

The Javan rhino

A century of teetering on the brink

“It seems that this unfortunate animal will not exist long except in the Peninsula of Ujung Kulon in West Java”.

This was the prediction of one Charles W. Loch before concluding his paper in the *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1937, in which he provided accounts of hunting expeditions that took place in search of Javan rhinos for sport and museum collections.

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Specifying the likely known remaining populations at the time, Loch gave his approximate estimates for each including “Probably Extinct” in Assam, “a few, 6 say” in Palembang, Sumatra, “8” in Siam (now Thailand), “4” in Burma (now Myanmar), “3 say” in South Laos, and “12” remaining on the Ujung Kulon Peninsula.

Today, all our hopes do indeed rest on the single, remnant population in Ujung Kulon.

Whilst these population estimates from the 1930s would, by today’s standards, be seen as unreliable, they do reveal an awareness of a species recognised almost a century ago to be teetering on the brink of extinction.

Go further back to the 18th Century however, and the story was quite different. Javan rhinoceroses were reported to be rather common, with their reputation as an agricultural pest even causing the then Indonesian Government to encourage their persecution. Since then, widespread destruction of their lowland forest habitats, combined with excessive sport hunting and hunting for Traditional Chinese Medicine followed.

By 2010, 73 years after Loch’s prediction and after the species had somehow survived the destruction of the Viet Nam War, Viet Nam’s last Javan rhino was poached.

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A new hope for Sumatran rhinos!

In the dense forests of Sumatra, there's a glimmer of hope shining through the shadows. On 30 September, 2023, the Indonesian Ministry of Environment and Forestry announced brilliant news – a new Sumatran rhino calf was born, joining the eight other rhinos living at the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary (SRS).

The female calf, who has not yet been named, is a symbol of hope for her species. She is only the fourth rhino to be born at the SRS in Way Kambas National Park and the third baby for her mum, Ratu.

Indonesia's Minister of Environment and Forestry, Siti Nurbaya, shared, "This news is certainly happy news, not only for the Indonesian people but also the world. I give my highest appreciation to the parties involved in the birth of this Sumatran rhino. Hopefully, we can continue to receive happy news from the births of Sumatran rhinos and other protected animals in the future."

Following 18 months on from the birth of Sedah Mirah, another female rhino who was born to first-time mum Rosa in March 2022, the new calf is settling into the early stages of her life at the SRS alongside mum, Ratu. At 23 years old, Ratu is an experienced parent, having nurtured her first calf, Andatu, in 2012, and then Delilah in 2016. Like the calves before her, this new arrival is a great cause for celebration, whilst also serving as a reminder of the alarming state of the Sumatran rhino population. With fewer than 80 left, and the IUCN's estimate of potentially just 34–47 individuals, Sumatran rhinos are in desperate need of help. Not only are their numbers frighteningly low, but the remaining rhinos live in small, isolated populations across fragmented habitats within Sumatra and Borneo.

Alongside our partners, we're working to protect the last remaining animals and encourage breeding to build their numbers back up. Since the early 2000s, in collaboration with the International Rhino Foundation (IRF), we have been helping to fund organisations and communities working around the clock to protect Sumatran rhinos, including Yayasan Badak Indonesia, Way Kambas National Park, the Indonesian Rhino Initiative and Indonesia's Ministry of Environment and Forestry.

Thanks to generous supporters, our grants have helped to support the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary in Way Kambas, as well as funding the Rhino Protection Units working to find and protect individual rhinos in Indonesia. We have also contributed towards increasing the capacity of the Sanctuary, doubling the space available for current and future rhinos. The state-of-the-art breeding facility is a major achievement, and will be essential for this new calf and, we hope, more like her.



Today, all our hopes do indeed rest on the single, remnant population in Ujung Kulon. But the threats haven't disappeared. Invasive plants shadow their preferred food sources, whilst diseases, genetic defects, and potential poachers are a constant concern.

Ever present is the fear of the nearby volcano, Anak Krakatau. In December 2018, Anak Krakatau erupted (above), causing a devastating tsunami that killed hundreds of people and displaced tens of thousands more living on the coasts of Indonesia. The world's last Javan rhinos were just two kilometres away from the tsunami's landfall.

When it comes to Javan rhino conservation, we are on borrowed time. With much of Ujung Kulon National Park being low-lying forest, and many rhinos often frequenting areas close to the coast, it is – worryingly – only a matter of time before an eruption occurs again.

With so few Javan rhinos remaining, protecting every animal and improving their existing habitat is key for their conservation. So, too, is establishing an additional habitat within the species' former range.

