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Mongabay Series: [Asian Rhinos](#)

Widodo Ramono, the man on a mission to save Sumatran rhinos

by **Rahmadi Rahmad** on 17 December 2020 | Translated by **Basten Gokkon**

- *Indonesian biologist Widodo Ramono has dedicated a lifetime to conserving the country's Sumatran rhinos from extinction.*
- *A former government official, Widodo now leads a rhino conservation group that oversees a captive-breeding program at a sanctuary for Sumatran rhinos.*
- *To save the species, found only in Indonesia, Widodo says protecting its habitats from deforestation and poaching is the most important thing.*
- *Mongabay Indonesia recently spoke with Widodo about the country's plans for rhinos and the challenges those plans face.*

Editor's note: Widodo died of COVID-19 on December 24, 2020.

BOGOR, Indonesia — Indonesian biologist Widodo Sukohadi Ramono is one of the longest-standing and most influential figures in the country's efforts to conserve the Sumatran rhino, a critically endangered species with a population now believed to be no more than 80.

Widodo's love for wildlife and the environment began in middle school in the late 1950s, when he joined a scout troop in his hometown of Blora, Central Java. He went on to study forestry at a vocational school in Bogor, West Java, and after graduating joined the Ujung Kulon National Park agency as a forest ranger.

In the early 1980s, Widodo was tasked to head the local conservation agency in Sumatra's Lampung province. That included overseeing Way Kambas National Park, home to the Sumatran rhino (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*). That's when Widodo's career as a government official kicked off. Over the years, he headed key posts, including as the director for biodiversity conservation at the environment ministry, until his retirement in 2005.

When Widodo was starting out in the 1980s, the Sumatran rhino population was estimated at around 800. That figure had halved by 1986, and dropped again to 275 by 2008. Much of the population decrease was likely due to revisions of overly optimistic estimates, but these decades were also marked by the inexorable and actual decline of the species.

Since 2009, Widodo has headed the Indonesian Rhino Foundation (YABI). His contribution to the conservation of Indonesia's rich wildlife, especially its two rhino species, is acknowledged globally by the IUCN, the Golden Ark Foundation, and at home by the Indonesian government.

Mongabay Indonesia recently spoke with Widodo about the country's plans for rhinos and the challenges those plans face.



Widodo Ramono. Image by Rahmadi Rahmad/Mongabay Indonesia.

Few births in captivity

Two rhinos have been born at the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary (SRS) in Way Kambas National Park, marking a major success for Indonesia's captive-breeding efforts. But both calves were born to the same pair of parents, and none have been born since May 2016.

Breeding rhinos is difficult and there's much about it that still remains a mystery to experts, Widodo says.

"It must be understood that the space between rhino births is around four to five years," he says. "Such a slow rate of productivity should be of everyone's concern."

Widodo says the main goal for the captive-breeding program at Way Kambas is to capture isolated wild rhinos in the hopes of producing as many calves as possible at the facility. The [program's recent expansion](#) is aimed at bringing in more rhinos from so-called “doomed” populations — those that are no longer viable for survival if left in the wild — to boost the success rate of the captive-breeding program.

There is some controversy at the international level about whether it makes sense to continue focusing on doomed rhinos, rather than capturing females from wild populations that are still breeding. Rescuing female rhinos from the wild to join the captive-breeding program may reduce the chances of them developing reproductive problems in the wild, which can happen when they don't meet a male rhino in a long time — an increasingly common problem as the animals' habitat is fragmented and they are cut off from each other. On the other hand, experts have also [observed](#) reproductive problems in female rhinos that were freshly captured from doomed populations.

“We must act quickly as there are still female rhinos out there that can bear offspring,” Widodo says.



A Sumatran rhino. Image by Rahmadi Rahmad/Mongabay Indonesia.

Keeping rhinos safe in Indonesia

Many experts, particularly in Indonesia, have advocated for keeping captive rhinos inside the country, in an environment as close as possible to their natural habitat, due to high mortality rates and low births among rhinos captured for previous breeding efforts abroad.

The seven captive Sumatran rhinos now live in a semi-wild environment at the Way Kambas sanctuary, which was built in 1996 and has been under YABI's oversight. Previous attempts at conserving the rhinos off-site mostly failed. Only one foreign zoo, Cincinnati, achieved successful births: three calves, two of whom are now at Way Kambas.

"Evidently, we can do it. Two rhino babies have been born in Way Kambas SRS," Widodo said.

Indonesia has another SRS facility, at Kelian Lestari in the Bornean province of East Kalimantan. It's home to a solitary female named Pahu, captured there in 2018. Another female, called Pari, is [planned to be captured](#) and placed there too. Scientists believe there are no more than 16 Sumatran rhinos left in Indonesian Borneo, inhabiting three known sites.

The government is [building another SRS in Aceh province](#) at the northern tip of Sumatra. The planned sanctuary will cover 100 hectares (250 acres) of an ecosystem that is believed to still record natural births of Sumatran rhinos in the wild.

"We must produce as many rhino babies as possible within a safe environment, considering the threat of extinction is right before our eyes," Widodo says.

Challenges

Indonesia is the last refuge for the Sumatran rhino. The species' population was historically decimated by poaching and habitat loss, but the main threat today is the low birth rate as a result of habitat fragmentation, which means individual males and females in the wild are less likely to encounter each other.

In 2017, the Indonesian government developed an emergency action plan for Sumatran rhinos, which includes increasing protection of rhino habitats, surveying the remaining wild population, and capturing those individuals with reproductive potential and moving them to captive-breeding and research facilities such as Way Kambas and Kelian.

"Population decline obviously is happening; it's a race against time," Widodo says, adding it's urgent that every stakeholder follow the government's plans.

“Conservation areas for the lives of Sumatran rhinos and other wildlife must be defended and managed,” he says.

The looming extinction of the Sumatran rhino — a species that once ranged from the foothills of the eastern Himalayas in Bhutan and eastern India, through Myanmar, Thailand, and south through the Malay Peninsula — would mean a colossal loss for Indonesia and the rest of the world, Widodo says.

The Sumatran rhino is the smallest and hairiest rhino species. It is the last survivor of its ancient lineage, belonging to the genus *Dicerorhinus* and believed to be the only living relative of the long-extinct woolly rhino (*Coelodonta antiquitatis*). It's also a key ecosystem engineering, spreading seeds and pruning vegetation as it forages for food.

“For the rhinos, the most important thing to do has always been protecting and managing their habitats,” Widodo says. “Otherwise, the rhinos won't survive.”