils to light bush and smoke out game. As fires rage, rangers race to protect the habitat, sometimes distracting them from normal duties and allowing poachers to move unseen.

That November phone call was from the Park's rangers. Sparks from one of the spreading fires had leapt the fire break we had maintained and the dry grass had ignited. Swept by the wind, the flames had burned 60 acres of recently planted seedlings. It was an entire loss. I was devastated.

Park rangers, supported by Rhino Protection Units in the area, did everything they could to save the newly planted zone; an area that had been destined to grow into an expanded habitat for rhinos, elephants, and tigers, among other wildlife. The new seedlings had been growing well and, in fact, wildlife had already begun to move into the area: not long before the fires, the team had spotted a tiger moving through the plot.



Minggu, 10 November 2019 08:07:18.14
48M 574677 9440745



Top to bottom: A ranger watching as the fires burn, destroying vital Sumatran rhino habitat.

The fires took hold of a huge area that had been replanted, only a handful of the new shoots survived.

Firefighters and rangers doing everything they can to put the fires out.

The project had been a true community effort. Local students had come to the area on field trips, learning about the rainforest and planting new trees. The pride in transforming an area that was deforested more than 10 years ago was profound.

I went through a range of emotions. I was sad to see the community's hard work wiped out in a single day. I was angry because this fire was not a natural disaster, but caused by humans. However, my emotions began to take a different form – that of hope.

The plants were gone, but the spirit of the people remained. Within weeks, rangers and communities were back at work, clearing the site again, planting new seedlings – larger ones this time, that would be more likely to withstand a fire. They've already built wider firebreaks, dug another deep well, and purchased more fire-fighting equipment. And we're committed to supporting them every step of the way.

Together, despite the setbacks, we are continuing to create a larger habitat for the Sumatran rhino and other endangered wildlife.

