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Mongabay Series: Asian Rhinos

Amid government inaction, Indonesia's rhinos head toward extinction (analysis)

Analysis by Jeremy Hance on 27 July 2023

- *The Sumatran and Javan rhinos, arguably the world's two most endangered large mammals, are in worse shape than widely reported, according to expert interviews and a recent report.*
- *The Sumatran rhino is down to fewer than 50 animals in the wild and a much-touted capture program has only caught a single female, which still hasn't been put into a breeding program.*
- *Meanwhile, new evidence points to overcounting of the Javan rhino population, putting in doubt the health of its population.*
- *Experts say the rhinos' predicament is in part due to a lack of will or a willingness to take risks by the Indonesian government.*

Margaret Kinnaird has worked in conservation for decades, from North America to Africa. But it was only when she started working in Indonesia that she heard the acronym NATO, or "No Action, Talk Only."

And for Indonesia's two rhino species, there's been a lot of talk.

The Sumatran rhino (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) and the Javan rhino (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*) are arguably the most endangered large mammals on Earth. Today only found in Indonesia, there are around 50-60 Javan rhinos left and fewer than 50 Sumatran rhinos.

Yet the programs to save them appear to be cratering. Multiple sources paint a picture of the Indonesian government as risk-averse and more concerned about looking bad than about saving rhinos. Critical actions to save the Sumatran rhinos have been put on hold for years — and in the case of Javan rhinos, decades.

Last year, the wildlife trade watchdog TRAFFIC and the Asian Rhino Specialist Group at the IUCN released an estimate that said only 34-47 Sumatran rhinos were left. None of the subpopulations, of which there may only be two, are likely to be viable in the long term. The much-touted capture program has only succeeded in capturing a single female, who has not been used for breeding either naturally or artificially.

Meanwhile, years of official reports that the Javan rhino population is growing have been undercut by indications that the population has been overcounted, while a decades-long plan to relocate some Javan rhinos to a second habitat continues to go nowhere.

None of this is a mystery to those working closely with Javan and Sumatran rhino, says Timer Manurung, the founder and director of conservation NGO Auriga Nusantara and lead author of a recent report on the Javan rhino that shows officials counting dead rhinos as alive, ignoring rising threats, and allegedly putting money and resources into less-than-vital programs. "All the stakeholders …know all [the] data, but they can do almost nothing. What then?"

Javan rhino

For years, reports and press releases from the Indonesian government asserted that the Javan rhino population was growing. Despite an incredibly low population surviving in a single park, the government reported a steady increase from 35 animals in 2011 to 77 in 2022. But the recent report by Auriga Nusantara blew apart the idea that Javan rhino conservation is working.

The report has four major conclusions: poaching is likely on the rise; disease may be present; authorities are inflating Javan rhino numbers; and they've allegedly mismanaged the conservation program so badly that they've put the survival of the species in jeopardy.

With two confirmed births last year, the government's official count puts the number of Javan rhinos at 77, its highest since official counts began. However, the report finds that the government tallies rhinos even when they haven't been seen on camera trap for several years. Fourteen rhinos included in the 2022 figure haven't been recorded since 2019, and one not since 2020. Three

additional rhinos have been confirmed dead — but are still counted as alive in official tallies.

"No government, especially one as sensitive to criticism as [Indonesia's], wants to admit that they have done a poor job of managing their species, especially critically endangered ones, so for me, it's no surprise that they are trying to inflate their numbers," says Kinnaird, a global wildlife practice leader with WWF.

Indeed, the report finds that instead of increasing, the Javan rhino population may be in grave decline since 2018, when camera traps picked up the most rhinos yet in a single year: 63 animals. Three years later, camera traps only picked up a total of 56 rhinos.

"Camera traps may miss a few individuals in some years," says Bibhab Talukdar, the head of the IUCN's Species Survival Commission Asian Rhino Specialist Group. He says conservationists need to wait three to five years before determining a missing animal is dead.

However, Kinnaird says she finds it doubtful that the camera-trapping regime in Ujung Kulon National Park, home to all of the world's Javan rhinos, would miss rhinos three years in a row.

"Given the extent of the area sampled and the number of camera traps deployed …this is a very weak, if not invalid, assumption," she says.

Member of a Rhino Protection Unit (RPU) measures the footprint of a Javan rhino in Indonesia's Ujung Kulon National Park. Image by YABI / International Rhino Foundation via Flickr (CC BY 2.0).

The also report notes that the park has spent hundreds of billions of rupiah on the Javan Rhino Study and Conservation Area, a 5,000-hectare (12,400-acre) site aimed to expand the animal's existing habitat and serve as a staging ground for transporting captured rhinos to a second, still-to-be-determined site. The report alleges this has been a waste of funds, and that construction here may have forced out Javan rhinos from the immediate area. Density maps in the report show that a population of rhinos that once frequented the southern section of the park has completely vanished.

