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Latest rhino assessment finds two species recovering, but three continue to decline

Spoorthy Raman

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- *Rhino poaching persists despite a slight decrease worldwide over the last three years, driven by relentless demand for their horns in East Asia, according to a recent report by TRAFFIC and the IUCN.*
- *Three of the world's five rhino species are still in decline, the report finds, with white rhinos in Africa dwindling to an almost two-decade low.*
- *Greater one-horned rhinos in India and Nepal are recovering well, while Indonesia's Javan and Sumatran rhinos — both critically endangered species — continue to teeter on the brink of extinction.*
- *Experts say increased intelligence and cross-border cooperation, stronger community programs and enforcement, and stricter sentences for traffickers are needed to save these megaherbivores.*

Over the last two decades, conservationists have fought a formidable battle: Trying to protect the world's remaining rhinos in Africa and Asia from poachers. The slaughter is driven by relentless demand for rhino horn in East Asia, where it's a status symbol and used in traditional medicine, despite studies debunking any medicinal benefits. On the black market, these horns are worth more than their weight in gold or diamonds.

Despite millions of dollars invested in rhino conservation — from recruiting armed guards to exploring assisted reproduction — rhinos continue to be killed. But there's also progress in conserving them. Dehorning has reduced their slaughter, communities are rallying behind rhinos, and some rhino populations have bounced back from historic lows.

A new comprehensive report by wildlife trade watchdog TRAFFIC and IUCN, the global wildlife conservation authority, on the world's five rhino species presents a mix of good news and bad news: While there have been fewer reported incidents of poaching and fewer rhinos killed since 2021, three out of the five species are still declining.



An Indian rhinoceros, also called the great one-horned rhino, with a calf in Assam, India. Native to the Indo-Gangetic Plain, these rhinos are recovering from years of poaching thanks to conservation actions. Today, there are an estimated 4,075 individuals in the wild, a small but significant increase from previous estimates. Image courtesy of Rohit Girotra via [iNaturalist \(CC BY-NC 4.0\)](#)

White rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum*) from Africa were hit particularly hard by both poaching and climate change-fueled droughts. The two critically endangered Indonesian rhino species — the Sumatran (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) and Javan (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*) — continue to be imperiled. On the other hand, India and Nepal's greater one-horned rhinos (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) showed significant recovery, while black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) numbers in Africa also showed a modest increase.

Because rhinos are dangerously close to extinction, a status update is [required](#) by CITES, the global treaty regulating wildlife trade, every three years before its Conference of the Parties (COP) meeting. Experts from TRAFFIC work with rhino experts from IUCN to put together this status report, which provides a periodic update on population trends, legal and illegal trade dynamics, and challenges to rhino conservation across Asia and Africa.

This report will inform discussions at the 20th CITES COP meeting, scheduled for November in Uzbekistan, where delegates from countries around the world will decide on the future of trade in several wild species, rhinos included.

“It is essential to see the trends over time, which is exactly what this report has been doing for years,” said Nina Fascione, executive director of the nonprofit International Rhino Foundation.

Poaching and climate change threaten Africa’s rhinos

The report estimated Africa’s rhino population — both white and black — at 22,540 in 2024. Critically endangered black rhino numbers increased by about 10%, from 6,195 in 2021 to 6,788. But the more abundant white rhino, considered near threatened on the IUCN Red List, fell by about 200 during the same period, from 15,942 to 15,752. After a slight increase in 2022, white rhino numbers have fallen by 11.2% since 2023, hitting a two-decade low.

“The decline in white rhinos is really discouraging … with all the efforts put into rhino conservation,” Fascione said. “White rhinos are vastly more targeted for poaching than black rhinos are, and so that’s what’s killing white rhinos — literally.”



A black rhino in South Africa, home to the world’s largest rhino populations. Native to East and Southern Africa, critically endangered black rhinos are battered by poaching. The report finds a modest increase in their numbers since 2021, with an estimated 6,788 individuals in the wild. Image courtesy of Yathin Krishnappa via [Wikimedia Commons \(CC-BY-SA-3.0\)](#)

The seemingly insatiable demand for their horns remains the biggest threat to the continent’s rhinos. “Poaching still plays an important role in shaping population trends in

some areas, but its relative influence on the overall continental decline has been reduced in recent years as other pressures have intensified,” Sam Ferreira, who coordinates the Red List Authority for the IUCN’s African Rhino Specialist Group, told Mongabay by email.

