

Acting to save the Sumatran rhino



In the dense, steamy rainforests within the Indonesian islands of Sumatra and Borneo, Earth's few remaining Sumatran rhinos are struggling to exist. Barely hanging on in fragmented sub-populations, this species is so rare – fewer than 80 survive – that only a handful of people has ever seen one in the wild.

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Despite ongoing protection, the species is close to extinction. Sumatran rhinos have become isolated in tiny pockets, decreasing the probability of breeding-age animals encountering one another. There simply aren't enough rhino babies being born. In 2018, a ground-breaking partnership, Sumatran Rhino Rescue, was established to support the Government of Indonesia's national Sumatran rhino breeding programme.

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Alongside Indonesian officials, on-the-ground partners and national organisations, we're working to relocate Sumatran rhinos to semi-wild managed breeding facilities like the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary (SRS), which was established in 1995. The goal is to quickly and safely increase rhino numbers, creating a source population from which animals can be carefully reintroduced into the wild.

Before that can happen, rhinos must be located for possible capture and transfer. Survey teams were established last year in areas known to have rhino populations: Way Kambas and



Gunung Leuser National Parks in Sumatra, and one area in Borneo. At the time of writing, six individuals are being tracked with hopes that captures can begin in late 2021.

Capture teams, which include veterinarians, transport and others, have been conducting in-person and online training sessions during the pandemic to prepare. Local and international experts have participated, sharing the best practice to safely rescue Sumatran rhinos.

Survey teams on the ground are continuing to report on rhino movements. Each update is helping teams to determine the best location to place a pit trap safely and ensure rhinos remain healthy during capture and transport.

In some cases, a rhino may be transported via truck to the SRS. However, capture and transport teams have also trained in the latest methods for transporting rhinos via helicopter, which involves holding rhinos in a sling upside down and which has proven to be the optimal transport method to cover distances that would take hours by vehicle and only 30 minutes by air.

All of this preparation and activity is hugely important. With fewer than 80 Sumatran rhinos left in the world, we have to act now. If we don't, the Sumatran rhino could go extinct in our lifetime.