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Killed for keratin? The unnecessary extinction of the rhinoceros

November 16, 2011 Written by: Terry Sunderland

Two sub-species of the African and Javan rhinos have been declared extinct in the past few months. Photo courtesy of Tony Mendez/flickr.

BOGOR, Indonesia (16 November, 2011)_In recent weeks, the newswires have been abuzz with reports of the extinction of two sub-species of rhinoceros. In late October, the reported death of the last Javan rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus annamiticus*) in Vietnam confirmed much of what many in the conservation world had suspected for some time: that this sub-species is now extinct. Sadly, in the past week or so, Africa's Western Black rhino (*Diceros bicornis longipes*) has also been declared extinct.

In Vietnam, it was an ignominious end to the Javan rhino. The last remaining individual, a female, had been shot in the leg at some point and had died from a subsequent infection that no doubt resulted in a long and painful death. No matter, the end result was the same; the body was found with the horn crudely hacked off.

Prior to the confirmation of its extinction, the past few years has seen continued speculation about the fate of the last Javan rhinoceros in Vietnam. The sub-species was rediscovered in 1988 after a poached individual was found in the Cat Tien National Park. The presence of such an iconic, yet enigmatic, large mammal that had stayed hidden from the world for so long, precipitated considerable conservation activity in Cat Tien. The Government of Vietnam, supported by international conservation NGOs mobilized significant resources to protect the last remaining population, estimated at between 7-10 individuals.

One of the last Javan Rhinos of Vietnam walking through a jungle stream in Cat Tien National Park. Photo courtesy of the Rhino Resource Centre.

However, in January 2011, it was reported in the Vietnamese press that one of the last Javan rhinos had been killed in Cat Tien, and speculation mounted as to whether this represented the last remaining individual, as so few had been encountered in recent years. In October 2011, a WWF-Vietnam report, based on extensive DNA analysis, concluded that the Javan rhinoceros in Vietnam, a sub-species that once ranged across the Mekong region up into southern China, was confirmed extinct. A related sub-species of Javan rhino (*R. sondaicus sondaicus*), clings on precariously in the Ujong Kulun National Park, in the westernmost part of Java, the most densely (human) populated island in the world. Unlike the other sub-species of rhinoceros, there are no Javan rhinos in captivity.

The African Western Black rhino, a sub-species once widespread in the savannahs of west-central Africa, was initially reported extinct in 2006, but evidence of extant individuals remained. Unfortunately, this evidence became increasingly scarce in recent years and the sub-species has also been recently declared extinct by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). A further sub-species of rhino in Africa, the Northern White

rhino (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*), which formerly had a range from Chad to northern Uganda is also nearing extinction.

It is commonly known that rhinos are hunted for their horn. Traditionally used for ceremonial dagger handles in the Middle East (jambiyas), particularly in Yemen and Oman, a trade officially banned since 1982. More recent cultural myths about the horn have led to a widespread contemporary trade, particularly to China and elsewhere in Asia. Rhino horn is promoted as a “remedy” for a wide range of ailments, from fever to arthritis to cancer, and, no doubt as a nod to its potent symbolism, as an aphrodisiac.

Yet, as is widely reported, there is nothing magical about the composition of rhino horn. It is almost entirely comprised of keratin, the same substance we produce in our nails and hair, and that comprises the bulk of animal hooves. Despite this, a kilo of rhino horn is estimated to be traded at around \$50,000 per kilo on the black market. This value is driving the current rate of hunting and it is estimated that a rhinoceros a day is killed in South Africa, despite the fact that all species of rhinoceros are protected in their habitat and international trade on rhino products is also illegal. With such a high value product, and the apparent ease of sourcing, organized crime elements have become involved in the poaching and trade of rhinos throughout their range, often using highly sophisticated hunting methods such as helicopters, high velocity rifles and satellite tracking devices.

So what is going wrong? And why do we seem powerless to protect the remaining rhinos in Africa and Asia?

Photo of two Javan Rhinos in a mud wallow in Ujung Kulon National Park, Java, Indonesia. Photo courtesy of A. Hoogerwerf/ The Rhino Resource Center.

Enforcing national and international legislation aimed at protecting endangered species is not only expensive, it is a highly polarizing issue. Conservationists have been roundly criticized for implementing what is regarded as draconian efforts at protecting species at the expense of local livelihoods, as local people are often excluded from protected areas. With each side being armed with the latest automatic weapons, shootouts between poachers and game guards have become common with numerous casualties on both sides. Protecting wildlife has become an increasingly perilous career.

Unless the trade itself is controlled rhinos will not be protected in the wild. Breaking the cartels that are able to circumvent international laws and restrictions on trading endangered species must be an immediate priority. If this means that somewhat unconventional methods are used, such as the use of the expertise of Interpol and other international law enforcement agencies, then so be it. Modern techniques are such that rhino horns can be “fingerprinted” to determine their point of origin. However, is there really the political will to control such a lucrative wildlife trade? If there were, perhaps the world’s rhinoceros populations would not be facing eradication.

In Vietnam, the WWF report concludes that the loss of the Javan rhino in Cat Tien was a “major conservation failure”. This, despite the fact that Cat Tien was one of the best funded national parks and protected area systems in the Lower Mekong. Substantial investment was made in park infrastructure for eco-tourism, seen as a source of revenue for the long-term financing of the National Park, rather than spent on direct monitoring and protection of the

Javan rhino. Although there are very few of them, visitors to the park today can meet in an impressive conference facility, eat in a 200-seater cafeteria that wouldn't be out of place in Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City and even sing the night away in a state-of-the-art karaoke club.

The one thing they won't be able to do is see rhinos.

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