



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: September 15, 2020

Contact: Christopher Whitlatch,
412-979-9742

2020 State of the Rhino Report: COVID-19 Provides Short Term Poaching Relief for Rhinos But Breeds Long Term Concerns

In Africa, Black Rhinos Experience Small Population Gains

Sumatran Rhinos Face Crisis as Population Becomes More Isolated

Strasburg, VA – The International Rhino Foundation (IRF) released today the 2020 State of the Rhino report which details current conservation trends, including the impacts from the global pandemic on the world's five species of rhinoceros.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about an unexpected benefit to rhinos and other wildlife in most places: a decrease in poaching incidents during the first half of the year. In response to the virus outbreak, countries around the world closed borders and restricted international and domestic travel.

With increased military and police presence, regular checkpoints enacted, and government parks and private reserves shuttered to all outside visitors, local poaching gangs found it risky to move people without raising suspicions. International travel restrictions have closed wildlife trafficking routes to China and Vietnam, the largest black markets for rhino horn.

As lockdown restrictions are beginning to ease in many countries, poaching is on the rise once again, increasing concerns that the devastation of local economies and widespread job losses may push more people to rhino poaching.

(MORE)

Safety measures have forced the postponement of planned rhino census operations as well. However, in Africa, the black rhino population had a small increase to 5,630 from 5,500 in 2019. The species remains critically endangered and at a fraction of the 65,000 historical population level in 1970.

Only about 2,300 remained in the early 1990's, and the population is forecasted to continue to make small gains. In some local areas, gains may be higher than expected. Zimbabwe's Bulyebe Valley reported a 13.8% population growth during the first 6 months of 2020.

Africa's other species, the white rhino has been facing declines over the last two years due to intensive poaching. The population is estimated to be hovering around 18,000 animals. Concerns remain that the species will continue to face declines this year.

900 rhinos were killed by criminals in Africa in 2018, nearly 1 every 10 hours. South Africa recently reported that poaching dropped from 319 animals in the first half of 2019 to 166 in the first half of 2020. Kruger National Park's Intensive Protection Zone reported zero rhino poaching incidents in April, the first since 2007.

"The two species of African rhinos and other wildlife that reside in game reserves are dependent on protection and monitoring personnel for their continued safety," said Nina Fascione, IRF's executive director. State reserves have maintained salaries for rangers, but have cut many critical operational expenses including fuel purchases and overtime pay.

Private reserves are dependent on tourism income and have had to make tough budget decisions. There is a growing fear that entire ranger teams may become ill or be forced to quarantine due to exposure to the virus, removing essential staff from the field. "As poaching increases, it is critical that protection and monitoring activities are maintained," said Fascione.

In response to emergency needs, IRF established the Reserve Relief Fund to provide gap funding for salaries and equipment. More than \$200,000 in grants have been awarded to date to ensure protection of rhino continues.

Asia

In Indonesia, fewer than 80 Sumatran rhinos remain. The species is likely now the most endangered large mammal on Earth, with declines of more than 70 percent in the past 30 years. Three small, isolated populations exist on Indonesia's Sumatra Island, plus a tiny handful of animals in Kalimantan. The last Sumatran rhino in Malaysia, Iman, died in late 2019.

The Government of Indonesia developed an Emergency Action Plan for Sumatran rhinos in 2017 in response to continued habitat loss and the fragmentation of the population. Going into its third year, the Sumatran Rhino Rescue project, formed by IRF and its partners, has initiated surveys in Way Kambas, Bukit Barisan Selatan and Gunung Leuser National Parks, as well as in Kalimantan in Indonesian Borneo to identify isolated rhinos. The activities are part of plans to rescue rhinos and bring those with reproductive potential into large, semi-natural breeding and research facilities like the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary in Way Kambas to increase population numbers.

(MORE)

“COVID-19 has presented hurdles with delays in planned training and rescue options for this year,” said Fascione. “Timing is critical and we all must do what is possible to save the Sumatran rhino from extinction.”

There have been no reported cases of the transfer of COVID-19 from humans to rhinos as has been the case for other species, including felines and primates. The keepers at the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary conservation breeding center in Way Kambas have implemented safety protocols in abundance of caution for the seven rhinos in their care.