Ujong Kulon authorities declined to comment, telling Mongabay to reach out to the central government, which also ignored requests for comments.

Since the 1980s, conservationists have called on Indonesia to establish a second site for the Javan rhino. A single tsunami — an outlandish-sounding but very real threat in Ujung Kulon — could wipe out the entire population in minutes. It's not

like there aren't sites available: the species used to live across much of Sumatra and Java. Indeed, it inhabited much of Southeast Asia. Yet, to date, nothing has been done.

John Payne, a rhino expert who managed a handful of captive Sumatran rhinos in Malaysian Borneo until the last one died without producing progeny in 2019, says a second site hasn't been pursued because of disagreements about the location and an unwillingness by the regional government to give up any of their rhinos.

"The reason boils down to risk avoidance, where the risk involved is not technical but political," says Payne, who adds that this kind of regional "nationalism" with dying rhinos needs to stop.

Kinnaird puts it even more succinctly: "Lack of government will."

Exacerbating the situation, a cloud of fear has descended over NGOs and researchers, especially foreign ones, working in Indonesia. For example, in 2019 the government abruptly terminated many of its partnerships with WWF Indonesia, including those involving rhinos.

Timer and other activists also cite recent examples like a group of five foreign scientists who were blocked from conducting conservation-related research in Indonesia after they challenged the environment ministry's claim that the nation's orangutans were increasing in number.

"I don't blame them," Timer says of NGOs that don't go public with troubling information. When asked if he was concerned about retaliation over Auriga Nusantara's report on Javan rhinos, he says, "We have many reports that [are] more sensitive than this."

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Read more: [As Indonesia paints rosy picture for orangutans, scientists ask: Where's the data?]

Sumatran rhino

As bad as things are for the Javan rhino, they're considerably worse for the Sumatran. If extinction is a clock, one could say the Javan rhino is at five minutes to midnight. The Sumatran? It's at 11:58 p.m.

In 2018, there was a hope that things might soon change for the Sumatran rhino. A new plan was put in place to capture more wild rhinos for a captive-breeding program.

Currently, nine rhinos are in captivity, but all of the recently born rhinos — the next generation — are closely related. For years, some conservationists had urged Indonesia to start considering catching more rhinos from the wild. Those

calls eventually become a near-consensus as the situation grew direr and it became clear that estimations of the wild population were overinflated.

In addition to pledging to catch more rhinos from the wild, Indonesia said it would do a full Sumatran rhino census, the first of its kind. Six years later, only one rhino has been captured and no census has been released.

Indeed, the species may already be extinct in southern Sumatra, leaving just Gunung Leuser National Park, in the island's north, as the animal's last stand.

Almost all sources say they believe the rhino is wholly gone from Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park in eastern Lampung province. Riszki Is Hardianto, a species specialist with Auriga Nusantara, says no rhinos have been caught on camera trap there since 2014 — almost 10 years ago.

No rhinos have been caught on camera trap in Way Kambas National Park since 2019, though Timer says it's possible a couple of animals may be hanging on. Nina Fascione, the head of the International Rhino Foundation, says rhino rangers found no signs of the animal in a section of Way Kambas last year, though she adds wider surveys may still locate a few.

"Are we worried? Yes. Are we giving up? No," Fascione says.

The potential loss of Way Kambas's rhinos leaves just two locations for potential capture: East and West Leuser. But again, no one knows how many rhinos are left here either — or, at least, no one will publicly release a figure.

Riszki estimates the East Leuser population to be just five to seven animals. However, he says the population of West Leuser is "still good," but is unwilling to put a number on it.

"So really, we only have the Leuser population remaining and I seriously doubt there are 34-47 in that landscape …but let's hope I'm wrong," Kinnaird says.

Last year, sources told Mongabay that only 18 rhinos had been caught on camera in all of Leuser in recent years, but the belief was there may be 20-30 animals in total. If that's the case, the total number of Sumatran rhinos left in the wild could very easily be fewer than 30, and maybe only 20.

All this helps explain why captures haven't happened. Leuser remains the only place for any good chance of capture, but, Riszki says, even after five years, rangers are having a hard time finding rhinos in East Leuser. And the breeding facility the government promised to build there isn't ready yet.

So why not go after rhinos in West Leuser, which seems to be the largest population? Riszki says the program isn't capturing rhinos from there currently because the population is "good for breeding" in the wild.

However, it's possible, even likely, that this population may have the last healthy, fertile wild Sumatran rhinos left on the planet.

"There is serious discussion about the feasibility of extracting rhinos from West Leuser," Fascione says. "IRF believes these animals should be captured if there is a safe mechanism by which to do so."

