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Mongabay Series: [Asian Rhinos](#), [Indonesian Forests](#)

Flawed count puts ‘glorified’ Javan rhinos on path to extinction, report says

by **Basten Gokkon** on 11 April 2023

- *Javan rhinos, a critically endangered species found only in a single park in Indonesia, may be on a population decline that could see the species go extinct within a decade, a new report warns.*
- *The report highlights questionable practices in the Indonesian government’s official population count, which has shown a steady increase in rhino numbers since 2011.*
- *Notably, the official count includes rhinos that haven’t been spotted or recorded on camera traps in years; at least three of these animals are known to have died since 2019.*
- *The report, by environmental NGO Auriga Nusantara, also highlights an increase in reported poaching activity in Ujung Kulon National Park, and a general lack of official transparency that’s common to conservation programs for other iconic species such as Sumatran rhinos and orangutans.*

JAKARTA — Every time a new Javan rhino calf is spotted, Indonesia’s environmental authorities issue an update of the precise population number for the near-extinct species. The rhino’s entire population is confined to a single national park, filled with hundreds of camera traps that allow conservationists to monitor sightings of known, named adult rhinos as well as any new births. Since 2011, when officials started installing the camera traps, the government has reported steady growth from 35 to 72 individual Javan rhinos (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*).

According to a new investigative report, however, the seeming precision of these numbers belies serious problems with transparency, poor management of the species, and indications that the population may in fact be declining.

Among the key revelations in the report [published](#) April 11 by Indonesian nonprofit environmental NGO Auriga Nusantara is that 18 rhinos (nine females and nine males) that have not been spotted alive for years (some since 2019) are still included in the most recent population counts.

Further investigation by Auriga Nusantara found that three of these 18 “missing” rhinos have died: one female in 2019 and a female and a male in 2021. None of these missing and dead Javan rhinos were publicly announced by either the agency that manages Ujung Kulon National Park or the Indonesian environment ministry. By contrast, the government has [regularly publicized news](#) of [Javan rhino births](#), signaling a stable population growth.

“It’s an unfair glorification from the government for not publishing these losses as well,” Timer Manurung, the founder and director of Auriga Nusantara and lead author of the report, told Mongabay in an exclusive interview on April 7. “There’s a political factor at play, especially when the environment ministry has a population increase target for priority species like the Javan rhinos.”



Timer said he believes it’s highly unlikely that live, healthy rhinos would go undetected by camera traps, considering the systematic setup of the devices throughout Ujung Kulon and the fact that rhinos typically frequent the same spots within their home range. But he said he would be glad if it turns out the rest of the missing rhinos are alive and have simply been staying out of view of the camera traps.

Timer added that his concerns were shared by multiple whistleblowers involved in Javan rhino conservation, who alerted his organization to problems in Ujung Kulon and prompted his team to begin the investigation in September 2022.

“This is the only remaining population of Javan rhinos and we are in danger of losing this species,” he said.

Muhamad Ali Imron, the director for forest and wildlife at WWF-Indonesia, which was deeply involved in the Javan rhino conservation project in Ujung Kulon National Park until 2019, said it was still possible the camera traps had missed some living rhinos. He said the network of camera traps didn't cover all of the park back when his organization was still involved in the program. The environment ministry [ended its partnership](#) with WWF-Indonesia in late 2019, and the latter has since not been involved with the program.

“We would give the camera trap records to the environment ministry (until end of 2019) and the ministry has the authority to decide and release/announce the population number of the Javan rhinos,” Imron told Mongabay in a written statement on April 10.

No.	Rhino name	Sex	Year		
			2019	2020	2021
1	Dewi	Betina	✓	✗	✗
2	Rawing	Jantan	✗	✗	✗
3	Puri	Betina	✓	✗	✗
4	Puspa	Betina	✗	✗	✗
5	Dipati	Jantan	✓	✓	✗
6	Dwipa	Jantan	✓	✗	✗
7	Silva	Betina	✓	✗	✗
8	Ratna	Betina	✓	✗	✗
9	Bayu	Jantan	✗	✗	✗
10	Mantili	Betina	✓	✗	✗
11	Bety	Betina	✓	✗	✗
12	Melati	Betina	✓	✗	✗
13	Satria	Jantan	✓	✗	✗
14	Mahesa	Jantan	✓	✗	✗
15	Wira	Jantan	✓	✗	✗
16	Bagas	Jantan	✓	✗	✗
17	Prabu	Jantan	✓	✗	✗
18	Febri	Betina	✓	✗	✗