Indonesia’s other species, the Javan rhino, made a small gain to 74 from 72 the previous year. Javan rhinos are found only in Indonesia’s Ujung Kulon National Park, where they are heavily protected. There has been no poaching in Ujung Kulon in more than 20 years.

Illegal fishing and lobster trapping in the protected waters of Ujung Kulon represent both a threat to habitat and the potential that poachers may ‘hitch a ride’ to the beaches of the park which are frequented by rhinos. As such a marine patrol was launched in January of 2020. In the first six months of operations, the two marine patrol units apprehended 45 boats and 218 people illegally encroaching in the park.

As the Javan rhino population increases, expanding their habitat will be a major concern. Habitat management projects are ongoing in the Javan Rhino Study and Conservation Area of Ujung Kulon, including the removal of the ubiquitous Arenga palm, which opens up corridors for rhinos to move to different areas of the park and promotes new growth of food sources.

In India, two greater one-horned rhinos were translocated to Manas National Park in March before COVID-19 related lockdowns were in place. The transfer was part of the India Rhino Vision 2020 (IRV2020) program established in 2009, bringing the population in Manas to 41 animals.

Unfortunately, the final translocation planned for late spring was postponed. IRV2020 was scheduled to wrap up this year with a new strategy envisioned to build on the program’s success, but review and planning meetings have been pushed back.

The greater one-horned population has been steadily increasing to more than 3,600 in India and Nepal from a low of 100 animals in the early 1900s. Nepal planned a census of their rhinos in 2020, but has postponed the count until 2021 because of the impact of COVID-19.

Strict protection by government authorities and forestry officials in India has resulted in several years of poaching declines. There were only three recorded losses in Assam in 2019 and just two incidents so far this year.

The 2020 monsoon season in Assam brought the sixth highest flood ever on record in Kaziranga National Park (KNP). 18 rhinos died and hundreds of other wildlife perished during the floods. In response to the widespread devastation and loss, calls for action were intensified and a proposal to build more artificial highlands in KNP has been pushed forward by the government.

(MORE)

“Hasty construction of highlands that is not studied and planned scientifically could lead to devastating future changes to the fragile ecosystem,” said Fascione. “A wrong direction in conservation could derail decades of progress and endanger the greater one-horned rhinos continued recovery.”

Assisted Reproduction Technology Advancements

In August 2019 a team of scientists in Germany harvested eggs from the two remaining female northern white rhinoceros, artificially inseminated those using frozen sperm from deceased males and created two viable northern white rhino embryos. With support from the Kenyan Government, the procedure was repeated in December 2019, and was able to create new embryos at Avantea Laboratories in Italy under the direction of Cesare Galli and his team. This significantly increases the chances of successfully producing offspring.

The research is part of an effort to save the subspecies from extinction, as well as advance the science of assisted reproduction technology (ART) as a tool in conservation of rhino species. Preparations for the next steps are underway with the plan to select a group of southern white rhinos at Ol Pejeta Conservancy from which a female could serve as surrogate mother for the northern white rhino embryo.

“IRF believes ART is one of several tools available to help save rhinos, but no species has ever been saved using ART alone,” said Fascione. “However, with species that are critically endangered, we don’t want to close any doors on conservation efforts.”

Recommended Actions

The report outlines the following four priorities for all five species of rhinos:

1. Bolster anti-poaching activities or “boots on the ground” to meet the challenge of increased poaching created by economic losses.
2. Maintain intensive monitoring and active management of wild populations in the face of revenue losses, employing conservation breeding where needed.
3. Work with local communities to ensure they are active participants in wildlife conservation and receive economic incentives that improve livelihoods.
4. Governments must commit to enforcing their wildlife crime laws and commitments to international treaties to foster more effective international collaboration on investigations to address the entire criminal supply chain, particularly in Asia.

Rhinos face many threats from habitat loss, encroachment by people, and fragmented populations that inhibit breeding, however, poaching remains the largest threat to their survival. A decline in the price for rhino horn, trending downward since 2015, has not disincentivized poachers.

“Declines in poaching during the global pandemic, gives us hope that a stronger commitment by governments in enforcing wildlife crime laws can break up large criminal syndicates involved in poaching, allowing rhinos to maintain steady populations gains,” said Fascione. “We want to thank everyone for continuing to make progress in the conservation of rhinos in the face of difficult obstacles this year. Together, we can ensure these marvelous creatures can thrive for future generations.”

###