

# Final stronghold

The Javan rhino, a shy, secretive species, has the dubious distinction of facing the highest probability of extinction of all large mammals on the planet. Occurring only as a single population of perhaps between 27 and 44 animals, its final stronghold is Indonesia's Ujung Kulon National Park (UKNP) on the western tip of Java, where they face habitat encroachment, and the risk of catastrophic loss posed by natural disasters such as volcanic activity, tsunami and disease.

Susie Ellis PhD | Executive Director, International Rhino Foundation

**A**nti-poaching patrols in UKNP have had their seventeenth straight year without rhino poaching. These successes were offset by news that the last-known Javan rhino inhabiting Vietnam was killed by poachers in 2010, causing biologists to declare the species extinct on the Asian mainland. Javan rhinos persist in UKNP because they are carefully monitored and guarded by IRF-funded Rhino Protection Units, elite anti-poaching teams that patrol every day.

Last month, the decomposed carcass of a Javan rhino was discovered. Its horn intact, the animal is believed to have been under 10 years of age. Three dead rhinos also were found in 2009 – two decaying carcasses and one older set of bones – probably not poached as the horns were intact. More likely, they died from natural causes or disease. In the past, there have been disease outbreaks among Javan rhinos caused by diseases spread by domestic livestock grazing in rhino habitat. This remains a major threat; even now, it is common for local people to graze their cattle within UKNP boundaries.

Recent video-camera-trap surveys conducted by UKNP staff have identified 37 individual rhinos, with only 4–5 reproductive females; previous studies conducted by WWF-Indonesia had confirmed at least 19 individuals. Faecal DNA studies are being carried out this year to back up these population estimates and to

determine the sex ratio. The death of this fourth rhino in UKNP is devastating and, combined with the loss of the last animal in Vietnam, totals a loss of 11% of the population (if indeed there are 44 animals) in the past three years. If this rate of decline continues, and if reproduction



Recently discovered Javan rhino skeleton is analysed

does not significantly improve, the species could be lost by 2030 – in a mere 18 years' time.

The population may have reached carrying capacity in the current habitat and probably cannot grow any larger without intervention. Expanding the habitat available to Javan rhinos, through establishing the Javan Rhino Study and Conservation Area (JRSCA) on the eastern side of UKNP should allow the population to increase and continue reproducing, which in

turn would help to expand the species' population and contribute to preventing its extinction. Habitat modifications (for example, removal of invasive Arenga palm and replanting with rhino food plants) have already taken place in the JRSCA. Two rhinos regularly visit JRSCA's recently replanted habitat.

Uncompleted activities include:

- constructing small bridges and a patrol road,
- providing a water supply and saltlick,
- constructing five new guard posts,
- constructing an electric fence that should significantly reduce, if not stop, the entry of domestic cattle into the Park from surrounding villages.

All of these are critical first steps to laying the foundation for the longer-term goal of translocating a subset of the UKNP population to a suitable second site (to be determined) elsewhere in Indonesia – which, given the rate of decline, needs to be done as soon as possible.

As much as we need comprehensive scientific studies, as well as community engagement, to support conservation, to inform Javan rhino management, we need to decisively act before all the necessary information is in place. Yielding to pressure from a handful of local NGOs opposed to the project, the Indonesian government has put the JRSCA construction on temporary hold. The JRSCA has the support of the IUCN Asian Rhino Specialist Group, a number of international and Indonesian NGOs, including the IRF. We see the JRSCA as the last desperate chance to set the Javan rhino on the path to recovery. We know we won't have this opportunity again.

## Thanks

Our grateful thanks to Safaripark Beekse Bergen van Dieren rijk and to Blair Drummond Safari Park for their support for Javan rhino conservation efforts.