Kinnaird says that "terrain is difficult [in Leuser] and requires huge investment to capture and extract rhinos." Payne, however, recently compared the terrain — mountainous and densely forested — to an area where he and his team successfully captured two females in Borneo and removed them by helicopter.

But any decision has to pass through the government.

Capturing rhinos is inherently risky. A number have died in the past in capture attempts, but *not* capturing them may prove the riskiest bet for the species as a whole. If Indonesia won't capture rhinos in Leuser, the last-ditch program may have already failed.

Moreover, if the population of West Leuser is only 20-30 animals, that's hardly enough for long-term survival. The late Nico van Strien, one of the world's leading experts on Sumatran rhinos and the only one to conduct a study on them in the wild, estimated in the 1980s that for short-term survival, a population would need *at least* 50 animals. For long-term survival, he estimated 500 animals.

With the Sumatran rhino almost wholly vanishing from the wild in the last 30 years, its survival is increasingly dependent on the nine rhinos in captivity, which is why conservationists are calling for more to be caught. But even when animals have been recently captured, they haven't been fully utilized.

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In 2018, conservationists captured a female rhino in Indonesian Borneo, which they named Pahu. One of the last surviving Bornean strain of Sumatran rhinos, Pahu arguably has some of the most important genetics in the world. The Bornean rhino is a different subspecies from the animal found on Sumatra. Mixing her genetics with a rhino from Sumatra would help build vitally needed genetic diversity and health for a long-term captive population.

But Pahu lives alone in captivity in Borneo, and Indonesia has never attempted mating her with one of the males in captivity in Sumatra. Conservationists say Pahu is too small and old for mating to be attempted safely; she also has a cyst on one of her ovaries.

"[There is] no hope of [Pahu] carrying a pregnancy," Payne says.

Still, Indonesia could have been doing much more with Pahu over the last five years, conservationists argue. Kinnaird says they could have been extracting eggs from Pahu and attempting artificial reproductive technologies, similar to

what has been done for the northern white rhino. The government said in 2019 it would attempt IVF with Pahu, but four years later, it appears that nothing has happened.

Here, again, politics have gotten in the way. The regional government doesn't want to move Pahu, and the national government won't make it. Timer says the national government could easily force the regional government to let her go. In the meantime, Pahu, and her priceless genes, sits unutilized.

"Pahu's entire living genome can be saved by making a living culture of her cells, which can easily be taken from her skin," Payne says. "This has been done with the last four Sumatran rhinos who died in Malaysia. At least there is then the possibility of using her genome to make egg cells."

A final Bornean rhino survives in the wild, dubbed Pari. There was a plan to catch her in 2019.

"WWF Indonesia had a highly skilled, international team that had prepped for months to capture the one animal on Kalimantan," Kinnaird says. "We were then denied our Memorandum of Understanding with the government and all on-the-ground work ceased."

There's been no news on this front since.

A female Sumatran rhino with its calf. Image by Rhett A. Butler / Mongabay.

Biding time toward extinction

All of this means many have lost faith in the Indonesian's government's ability to save its rhino species — or its tigers, orangutans and elephants, all also listed as critically endangered.

"With massively declining wildlife numbers, Indonesia's ecosystems become less resilient, open to disease spillover, and they fail to provide the important services that improve our own well-being," Kinnaird says. "The government of Indonesia is failing its own people by turning a blind eye to overexploitation of resources, inappropriate land use, and ignoring sustainable development."

Payne, who's worked in conservation since the 1980s, says he believes those in the upper echelons of government have adopted an attitude of doing nothing for the rhinos, because doing something, especially what scientists are asking, requires risk — in some cases, a lot of risk. The idea, he says, is that if one does nothing and retires before the species vanishes, then one can escape criticism

— and someone else will be blamed when the rhinos eventually totter into oblivion.

“I think that’s part of the story,” Payne says. “Just do nothing.”

He adds: “The only hope I have is [that] we get a new minister of forestry in Indonesia. Literally, write this down. She’s [Siti Nurbaya Bakar] been there since May 2014. Nine years …If she used common sense, from my view, she would’ve said start catching [rhinos] five years ago. But she said, ‘Let’s not do that. It’s just too difficult.’ If you get a new minister of forestry and a new president …one could start again.”

The minister did not respond to requests for comment.

But Timer says waiting for a new government to take power after elections next year means waiting too long. “I think we need to start pushing.”

He adds the government isn’t just “one voice,” with many officials keen “to do the right things” for the rhinos. Timer says these include those sources who have leaked information to his organization.

He says the government could regain trust with one simple thing: “Transparency.” Legally, the Indonesian government owns the rhinos, but Timer says we shouldn’t think of the rhinos like property.

“For us, as a citizen of the country, I think we have to hammer …we have to push the government …because it’s not their species,” Timer says. “It is not [the] government’s species. It’s …let’s say, the Earth’s species.”