High on that list are extended multi-year droughts, driven by climate change, that have desiccated rhino habitats in [Southern](#) and [East Africa](#), starving these megaherbivores. Another serious issue is that across Africa, rhino populations are fragmented into small populations, which makes them more vulnerable to environmental pressures from disease, drought, habitat loss and inbreeding, Fascione said. Big herds face a different risk. “Large populations are what’s appealing to poachers,” she said.

It’s also increasingly difficult to manage rhinos across large geographical and political landscapes with varied governance structures and policies.

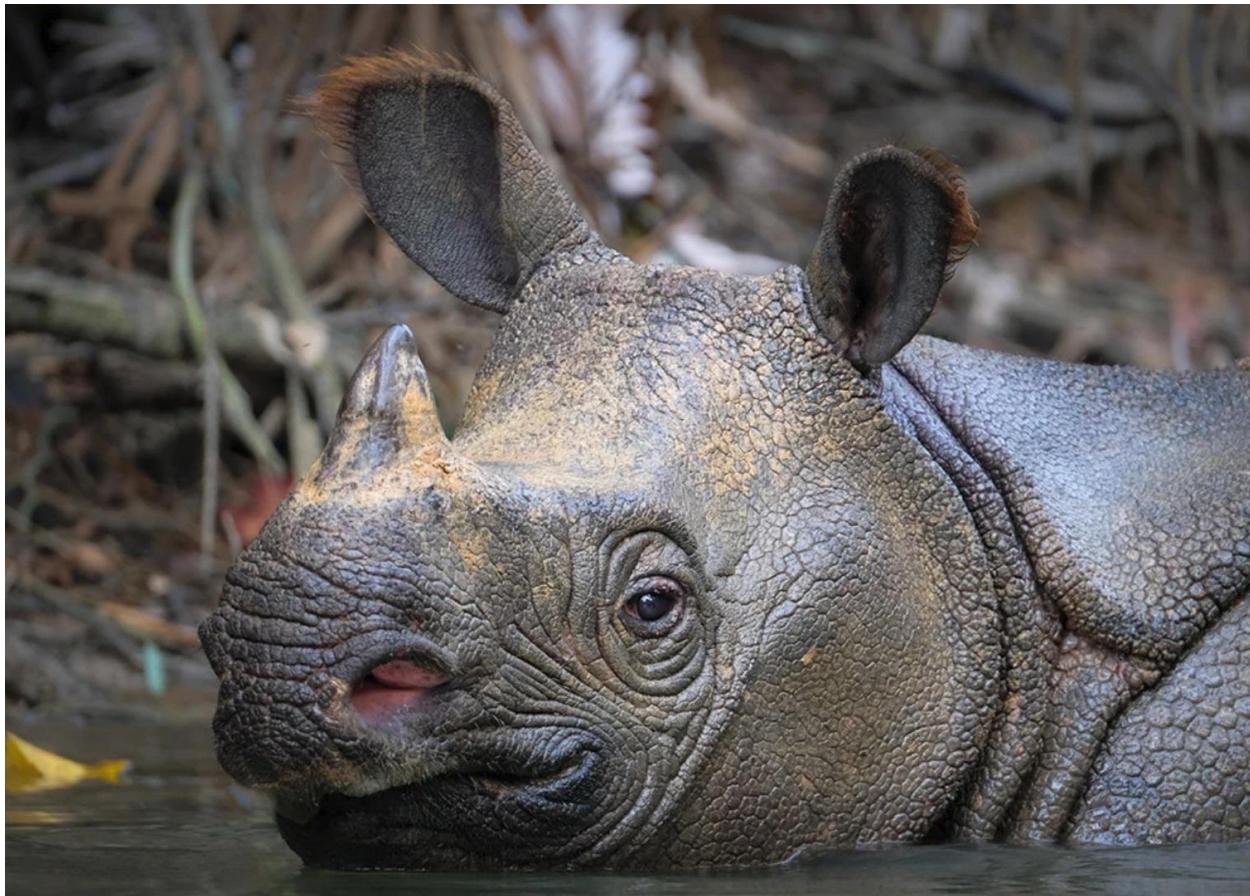
But overall, poaching in Africa dropped from 540 documented incidents in 2021 to 516 in 2024.