○ Found dead in 2021

○ Found dead in 2019

✓ Recorded by camera traps

✗ Not recorded by camera traps



Auriga Nusantara. A rhino protection unit discovered the body of a juvenile male Javan rhino in a mudpit in Ujung Kulon on March 21, 2019. Image courtesy of the Ministry of Environment and Forestry of Indonesia.

Misleading Population count

Auriga's report also showed that, every year from 2011 to 2022, with the exception of 2014, the environment ministry reported more rhinos living in Ujung Kulon than the camera traps had actually recorded for that year. Timer said this discrepancy was due to the official population count including any previously recorded rhino as long as it hadn't been found dead.

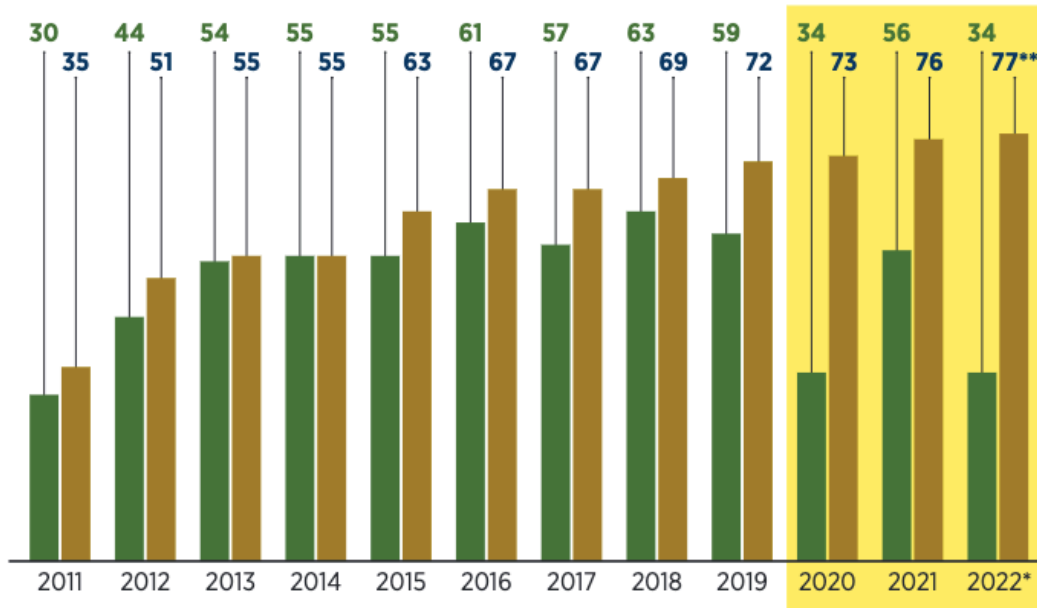
"It's misleading," Timer said, adding that the camera trap recordings on their own indicated a declining population trend of the Javan rhinos — a far cry from the stable growth claimed by the government.

By accounting for all rhino deaths — the majority of which were never publicized by the ministry — the investigation came up with an annual death rate of 1.1 Javan rhinos per year, with a particularly concerning mortality rate among females. This, Timer said, could put the species on the path to extinction within a decade without any meaningful intervention by conservation authorities and experts.

Auriga's report also highlighted worrying indications that intentional rhino poaching has resumed in Ujung Kulon since 2018, following three decades without reported incidents. The paper showed images of snares found by field officers, a hole found in a rhino skull, and deep wounds in the upper body of a living rhino. The report said Auriga's sources suspected the wounds were caused by bullets, though park officials have disputed this, saying instead that the wounds could have been caused by bamboo or other sharp objects. Auriga also highlighted the discovery of a snare positioned specifically to catch a large mammal like a rhino or banteng (*Bos javanicus*), adding that sightings of people carrying firearms and other illegal activities have been increasing all over the park.

