

<https://news.mongabay.com/2024/09/sumatran-javan-rhino-horn-trafficking-indonesia-wildlife-poaching-endangered/>

## More alarms over Indonesia rhino poaching after latest trafficking bust

[DONNYIQBAL](#), [NOPRI ISMI](#)

5 SEP 2024 [ASIAASIAN RHINOS](#)

- *A recent rhino horn trafficking bust in southern Sumatra may be linked to a poaching network in Java responsible for killing 26 Javan rhinos since 2019.*
- *The arrest of a 60-year-old suspect in the bust highlights the broader crackdown on the illegal wildlife trade, including the use of cyber patrols to monitor online trafficking activities.*
- *Investigations have uncovered significant discrepancies between official rhino population figures and actual numbers, suggesting that many rhinos have disappeared due to poaching, despite government claims of population growth.*
- *Conservation experts stress the exclusivity of the rhino horn trade network and the need for specialized efforts to dismantle it.*

**See All Key Ideas**

PALEMBANG/PANDEGLANG, Indonesia — Authorities in Indonesia are investigating possible links between a recent bust of rhino horns for sale and a killing spree of Javan rhinos still being uncovered in court.

Police working with agents from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry [announced](#) on Aug. 27 the arrest of a 60-year-old man in Palembang, South Sumatra province, for allegedly attempting to sell eight rhino horns, five tobacco pipes made of elephant ivory, and three pipes made from dugong tusks. The arrest took place on Aug. 23 during a sting operation as the suspect, identified only by the initials Z.A., attempted to sell the products.

Authorities said they identified four of the rhino horns as belonging to Indonesian species, and the other four from abroad, but didn't specify which ones. Indonesia is home to two critically endangered rhino species, the Sumatran (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) and Javan (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*), each with a total estimated population of less than 100.

“This is a transnational crime,” Rasio Ridho Sani, the environment ministry's director-general of law enforcement, told reporters. “We continue to strengthen the

partnership with international law enforcement agencies, such as the Interpol and UNODC [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime].”



Rasio said the arrest followed a long investigation by the ministry’s cyber patrol, which monitors the online illegal wildlife trade. He also called for the suspect to face the maximum punishment as a way to deter future crimes. Wildlife trafficking is punishable by up to 15 years in prison and 5 billion rupiah (\$325,000) in fines, according to the revised Conservation Act.

Officials also said the sting operation was part of a larger crackdown on the illegal wildlife trade centering on networks in Sumatra and Java. That crackdown stemmed from the discovery this year of organized poaching of Javan rhinos in their only habitat, Ujung Kulon National Park, which may have killed [up to 26 of the animals](#), or a third of their total population, between 2019 and 2023.

“Rhino poaching continues to be a threat [and] we’re identifying the network in Java and Sumatra,” Rasio said. He didn’t say whether the horns seized in the August sting were linked to the poaching spree.



The Javan rhino poaching case unfolded when police in Banten province, where Ujung Kulon is located, received a report dated May 29, 2023, about [the disappearance of camera traps](#) from the national park. Footage taken by other camera traps in the park showed armed individuals inside the park, ostensibly tracking down rhinos. Police eventually identified residents of a nearby village, brothers Sunendi and Sahru, of being the respective leaders of two poaching gangs operating in the park. Mongabay Indonesia’s investigation into the case also found indications the gang were [fed information about rhino movements from an insider](#) in the park’s patrol team.

Sunendi was in June [convicted and sentenced to a record 12 years in jail](#) by a district court in Banten, having been proven guilty of selling at least four horns. The Jakarta-based middleman who connected him with buyers, Yogi Purwadi, was in July [convicted and sentenced to four and a half years in jail](#) by the same court.

However, the court on Aug. 27 [acquitted](#) Liem Hoo Kwan, also known as Willy, the buyer for whom Yogi acted as an intermediary. Despite evidence such as phone records and texts linking Willy to the transactions, the lead judge on the three-member panel overruled his colleagues to find Willy not guilty.

Prosecutors say they will appeal the decision.



A district court in Banten province on Aug. 27 acquitted Liem Hoo Kwan, a.k.a. Willy, who was implicated in the Javan rhino horn trade. Image by Donny Iqbal/Mongabay Indonesia.

Over the past decade, numerous reports have highlighted the mysterious disappearance of Javan rhinos previously captured on camera traps. According to a source in Mongabay Indonesia's investigation, the killings began in 2018 with the discovery of [the body of a male rhino](#) on Ujung Kulon's southern coast.

The source's account aligns with the findings from a [2023 report](#) by Auriga Nusantara, a conservation NGO. It reported that between 2019 and 2021, a total of 15 rhinos vanished, while three others were confirmed dead. Yet all were counted in the government's official census of the rhino population during that period. It

also highlighted [questionable practices](#) in the Indonesian government's official population count and an increase in reported poaching activity in Ujung Kulon.

Auriga's estimated for the number of missing rhinos is higher than the 11 cited in official data from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, as [reported](#) by investigative news outlet *Tempo*. Both figures are lower than the police's estimate of [26 rhinos poached](#), which investigators determined from the suspects' testimonies.



The resurgence of rhino poaching and the possible loss of dozens of rhinos have sparked concerns about the gap between official population estimates and the true number of these critically endangered animals. More significantly, recent evidence points to a declining population of Javan rhinos, contradicting the government's claims of stable growth.

The environment ministry reported that Ujung Kulon's rhino population grew from 51 to 80 between 2012 and 2022, crediting the increase to a high birth rate. However, Auriga has questioned these figures, pointing out that inconsistencies

between monitoring data and camera-trap images indicate the official counts may overlook rhinos that have gone missing. For example, in 2022, images from 132 camera traps identified only 41 individual rhinos, far below the ministry's official count of 80 Javan rhinos that year.

Wildlife conservationist Dwi Nugro Adhiasto said the trade in rhino horns was distinct from that of other protected species as the network was exclusive and the prices were so high that the market was also rarified. He added that illegal poaching networks typically used code words in their communications, such as “jacket” for a tiger skin, or “cassava” for elephant ivory.

“There must be specialized knowledge to crack cases of illegal wildlife trade,” he told Mongabay Indonesia. “Their network is small and closed.”



A Sumatran rhino. Image by Rahmadi Rahmad/Mongabay Indonesia.

*This story was reported by Mongabay's Indonesia team and first published [here](#) and [here](#) on our [Indonesian site](#) on Aug. 28 and 29, 2024.*

***Basten Gokkon**, senior staff writer for Indonesia at Mongabay, contributed to this reporting. Find him on X [@bgokkon](#).*