A long road to recovery for Asian rhinos

The recovery of the greater one-horned rhino, also known as the Indian rhino, is a growing success story. In 1904, [perhaps two dozen remained](#) in India’s Assam state. The population surged to 1,500 by the 1980s, and since then has grown [by 170%](#) to 4,014 in 2024. This report tallied 4,075, with nearly 80% of them in India and the rest across the border in Nepal.

Bibhab Talukdar, chair of the IUCN Asian Rhino Specialist Group, attributed this growth to strong protection and decreased poaching in the two countries. India has improved [surveillance and monitoring](#), [restored habitats](#) and [built wildlife corridors](#) between protected areas, allowing [rhinos to disperse](#). The species is still considered vulnerable on the IUCN Red List.

Meanwhile, the two critically endangered Indonesian rhino species are [still hanging on by a thread](#). In 2023, Indonesian authorities reported 76 Javan rhinos, but with the [killing of up to 26 rhinos by poachers](#) in 2024, that number may have dropped to just 50. Six [calves](#) born last year offer a glimmer of hope.



A Javan rhinoceros in Indonesia. A critically endangered species, Javan rhinos have been victims of massive poaching in the last three years, with poachers killing nearly a third of the wild individuals. Today, only about 50 survive in the wild. Image courtesy of Royle Safaris via [iNaturalist](#) (CC BY-NC 4.0)

Sumatran rhinos are in an even more precarious state, with just 34-47 remaining in the wild. Recent news of the [rediscovery](#) of a once-lost population of these elusive rhinos in an Indonesian national park has cheered conservationists.

Counting rhinos is a challenge

True rhino numbers are tough to assess. While the report presents the best available estimates, counting the second-biggest mammal on the planet is a tricky business.

“It’s difficult to get accurate population counts because in some areas, rhinos are very elusive,” Fascione said, and not all countries report their numbers accurately and on time.

In some cases, reporting healthy rhino populations can endanger the animals. “It’s almost like you’re putting an alert out for the poachers,” Fascione said. And for places that have lost rhinos, the numbers “might be embarrassing.”

In her work as TRAFFIC's specialist for elephant and rhino trade, Sharon Baruch-Mordo has seen firsthand why there are gaps in data. Rhino poaching and horn trafficking are illegal, and as with any criminal activity, it's difficult to get accurate data. The only available trafficking data come from seizures, and there's no way to estimate what slips through undetected.



The largest and most populous of all rhinos, the white rhino, is the most pursued by poachers. The report finds that droughts, fragmented populations, and management limitations, in combination with poaching, have caused an 11% decline: only 15,752 individuals are left in the wild. Image courtesy of AfricanConservation/Working with Wildlife via [Wikimedia Commons \(CC BY-SA 4.0\)](#)

This trade is run by the same transnational crime syndicates that also smuggle drugs, weapons and people. The Wildlife Justice Commission, an investigative nonprofit, estimated that trade in rhino horn over the past 10 years was worth anywhere between [\\$874 million and \\$1.13 billion](#).

“The report doesn’t necessarily give all the answers, but it’s just posing some opportunities to investigate [these criminal syndicates],” Baruch-Mordo said.

Illegal killing and legal trade continues

The report found that from 2021 to 2023, somewhere between 676 and 853 rhino horns found their way into the illegal trade annually. Three years ago, that estimate ran from 1,531-1,729. However, these numbers are hard to interpret and can’t be compared like-for-like, the authors say, because of statistical adjustments in how horns are counted. Without these adjustments, the most recent numbers would be 1,160-1,289 horns, a much smaller change.

There was also a substantial 81% decrease in the number of rhino horns seized in 2023 — about 150 — compared to 600 in 2019. Between 2021 and 2023, nearly 1.8 metric tons, the equivalent of about 716 horns, were seized. South Africa had the largest single seizure, 160 kilograms (353 pounds) destined for Malaysia.