Imron of WWF-Indonesia confirmed that communities and partner organizations in the Ujung Kulon area have reported [seeing poachers entering the coastal park from the sea](#).

Figure 3. **Javan rhino population dynamics in Ujung Kulon National Park since 2011.** Rhinos recorded by camera traps in Ujung Kulon vs population figures announced by the Ujung Kulon National Park Office or Ministry of Environment and Forestry: In the last four years, despite numbers recorded by camera traps always being lower than in 2018, the Ujung Kulon National Park Office or Ministry of Environment and Forestry consistently publicize figures suggesting the population is increasing. | Source: Anonymous Whistleblowers



* Camera trap data to August; remaining data is still being processed

** Based on explanations from the Ujung Kulon National Park Office in the media

■ Numbers of Javan rhinos detected by camera traps

■ Population numbers announced by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry

No	Name	Sex	Age class	Year of death										
				2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	
1	Sudara	Jantan	Anakan	■										
2	Iteung	Betina	Dewasa		■									
3	Sultan	Jantan	Dewasa			■								
4	Arjuna	Jantan	Dewasa			■								
5	Demang	Jantan	Dewasa				■							
6	Samson	Jantan	Dewasa							■				
7	Sari	Betina	Dewasa							■				
8	Manggala	Jantan	Anakan								■			
9	Febri	Betina	Remaja									■		
10	Wira	Jantan	Dewasa										■	
11	Puspa	Betina	Dewasa											■

- Not publicized by KLHK, and did not appear in media reports,
- Not publicized by KLHK, but appeared in media reports
- Publicized by KLHK

The graphic shows known Javan rhino deaths since 2011. Image courtesy of Auriga Nusantara.

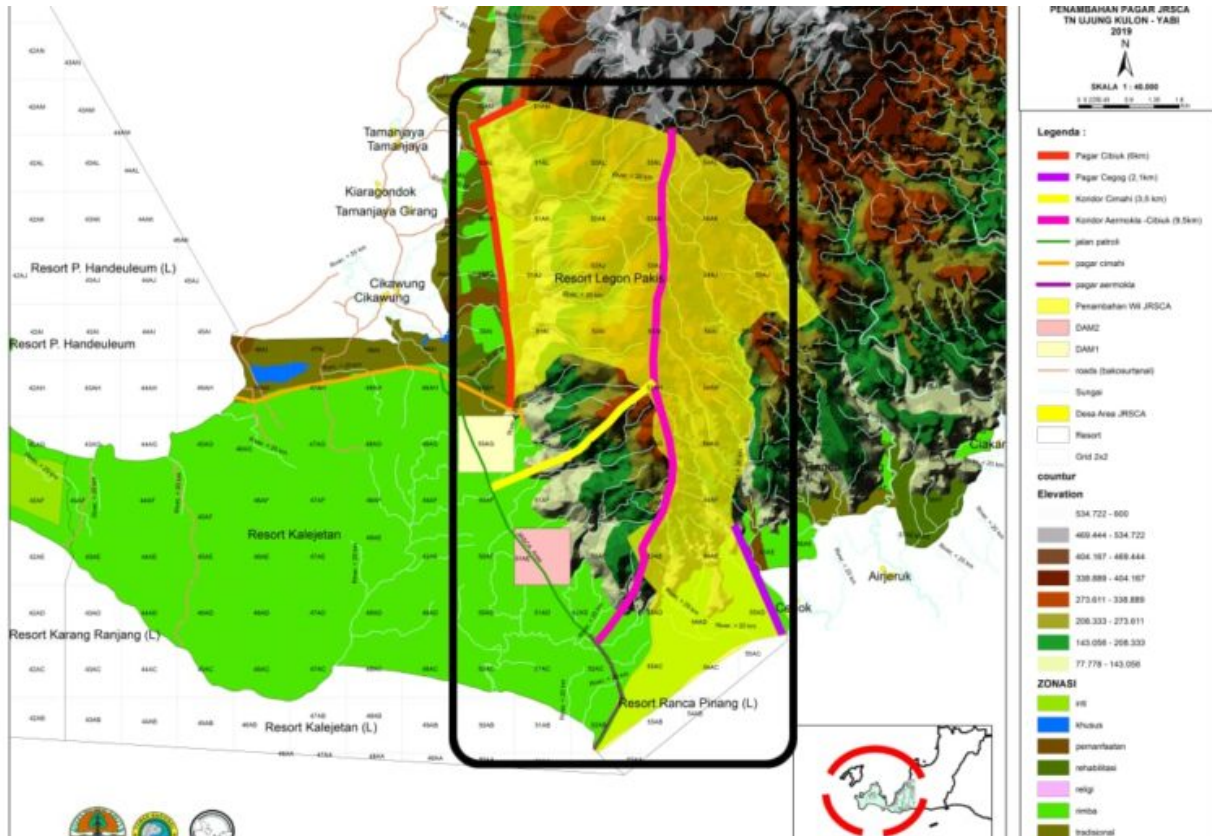
Timer attributed the recent indications of rhino poaching in Ujung Kulon to lax security in parts of the park, coupled with poachers shifting their attention to the park due to the dearth of Sumatran rhinos, a different critically endangered species, in Lampung province, across the Sunda Strait from Ujung Kulon.

