

Asian Rhino Specialist Group Meeting: Assessment Status of Sumatran and Javan Rhino in SE Asia

By Clare Campbell



Delegates at the AsRSG Meeting, Taman Safari.

The AsRSG meeting was held on 13 and 14 March 2012 at Taman Safari in Bogor, Indonesia. This meeting focused entirely on the Indonesian rhino species. The meeting was attended by 40+ key personnel from relevant government departments, NGO's and field staff. Clare attended on behalf of ARP Director Kerry Crosbie.

Sumatran Rhino Conservation Assessment

Susie Ellis opened this session with some information on the current issues with poaching of African rhino and frightening comparison with Asian species. At the time, 97 African rhino had been poached this year alone (current numbers suggest more than 251). If this poaching pressure was applied to Javan rhino they would be gone by the end of April, Sumatran would be gone by September.

Whilst this level of poaching has not been experienced in recent years for Asian species, this is a global crisis that we need to be aware of and be on guard for any potential increase in poaching in this region. Clearly the Asian species cannot withstand ANY increase in poaching.

Even in the absence of significant poaching, the Sumatran and Javan rhino remain in a critical situation. We have lost 11% of the population in the last 2 years and they face potential extinction within the next few years. It is essential that we reduce mortality, increase breeding and resolve the habitat issues impacting the wild rhino populations.

One of the most positive outcomes from the meeting was information provided from staff working within the Leuser ecosystem indicating

population numbers for Sumatran rhino to be as high as 80 individuals in this area. Camera trap data shown by Leuser International Foundation identified at least 25 individuals from 700 frames of footage.

Significant habitat remains in the Gunung Leuser NP however infrastructure development in this region presents a major threat to the future of this population.

On a negative note, the general consensus amongst delegates was that the Sumatran rhino should be considered extinct in Kerinci NP, and mainland Malaysia. There are possibly very small numbers of rhino remaining in Taman Negara and Belum Forest however these remain doomed and unviable. Forest Restoration projects appear at this stage to be the most effective way of securing forest, with the most effective project currently in operation, the Harapan Project in Jambi. This requires funding to purchase forest but then secures the area for conservation purposes.

In Sabah, the situation is even more dire with the wild population now considered doomed and only three animals currently housed in captivity. Only 1.0 of these animals is considered reproductively viable and semen is currently being collected and stored. There are currently 51 straws stored. The Sabah project currently receives significant funding from both the Malaysian Government and the Sime Darby Foundation.

Captive breeding also remains to be a vital element in the protection of the Sumatran rhino population. With Ratu's pregnancy it would appear that the technology and expertise may finally allow more effective propagation of rhinos in captivity. This presents an exciting opportunity for population expansion and this success is credit to many years of perseverance and disappointment by the WK team aided by Cincinnati.



An Aceh rhino with a typically long horn. Photo by Mike Griffiths.



Javan Rhino images from UKNP. © Dodi Sumardi

Javan Rhino Conservation Assessment

Ujung Kulon National Park now has a new Director, Pak Mohammed Haryono, taking over from Pak Agus who has been relocated to Gunung Halimun National Park.

Pak Haryono presented along with Dodi Sumardi, senior staff member from UKNP the results of their camera trapping survey. They presented some outstanding video trap footage identifying 35 individual rhino. In several snippets the rhinos are observed in courtship behaviour as well as mothers with calves.

As of December 2011, 22 male and 13 female rhino were identified in UKNP. Of these, 5 were calves, 3 of which were males and 2 females.

These video camera traps have only covered 20% of UKNP so it is likely that the population may well be higher than 35. Of the remaining 80% habitat, probably only half of this is suitable for rhino and much of this area could also be significantly impacted by invasive plant species.

More video trapping equipment is urgently required to ensure effective survey of the entire area. The NP currently has 44 cameras; another 120 are required as soon as possible.

The current threats facing the Javan rhino population include;

- Inbreeding-small population causing immune and genetic problems
- Space and food competition-occupying same niche as Banteng

- Parasitic-transmission of infectious diseases from livestock
- Langkap and other invasive plant species
- Human activities- illegal hunting, encroachment and agriculture
- Natural disasters such as tsunami, volcano, earthquake
- Global warming-rise in sea level will result in habitat loss

The current protection strategies include;

- Maintain and then expand the wild population in UKNP by 20%.
- Establish one additional wild population elsewhere through translocation after identifying and securing adequate (> 400,000 ha) additional habitat.
- Establish one Javan rhino sanctuary to back up the in situ conservation program.

To conclude, delegates prepared a series of recommendations to range country government and non-government agencies and international donor agencies.

These included an increase resource allocation towards active protection, management and monitoring rhinos, rapid surveys of remaining small populations, further development of the JaRhiSCA project, harvesting and exchange of gametes from captive rhino, improved habitat and invasive plant management and intensifying conservation awareness amongst local people.



Removing Arenga Palm.© Dodi Sumardi