



Where Have All the Rhinos Gone?

THE PLIGHT OF THE AFRICAN BLACK RHINOCEROS IS BEST KNOWN, BUT THE POPULATIONS OF ALL FIVE SPECIES have declined precipitously in recent times. In the past, most of the loss, particularly in Asia, has been due to expanding human populations and habitat destruction from logging and agriculture. Since 1970, however, about 85 percent of the world's rhinos have been killed for their horns. Today, only about 10,000 to 11,000 rhinos survive worldwide.

Of the three Asian species, the Indian, or greater one-horned, rhinoceros survives in the greatest numbers. It once roamed the northern Indian subcontinent, but its habitat is largely gone. Now strictly protected and precariously back from the brink of extinction, the species numbers about 1,900 and populations are increasing. Most of the animals live in two areas: 1,100 in Assam, India (up from 20 in 1908), and 400 in Nepal (up from 80 in the 1960s). However, poaching has been flaring up and is cause for concern.

Once distributed throughout eastern India and southeast Asia to the island of Java, the Javan, or lesser one-horned, rhinoceros is found in only two known populations. About 50 animals live in Ujung Kulon National Park on the western tip of Java, and there may be 15 in southern Vietnam.

Possibly the most endangered of all rhinos is the diminutive Sumatran, or hairy, rhinoceros. Living in thick forests like the Javan rhino, the Sumatran has been reduced to mostly scattered, nonviable populations on the Malay Peninsula and on the islands of Sumatra and Borneo. Its remote habitat is being logged, few animals are in protected areas, and none has ever bred in captivity. Their low densities and remote habitat make censusing extremely difficult. Perhaps 500 or more exist, but there are no reliable estimates.

Africa's other rhinoceros, the white rhino, has rebounded from near extinction. Down to 12 in Natal, South Africa, at the turn of the century, the southern subspecies now numbers 5,600 or so in about 200 reserves and private ranches throughout its former range in southern Africa. The northern subspecies, though common around the turn of this century, is struggling to recover from the decimation unleashed by local civil unrest that eliminated all but 30 or so animals, which live in Zaire's Garamba National Park.

The latest expert estimate of the number of Africa's remaining black rhinos is 2,480. The species once could be found throughout sub-Saharan Africa outside of rainforests. Now it survives in pockets mainly in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Kenya, Namibia, and Tanzania. Although there is plenty of habitat, black rhinos plummeted from an estimated 65,000 in 1970 to 13,000 in 1980 to 2,480 today because of poaching for their horns.

—Dorene Bolze, Policy Analyst,
NZS/The Wildlife Conservation Society