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Poachers claim to have killed one-third of all Javan rhinos, Indonesian police say

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- *An expanding investigation into poaching of Javan rhinos suggests as many as 26 of the critically endangered mammals, out of a total population of 70-odd, may have been slaughtered by poachers since 2019.*
- *Police in Indonesia have arrested 13 alleged members of two gangs that they say were responsible for the poaching spree in Ujung Kulon National Park, the last place on Earth where Javan rhinos are found.*
- *Two other men, charged with fencing the horns, say they were destined for China; police say they're aware of at least two Chinese nationals who may also be involved.*
- *Suspicious about poaching at Ujung Kulon have swirled in recent years, but the latest revelations suggest the Indonesian government's widely criticized lack of transparency about rhino counts served to conceal the scale of the problem.*

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A staggering 26 Javan rhinos may have been killed in Indonesia's Ujung Kulon National Park since 2019, according to [local law enforcement](#).

Once roaming much of Southeast Asia, Javan rhinos (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*) today survive in a single park in Java and are one of the most endangered large mammals on Earth. If the death toll is accurate, it would amount to poachers killing at least one-third of all the Javan rhinos left on the planet in the span of just a few years.

The mass slaughter raises questions of how this could happen in what was supposed to be a heavily guarded park.

Abdul Karim, the police chief of Banten province, where the park is located, told local media that officials don't know for certain how many rhinos were killed, as the number is currently based on statements from suspects in custody and not on findings of direct evidence such as rhino horns or bones.

However, when asked by local media, he confirmed that the suspects claimed to have killed 26 rhinos.

Karim [said](#) the authorities have arrested 13 suspected members of two poaching gangs: all eight alleged members of a gang thought to be led by a suspect named Sunendi, and five alleged members of another led by a suspect named Suhar. Three other alleged members of the Suhar gang are still at large.

Police have also arrested two other men for allegedly fencing the rhino horns. In their statements to police, the suspects said the horns were destined for China; one of the fences was arrested shortly after returning from a trip to China, though it's not yet known whether he took any rhino horn there. Police say they're aware of at least two Chinese nationals who may also be involved.



Rainforest creek in Ujung Kulon National Park, the protected area home to all of the world's remaining Javan rhinos. Concerns about poaching in the park have swirled in recent years, with a spate of recent arrests confirming those fears. Image by Rhett A. Butler/Mongabay.

"The rug has been pulled out from under us," said Nina Fascione, executive director of the International Rhino Foundation (IRF), which works closely with park officials. "There have been concerns about rhinos missing from camera trap counts over the last few years, but that didn't necessarily mean they were deceased, as this species is excellent at hiding."

The Indonesian government tracks the Javan rhino population using camera traps, but no update has been released since 2019, when officials claimed 72 rhinos inhabited the park. That number, however, was called into doubt last year when the local NGO Auriga Nusantara released a [report](#) that found that 18 rhinos of the rhinos being counted hadn't been seen in three years — and that some of them were known to have died.

The report also claimed that poachers were entering the park — a claim that has proven true this year with the series of arrests and revelations.

Police arrested the alleged head of the first gang, Sunendi, [last November](#). To date, he's the only one of the suspects to have gone on trial. Prosecutors in his case are seeking the maximum sentence for poaching in Indonesia: five years. But many [experts](#) say that's not enough to deter poaching.

Park officials closed Ujung Kulon to tourism last year and say they've increased security. The IRF said in a statement that it had been "assured" that the situation "is stable now that local police and military have joined security efforts."

"As far as we know, no Javan rhinos have been poached in 2024," the organization added, noting that all the poaching revelations that have come to light at trial occurred from 2019-2023.



But even increased security is unlikely to be enough to ensure the survival of this critically endangered species; [for more than 30 years](#), experts have called on Indonesia to establish a second population of Javan rhinos beyond Ujung Kulon. They warned that the species could be wiped out by a tsunami or disease or, indeed, poachers.

Some experts have also called on the government to begin a [captive-breeding program](#) for the rhinos, similar to what has been successfully done for Sumatran rhinos (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) for decades (there are currently 11 in captivity). Sumatran rhinos are also only found in Indonesia now and are also among the most endangered large mammals on the planet, with no numbers released on how many survive in the wild for years. An [independent analysis](#) suggested only 34-47 Sumatran rhinos survive today.

If the poaching suspects' claims hold up, that would put the Javan rhino in the same ballpark. Many of Indonesia's great mammals are now considered critically endangered, including the Sumatran tiger (*Panthera tigris sondaica*), Sumatran elephant (*Elephas maximus sumatranus*), and all three species of orangutan: Sumatran (*Pongo abelii*), Bornean (*Pongo pygmaeus*), and even the [newly described Tapanuli orangutan](#) (*Pongo tapanuliensis*).

Conservationists have long criticized the Indonesian government for not being transparent about the numbers of its vanishing species. In 2022, a [leaked census](#) showed that Sumatran elephant populations had dropped by half since the turn of the century. Several scientists have been [effectively banned](#) from working in Indonesia for questioning government claims that orangutan populations were increasing. The government has also pledged to do a full census of the Sumatran rhino — but years later there has been no count released, and only one rhino has been captured from the wild from Borneo, leading some to [suspect very few survive](#).