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The International Rhino Foundation Releases 2021 State of the Rhino Report

*Greater one-horned, black, and Javan rhinos increase while white and Sumatran rhinos decline.
Poaching again on the increase after 2020's decline.*

Strasburg, VA – The International Rhino Foundation (IRF) published its annual signature report, State of the Rhino, providing current population estimates and trends, where available as well as key challenges and conservation developments for the five surviving rhino species in Africa and Asia.

In India and Nepal, the greater one-horned rhino population, which once numbered as low as 100 individuals in the early 1900s, has increased to more than 3,700. Strict protection by government authorities and forestry officials in India and Nepal has resulted in several years of poaching declines. In 2020, there were only two recorded losses in the state of Assam in India, the region with the largest greater one-horned rhino population, continuing the successful downward trend in poaching losses.

Nepal completed a new nationwide census for greater one-horned rhinos and the population now stands at 752, an increase of 107 from the previous survey in 2015. The census was originally scheduled for 2020, but was delayed due to COVID-19 mitigation efforts.

The increase in Nepal's greater one-horned rhino population is encouraging, but there are ongoing concerns. Population growth averaged 5% per year according to the 2015 survey. That growth rate has slowed to 3% in 2021. Chitwan National Park, home to Nepal's largest rhino population, has experienced a worrisome increase in natural rhino deaths over the past few years. And for the first time in nearly four years, four rhinos were poached in Chitwan in 2020.

Protection continues to be a key focus to increase populations. Additionally, habitat management, including removal of invasive species and creating new suitable areas, is necessary to increase food resources and the overall health of rhinos.

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“The continued growth of the greater one-horned rhino population is encouraging and the result of tremendous collaboration between the governments of India and Nepal, local and international organizations and the local communities that value their rhinos and other wildlife as national treasures,” said Nina Fascione, executive director of IRF. “With ongoing combined efforts, we can expect to see continued growth of existing populations as well as the potential to introduce rhinos to additional habitats they once called home.”

Elsewhere in Asia, Indonesia’s Ministry of Environment and Forestry has announced four Javan rhino births in the first half of 2021, increasing the world’s only remaining population of Javan rhinos to 75. The new births offset declines due to natural deaths, for a small overall population increase from 74 animals last year.

Javan rhinos are found only in Indonesia’s Ujung Kulon National Park (UKNP), where the population appears to be slowly growing. Ten years ago, there were fewer than 50 Javan rhinos in UKNP, but thanks to active and effective conservation efforts by the Park, the rhino population has gradually increased, with at least one new calf recorded every year since 2012.

“IRF welcomes and celebrates these new Javan rhino calves,” said Fascione. “The new births and continued population increase of this critically endangered species are the result of the commitment of the Government of Indonesia and Ujung Kulon National Park officials to the protection of the Javan rhino and its habitat.”

In Sumatra and Kalimantan, efforts to save the Sumatran rhino continue despite significant difficulties caused by the global pandemic. The dedicated individuals working to save Sumatran rhinos have continued their vital rhino conservation operations while facing some of the world’s worst COVID infection rates.

Due to their dense habitat, shy nature and small numbers, direct sightings and even camera-trap documentation of this species is rare - population estimates are compiled based on footprint data and other signs of presence. Despite protection and monitoring, this population continues to decline due to loss of habitat and isolation of populations, making it difficult for rhinos to find each other and breed.

“Under the leadership and guidance of the government of Indonesia’s Emergency Action Plan for Sumatran Rhinos, IRF has joined a coalition of organizations working to save the Critically Endangered Sumatran rhino,” said Fascione. “We must act now and utilize every tool in the toolbox to save this imperiled species.”

In Africa, the white rhino population, under pressure from poaching, is declining. The official current southern white rhino population estimate from IUCN’s African Rhino Specialist Group (AfRSG) remains at ~18,000 white rhino, which represents a 12% decrease for this species in the past decade. In February, 2021, South African National Parks (SANParks) released a report indicating that the total white rhino population in Kruger National Park - once thought to be the largest population of white rhinos in the world - had plummeted 67% from about 10,621 in 2011 to just 3,549 individuals in 2019.

