

# A single gang of poachers may have killed 10% of Javan rhinos since 2019

by [Jeremy Hance](#) on 26 April 2024

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- *A poaching case currently being heard in an Indonesian court has revealed that at least seven Javan rhinos were killed from 2019-2023 for their horns.*
- *The world's sole remaining population of Javan rhinos lives in Indonesia's Ujung Kulon National Park, with official population estimates standing at around 70 individuals.*
- *A single suspect has been arrested and indicted in the case, with three alleged accomplices still at large.*
- *The revelation from the recent indictment raises questions about security at the park, most of which has been closed off to the public since September 2023 over poaching concerns.*

It was news that rhino conservationists had long feared. Indonesian [media](#) are reporting that a poaching ring allegedly killed seven Javan rhinos (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*), and possibly more, from 2019-2023, potentially wiping out 10% of the entire global population of the critically endangered species.

Ardi Andono, the head of the government agency that runs Ujung Kulon National Park, [told local media](#) his office had not yet confirmed how many rhinos were killed, pending ongoing investigation of body parts seized from the sole suspect arrested to date.

The information came to light as the suspect, Sunendi, was indicted earlier this month in Pandeglang District Court, raising questions about the security — or lack thereof — in Ujung Kulon National Park, the last place on Earth home to Javan rhinos. Sunendi has been charged with poaching, illegal possession of firearms, and the theft of four camera traps.

## Anak Badak Jawa Jantan (Luther)



Male Javan rhino calf named Luther with his mother in 2020. Image courtesy of Indonesia's Ministry of Environment and Forestry.

According to the [indictment](#), Sunendi was arrested in November 2023 after he was pictured by a camera trap inside the park in April that year. The arrest was part of a series of joint raids by police and enforcement officers from the environment ministry. Prosecutors allege he killed at least seven rhinos between 2019 and 2023, entering Ujung Kulon National Park from the village of Rancapinang at the southern boundary of the park. Police are still searching for three other suspects alleged to be part of the poaching ring, identified by prosecutors only as Haris, Sukarya and Icut.

Sunendi [reportedly told the court](#) in detail how the gang operated. After one successful hunt, in May 2022, the defendant said that Haris sliced the rhino's neck, "just like slaughtering a goat." They cut off the horn, put it in a plastic bag and took it back to Sunendi's house to store in the bathroom. Eventually he put

the horn on the roof of his house to sun-dry it and also “so that it would not be noticed by other people.”

Later that same month, Sunendi allegedly took the horn to a dealer in Jakarta, where he sold it for 280 million rupiah, or about \$19,000 at the exchange rate at the time.

Andono said the series of raids carried out in October 2023 that resulted in Sunendi’s arrest also yielded 345 weapons from people believed to be entering Ujung Kulon to hunt. The haul included automatic firearms that in Indonesia are restricted for use only by the military.

The punishment for poaching in Indonesia is five years, but if the guns prove to be illegally held, that could add 20 years to the sentence.

Nina Fascione, executive director of the International Rhino Foundation (IRF), which works closely with the Indonesian government on conservation of both the Javan and Sumatran rhino, called on prosecutors “to seek the highest possible sentencing for anyone found guilty of rhino poaching. Other would-be poachers need to know that wildlife crimes will not be tolerated in Indonesia.”



A rhino protection unit patrols Ujung Kulon National Park by water. Image by Rhett Butler/Mongabay.

Indonesian authorities have long credited strong protection of Ujung Kulon as one of the factors allowing for a stable and growing population of Javan rhinos. However, claims of poaching have long persisted, and were escalated last year with the [release of a report](#) by the NGO Auriga Nusantara casting the government's population claims into doubt. The report not only alleged that poachers were entering the park, but also said that 18 rhinos still officially

counted as alive had not been seen in three years, and that at least three of those rhinos had been confirmed dead.

Park officials have occasionally [publicized the deaths of rhinos within the park](#), but they have cited natural causes or conflict among rhinos in those cases, and [told the press that the rhinos' horns were intact](#).

In 2021, the Indonesian government put the Javan rhino population at 76 animals. However, that same year camera traps only managed to confirm 34 individual rhinos. Given that law enforcement and the courts have now confirmed the activity of at least one alleged poaching gang, it's impossible to say how many Javan rhinos may be left on the planet.

"We don't yet have a full picture of exactly what has happened or how — there are still suspects at large and the investigation is ongoing," Fascione said. "We implore these criminals to do the right thing and turn themselves in, and for anyone with information regarding this case to assist authorities."

The poaching revelations raise questions as to how this could have happened in the first place, especially as Sunendi and his gang are alleged to have operated for four years. Rhino protection units routinely patrol the park and camera traps are set up widely. News reports say Sunendi and his accomplices knew the routines of the guards and exploited that. Since then, officials have upped security.



A park ranger examines a male Javan rhino found dead on April 23, 2018. Park officials have occasionally publicized the deaths of rhinos, but noted that these animals were found with horns intact. Image courtesy of the Ujung Kulon National Park Agency

“We have also closed the route to the entire peninsula, including for tourism, we have also dismantled the huts in Sangiang Sirah which were apparently used by hunters,” Andono told local media. “Apart from that, we also implement a full protection system on the peninsula, the area is guarded 24 hours a day.”

For decades, conservationists have been calling on the Indonesia government to establish a second site where some of the Javan rhinos could be relocated, in an effort to boost the species’ prospects of survival. Their current home, Ujung Kulon, is vulnerable to disasters such as [tsunamis](#) and earthquakes, as well as to poachers and the incursion of domestic livestock that could potentially expose the rhinos to disease. But plans for a new site have never gone beyond discussions, despite the rhinos’ precarious position.

A [paper](#) last year argued that Indonesia should also set up a captive-breeding population of Javan rhinos, similar to what's being done for Sumatran rhinos, to better protect them and increase the birth rate.

Despite the recently uncovered poaching allegations, the Javan rhinos are [still reproducing](#). In March, camera traps caught an image of a mother and a calf. Since 2022, conservationists have recorded four new calves in the park.

The Javan rhino is one of the most endangered large mammals on Earth, and one of the last remaining megafauna on the island of Java. Indonesia has already lost the Javan tiger and the Bali tiger.

"This is not just a crime against Indonesia, but against the world," Fascione said.

**Citation:**

Nardelli, F., & Robovský, J. (2022). New data on the ecology and conservation of the Javan rhinoceros *Rhinoceros sondaicus* Desmarest, 1822 (Perissodactyla, Rhinocerotidae). *Gazella*, 49, 182-205. Retrieved from [https://www.zoopraha.cz/component/joomdoc/Gazella/GAZELLA\\_49\\_2023\\_09\\_NOSOROZCI.pdf/JOOMDOC\\_ROUTE\\_DOWNLOAD](https://www.zoopraha.cz/component/joomdoc/Gazella/GAZELLA_49_2023_09_NOSOROZCI.pdf/JOOMDOC_ROUTE_DOWNLOAD)