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Tracking rhino horn trade: Interview with International Rhino Foundation's Nina Fascione

Abhishyant Kidangoor

29 Aug 2025 [Africa](#)

- *A new report has found that the population of Javan rhinos has decreased since 2021 as a result of poaching.*
- *The report by the IUCN also found that the population of black rhinos saw an increase in Africa.*
- *Nonprofit International Rhino Foundation, which synthesized the data in the report, has now helped fund a tool to monitor and visualize illegal rhino horn trade globally.*
- *The tool aims to aid conservationists, NGOs and governments in informing and enforcing stricter policies.*

How are rhinos faring around the world? As per new findings, it's a "mixed bag."

According to a [report](#) published by the IUCN, the number of Javan rhinos, on the Indonesian island of the same name, have plummeted as a result of poaching. On the other hand, the numbers of black rhinos in Africa have increased.

"Trade in rhino horn is as great a threat as ever to the survival of these species," Nina Fascione, executive director of the International Rhino Foundation (IRF), told Mongabay in a video interview. While the IRF was not involved in the preparation of the report, it has played a part in synthesizing the information in it for use on the ground.

According to the report, the total global population of rhinos is at 26,700. The Javan rhino (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*) population plunged nearly a third from 76 at the end of 2021 to 50 currently. Neighboring Sumatran rhinos (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) remained more or less stable at somewhere between 34 and 47. Meanwhile, black rhinos (*Diceros bicornis*), found across Southern and East Africa, saw their population rise to 6,788 from 6,195 over the same period.

Monitoring the illegal trade in rhino horns, according to Fascione, remains the top concern while trying to protect these iconic species, four of five of which are considered threatened on the Red List of the IUCN, the global wildlife conservation authority.

The International Rhino Foundation has now helped fund a tool developed by wildlife trade watchdog TRAFFIC. The [tool](#) that visualizes poaching and trafficking data gathered over the years from around the world. Fascione said the data threw up no new surprises, especially to people actively involved in curbing the rhino horn trade.

The report highlights Qatar as a growing hub of horn trafficking. It also documents an emerging illegal trade link between South Africa — home to the world's largest rhino population — and Mongolia.

"The Mongolia piece of this is a little bit new and had not been previously part of seizure data," Fascione said.



Nina Fascione is the executive director of the International Rhino Foundation which collaborated with other organizations to develop a tool that tracks the routes of illegal rhino horn trade. Image courtesy of International Rhino Foundation.

Nina Fascione spoke with Mongabay's Abhishyant Kidangoor about what the report reveals, the need for the newly developed tool, and her foundation's plans to deal with the illegal trade in rhino horn. The following interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Mongabay: To start with, could you tell me how you got into this field of work?

Nina Fassione: Personally, I've worked with wildlife my entire career. I have been working in the rhino field for a little over five years. The International Rhino Foundation has been around for more than 30 years. We work to conserve all five species of rhinos, two in Africa and three in Asia. Unfortunately, when one is working to conserve rhinos, rhino horn trade is one of the primary things you need to work on. Rhinos are some of the most ecologically important animals I've ever worked on in my career. They are pretty special.

Mongabay: If you were to describe where we are in terms of the illegal trade in rhino horn, how would you describe it?

Nina Fassione: That's a very difficult question to answer. The numbers in our report showed a slight decline in trade in some parts, but the authors indicate that could be because of the different methodology. It's hard to do an apples-to-apples comparison. Suffice it to say that trade in rhino horn is as great a threat as ever to the survival of these species.

Poaching is undertaken by global criminal syndicates that use highly sophisticated networks of tools, technologies and people to perpetuate this trade, because there is a lot of money involved. Rhino horn is perceived to be very valuable and this illegal trade is still worthwhile to poachers and the high-level criminals that perpetuate it.



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A Sumatran rhino in Lampung, Sumatra. Image by Rhett A. Butler/Mongabay.

Mongabay: What are some of the challenges you face in slowing this down?

Nina Fascione: In my opinion, by far the biggest challenge is on the demand side. How do you get people to recognize that there literally is no value in this? There is no value to rhino horn. It is made of keratin ... the same substance as our hair and nails. It does not cure cancer. Science has proven this. It does not cure the multitude of things that people believe it does. How do you convince people who are driving this trade that it is damaging to not just the species, but our environment and our global heritage? There is no benefit except this perceived benefit. That is the biggest challenge.

Of course, there are huge technical challenges. The very work of stopping poaching so that rhinos aren't wiped off the face of the Earth — it's dangerous. Being a ranger is one of the most dangerous jobs in the world. They literally put their lives on the line every day to protect rhinos. There's technological warfare with poachers always developing different systems of poaching and of evading law enforcement. There are challenges with the reserves that try to protect rhinos needing to develop better technology to try to stop poaching. It's like an arms race of rhino horn trading, poaching and trafficking. So it is a problem of enormous magnitude.