Unlike ivory and pangolin scales, multi-ton seizures of rhino horns are rare because each horn only weighs around 1-3 kg (2.2- 6.6 lbs), while an elephant tusk weighs anywhere from 36-70 kg (80-154 lbs).

South Africa has the most rhinos of any country — mostly white rhinos — and it remains the most heavily targeted by poachers. It's also one of only two countries, the other being Namibia, that allow licensed hunting of rhinos.

Nearly 90% of trafficked horns from African species originate from South Africa, and there's been a startling increase in poaching since early 2025, with 91 rhinos killed between January and March.



Seized rhino horns ready to be destroyed. The report finds that between 2021 and 2023, an estimated 676 – 853 rhino horns entered the illegal trade each year. Image courtesy of Joanna Gilkeson/USFWS via [Wikimedia Commons](#) (Public domain).

Chad lost two female black rhinos in March to poaching. In India, nine greater one-horned rhinos were killed between January 2021 and December 2024, with another four slayed in Nepal. In Indonesia, poachers arrested by police claimed to have killed up to 26 Javan rhinos between 2019 and 2023 in Ujung Kulon National Park, the only place on Earth where the species is found.

African rhinos still a target for trophy hunters

In addition to the illegal trade, the legal trade in some of these severely threatened rhinos persists, including as hunting trophies and live individuals. All rhino species are listed on Appendix I of CITES, meaning their commercial international trade is prohibited. But certain rhino populations in South Africa, Namibia and Eswatini are classified as Appendix II, which means their commercial trade is regulated with permits.

The report noted 276 live rhinos traded during 2022-2024, mostly white rhinos, with the U.S. being the top destination. These exports were primarily for zoos and breeding programs, according to the CITES trade database. Another 379 rhinos were hunted as trophies, with most trophy hunters coming from the U.S.

Regulated rhino hunting in Namibia and South Africa, the report states, “occurs at low levels relative to national populations” and “contributes measurable revenue that can support conservation when transparently reinvested.”

A black rhino hunt can fetch anywhere from \$170,000 to \$250,000. The most recent numbers for white rhino hunts stood at \$88,208 per hunt in 2018. However, the claim that trophy hunting contributes to conservation is highly contentious, and many have argued that it's rife with corruption and does little to help local people — or rhinos.

For the upcoming CITES meeting, Namibia has sponsored a proposal that would amend the rhinos' current Appendix II status in the country to allow international trade in live animals for conservation, as well as hunting trophies and trade in rhino horn stockpiles.



A mother and her calf poached for their horns in South Africa. The report found that poaching to meet the international demand for rhino horn continues to threaten all rhino species. Image courtesy of Hein waschefort via [Wikimedia Commons \(CC-BY-SA-3.0\)](#)

The situation in Namibia has changed dramatically in recent years, becoming much more dangerous for rhinos. “Namibia has an outstanding conservation record and has made remarkable progress in recovering its rhino populations,” Ferreira said. From 2005 to 2024, the country’s white rhino population increased from 293 to some 1,500, and black rhinos from 1,141 to 2,098. But that progress is reversing. In the past three years, poaching incidents surged, with 95 rhinos poached in 2022, 77 in 2023, and 83 in 2024, Ferreira said.

Fascione said similar attempts to loosen trade rules for rhinos have been rejected at previous CITES COPs. She said she believes that Namibia’s proposal will meet the same fate because “more evidence would be needed to show that legalizing horn trade would contribute to rhino conservation.”

Permitting any form of commercial rhino trade is a slippery slope: evidence from loosened trade rules on ivory and other animal products has proven that opening that door increases demand and poaching. Experts note that trade in stockpiles [could open the floodgates](#) for illegal trade. “There are too many risks … we have to tackle this problem some other way,” Fascione said.

Those risks were made abundantly clear this August, when John Hume, a rhino breeder in South Africa (where the domestic horn trade is legal), was [arrested and charged](#) with selling horns to buyers in East Asia, using fraudulent domestic permits. Determining the exact stockpiles in a country is also a challenge — as the report highlights — because some countries, such as South Africa, underreport these numbers. There’s also the [risk of stockpiles being stolen](#) and ending up in the illegal trade.