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After experiencing a decline in poaching in 2020, due largely to border closures and lockdowns as a result of COVID mitigation measures, white rhino poaching incidents are again on the rise. South Africa reported that poaching in the first half of 2021 is higher than last year, though still below the number of deaths recorded in the same period in 2019. Authorities have also noted a rise in poaching figures in other areas of the country, possibly due to the lower number of rhinos found in Kruger.

Still recovering from devastating poaching losses since the 1970's, Africa's other species, the black rhino, has seen an encouraging population increase of 16-17% over the past decade. Though the species remains Critically Endangered, the population has increased to more than 5,600.

Namibia hosts the largest meta-population of black rhinos remaining in Africa Etosha National Park now holds the world's largest black rhino population, and rhino numbers are increasing steadily under a well-established and innovative conservation and management program implemented by the government of Namibia.

In Kenya, officials are celebrating the first zero poaching year in 21 years. Kenya's worst year for poaching was in 2013 when 59 animals were killed -- more than 5% of the national population. The poaching rate has since declined, with just four animals poached in 2019 and none during 2020

Rhinos roam in nine countries in Africa, including Botswana, eSwatini, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Not all countries report population numbers or poaching data.

Rhino Conservation Research Efforts

In July of this year, scientists working to bring back the functionally extinct northern white rhino announced they had successfully created three additional embryos of the subspecies, bringing the total to 12. They used eggs collected from Fatu, one of the last two remaining northern white rhinos in Ol Pejeta Wildlife Conservancy in Kenya, and sperm from two deceased males.

A scientific consortium, Biorescue, is leading this research with cooperation from the Kenyan government. The eggs are being fertilized in a lab in Italy. Due to their advanced age, neither of the remaining northern white rhinos are capable of carrying a calf to term, so a surrogate mother will be selected from a population of southern white rhinos if a viable embryo is developed.

Labs across the world are conducting additional artificial reproductive technology (ART) research in an effort to better understand its application to rhino conservation. "IRF continues to monitor achievements in ART with great interest," said Fascione. "Any gains in the understanding of the science behind rhino breeding could prove extremely useful."

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Wildlife crime is an ever-evolving challenge and requires collaboration and coordination within and between countries, as rhino horn trade is controlled by large criminal syndicates that operate multi-nationally.

While the act of poaching is often the most visible and most readily understood part of wildlife crime, it is the transport, trade and sale of illegal rhino horn - from the protected area, across provincial boundaries and national borders and all the way to the end consumer - that makes this type of crime not just possible, but also profitable.

During the past year, there have been some large seizures of rhino horn and several high-profile arrests of suspected wildlife trade criminals by authorities in South Africa, India and Vietnam. Training is ongoing to better analyze and secure crime scenes, collect evidence and provide testimony to convict wildlife criminals. In Vietnam, authorities have worked to secure longer sentences for wildlife criminals as a deterrent.

“Demand for rhino horn destined for black markets remains a top threat to the survival of rhinos,” said Fascione. “Continued coordination between countries for law enforcement is vital to breaking the hold of international criminal syndicates on trade.”

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

1. Remain vigilant with anti-poaching activities, or “boots on the ground,” to meet the challenge of increased poaching created by economic losses, particularly those brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Work with local communities to ensure they are active participants in wildlife conservation and receive economic incentives that improve livelihoods.
3. Continued cooperation and enforcement by governments of their wildlife crime laws and commitments to international treaties to foster more effective international collaboration on investigations to address the entire criminal supply chain.
4. Continue to improve habitats and return rhinos to their former ranges.
5. Support the activities of governments, people and organizations making a difference for rhinos.

Rhinos continue to face many threats from poaching, habitat loss, encroachment by people, and fragmented populations that inhibit breeding. “We must act today, to ensure these marvelous creatures can thrive for future generations,” said Fascione. “Let’s continue to build on our successes of greater one-horned, black, and Javan rhinos and reverse the declines for Sumatran and white rhinos, working together so rhinos can continue to thrive on Earth.”

The full report is available at <https://rhinos.org/about-rhinos/state-of-the-rhino/>. IRF will celebrate World Rhino Day on September 22 with a variety of events. More information is available at Rhinos.org.

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Enc: A full set of State of the Rhino charts and graphs is available at <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/12SRWpcTOMB3xf5NPOShlPiPqS9iJYT34?usp=sharing>