Mongabay: Which brings me to the tool you had helped develop. Could you tell me what led to the development of the tool? What gaps were you trying to fill with it?

Nina Fascione: The tool was developed by the International Rhino Foundation's partner, TRAFFIC, and funded by the International Rhino Foundation and Save the Rhino International as a way for people to visually understand trade and trafficking routes of rhino horn.

It's based on numbers that come out every few years. It's a report requested by the IUCN Secretariat. This is done in advance of the IUCN Conference of the Parties, of which the 20th conference is happening this coming November and December. So all the parties, all the countries, contribute to this report. The reporting on rhino numbers is given by the IUCN's Asian Rhino Specialist Group and African Rhino Specialist Group, and TRAFFIC does the trafficking trade numbers. This online tool is new this year. It's an interactive way for people to visually understand the number of rhino horns moving through countries.



Black rhinos in Kenya. Image by Rhett A. Butler/Mongabay.

Mongabay: Could you paint a picture as to what the tool looks like?

Nina Fascione: It's literally a map. You can scroll over the map and you can click on countries and see the numbers from that country or territory. You can see illegal trade summaries for the countries that are involved in seizures of illegal rhino horn. That's the only way you know about it, when there are seizures of rhino horn. Obviously, we don't know what we don't know. So the tool looks at the trade routes and such. But it's just what we know.

Our hope is that it's used by conservationists, nonprofit organizations, governments, and hopefully they will use it to help inform their own policies and law enforcement efforts. This is a visual way to showcase the global pathways used in trade and trafficking. It's an easier way to understand the complex links of movements of rhino horn between countries.

Mongabay: Looking at the data, what surprised you? What were you not expecting?

Nina Fasione: I don't think there were surprises in this. Those of us that work in rhino conservation are aware of it on a daily basis. What the International Rhino Foundation does, among other things, is that we use all the tools in the toolbox to protect rhinos. We do habitat conservation work, biological management, genetics, and we do captive breeding. We do everything that an organization should do to save the species. But fighting poaching is, far and away, the number one thing we need to focus on to save the species. So it's not a surprise to us that, say, 1.8 tons of horns were seized. It was not a surprise to us that the largest seizure by weight was in South Africa en route to Malaysia. It comes from South Africa, the country with the largest rhino population, and the end countries tend to be in Asia, countries like China and Vietnam. Sadly, nothing is a surprise. It's helpful information because we're fighting this battle on a daily basis.

The report did talk about an emerging illegal trade link between Mongolia and South Africa. And the Mongolia piece of this is a little bit new and had not been previously part of seizure data.



Thai Customs officers display rhino horns seized at an airport in 2017. Image by Associated Press/Sakchai Lalit.

Mongabay: What are the next steps? How are you planning on using this data?

Nina Fascione: The next steps are continuing to fight this war. The really brave men and women that are fighting this crime at all levels, from the rangers on the ground, to reserve managers to even the corporations or individuals that own reserves in Africa that have to put so much of their own resources into protecting this animal — because they value and appreciate having rhinos on the landscape and understand the role that rhinos play in our ecosystem — their lives are on the line to save rhinos.

The International Rhino Foundation will continue to do what we do, which is to draw attention to this matter, to raise funds to put people on the ground, to support our partners on the ground, to build capacity for fighting and hopefully get ahead of this constant war on crime.

Rhino poaching is a crime. It's a law enforcement issue. It is not just a conservation issue. These global syndicates that are poaching and doing this trade and trafficking of rhino horn are the same gangs that are smuggling drugs. We're up against a lot and it will take a collaboration of all the entities, from the reserves to NGOs to the

governments to law enforcement agencies, to put an end to this and ensure that we have these really important species around for generations to come.

We will keep fighting the fight. We will keep doing what we're doing. I'm thrilled by the press attention which helps make people understand that this is important too. Rhinos matter. Biodiversity matters. Saving species matters.

Mongabay: If we were to speak again in five years, what do you hope you'll be telling me about this issue? What is the most realistic best-case scenario in your head?

Nina Fascione: We can talk in time frames of three years which is how often this report comes out. In three years, let's hope the trafficking numbers are reduced and the rhino numbers have increased. Five or six years from now, when we're talking about it, I hope the demand decreases and that there is recognition that this is a made-up market. There's not a real value in rhino horn. There's some evidence that younger generations aren't turning to rhino horn for traditional Chinese medicine the way their elders did. So that's my hope: that the demand is reduced. And in the meantime, I also hope that the protection side is strong enough to stay one step ahead or a couple of steps ahead of the poachers.

Banner image: A rhino in South Africa. Image by Elena Blessing via Pexels (Public domain).