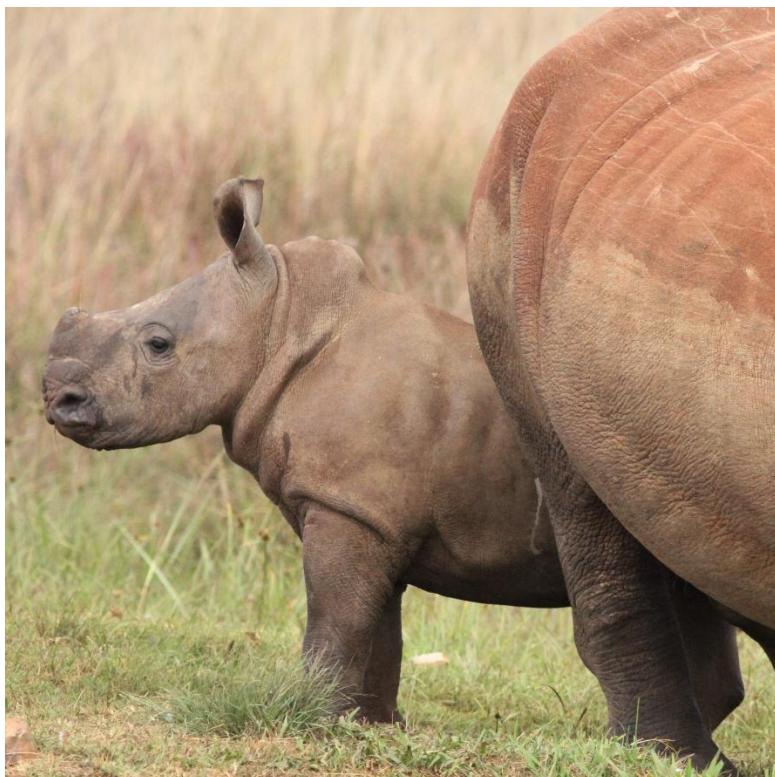
The road ahead for rhino conservation

Despite disturbing, generally downward trends, this report highlights some bright spots for rhino conservation in Africa and Asia. Many countries have tightened law enforcement, successfully convicted poachers, and handed out longer sentences, which act as deterrents.

Several organizations and governments have tried rewilding rhinos to help them thrive in remaining habitats. In 2023, after the NGO African Parks bought Hume's private rhino farm, it launched an initiative to rewild the farm's 2,000 rhinos over a 10-year period. In India, rhino translocations have played a key role in their expanding numbers.

In 2024, scientists achieved the world's first IVF rhino pregnancy by transferring a lab-grown white rhino embryo into a surrogate mother, raising hopes for using assisted reproduction techniques in rhino conservation.

Governments and NGOs are also working with local communities to save rhinos. For instance, in India, the International Rhino Foundation is partnering with communities around Manas National Park to remove invasive plant species and restore 20 hectares (50 acres) of prime rhino habitat. In Zimbabwe, rhinos have been reintroduced on community-owned lands.



A dehorned rhino calf in South Africa, where most rhino poaching incidents occur. A 2025 study found that dehorning rhinos reduces poaching by 80%. Image courtesy of Derek Keats via [Wikimedia Commons \(CC BY 2.0\)](#)

But challenges remain, including corruption (the trade is extremely lucrative), limited resources for protection, and slow prosecutions. Guards are often outgunned, up against poachers armed with state-of-the-art weapons.

Gaps in coordination also hamper rhino conservation, and trafficking networks are hard to crack, Ferreira said. “Addressing these challenges requires sustained political will, increased and well-targeted funding, adoption of modern enforcement tools, and stronger community participation.”

“Rhinos are indeed megaherbivores that play an outsized role in our ecosystems by spreading seeds and regenerating [the landscapes they live in] ... and they are a massive, massive tourism draw,” Fascione said. “Hopefully, governments recognize the important role rhinos play and what they bring to us as humans and to our societies.”

Banner image: A Sumatran rhino with a four-day-old calf. This critically endangered species is the smallest of all rhinos, and just 34-47 individuals survive in the wild. Image courtesy of International Rhino Foundation FunkMonk via [Wikimedia Commons \(CC BY 2.0\)](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Sumatran_rhino_and_calf.jpg&oldid=1000000000)