The return of poaching could also explain the missing and dead rhinos, Timer said, although other concerns include the spread of parasites or infectious disease.

“But rhino deaths have hardly ever been thoroughly investigated by the Ujung Kulon park agency,” Timer said. “If rhino poaching has truly returned, this species could go extinct in just a year.”

Auriga’s report also raised other concerns about the management of the park and the Javan rhinos, such as why most of the funding goes into the

development of the Javan Rhino Sanctuary and Conservation Area, at the expense of addressing more pressing needs like [a second habitat for the rhinos, which has been put on hold.](#)



Or cialresponse

Auriga requested confirmation of its findings from the environment ministry in January, but received a response saying that the ministry couldn't provide the requested data because it was considered to be "documentation belonging to the state."

The environment ministry, however, issued [a circular letter](#), which Mongabay has reviewed, dated March 21 and signed by the ministry's secretary-general, in which it confirmed that 15 of the Javan rhinos included in the population count have not recently been spotted on camera, as well as the indications of targeted rhino poaching.

Mongabay sought further comment from the Ujung Kulon park agency and the environment ministry, but did not receive a response by the time this article was published.

Nina Fascione, executive director of the International Rhino Foundation, which has long been involved in the Javan rhino conservation program, said rhino numbers had been increasing over the decades, but that the trend highlighted by Auriga was worrying.

“The numbers in this report, which are also mentioned in [the circular letter] are very concerning,” she said in a statement to Mongabay. “IRF stands ready to help the government of Indonesia determine the exact number of rhinos and take steps to conserve them, and are already supporting Ujung Kulon National Park and other partners on increased Javan rhino monitoring and security measures.”

The IRF’s local affiliate, Yayasan Badak Indonesia (YABI), declined to comment, saying that Java rhino population figures could only be confirmed with the Ujung Kulon park agency. Mongabay also contacted Save the Rhinos, another NGO involved in the conservation program, but it referred all questions to the IRF.



Timer said the relevant stakeholders were already aware of the missing rhinos, but that none of them wanted to come forward and call out the government for fear of retaliation from the environment ministry. The ministry has previously sanctioned [NGOs](#), [conservation scientists](#) and [officials](#) who refuse to toe the official line. Timer said the current situation with Javan rhinos is similar to what's happening with other priority species, like [Sumatran elephants](#), [orangutans](#), and [Sumatran rhinos](#): official population figures for all of these species are either far more optimistic than most estimates by scientists or aren't published at all.

“This has been the talk among conservationists, but they can't do anything about it because they're under the pressure of the current political situation. We're just amplifying them,” Timer said.

Auriga proposed several measures to improve the overall management of Ujung Kulon National Park and the protection of Javan rhinos. These include using a population census technique that complies with academic standards and that's led by a free and fully independent scientific authority. The NGO also called for a restructuring of the park agency and fund management to prioritize the search for and establishment of a second habitat where some individuals can be relocated. It also recommended conducting investigations into every unnatural death and potential diseases.

“Our only focus must be the interest of the species itself instead of the ego of the managing institution,” Timer said.



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