

The rhinoceros, under siege but not lost

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For millennia, the rhinoceros stood as one of Earth's great survivors, armored and immense, its bulk anchoring the landscapes of Africa and Asia. Today, it's perilously close to vanishing. A [recent report](#) by wildlife trade watchdog TRAFFIC and the IUCN, the global wildlife conservation authority, reads like a somber register of loss and resilience. It records populations buffeted by poachers, weakened by drought, and fragmented into ever-smaller herds.

The numbers tell a grim story. White rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum*), once abundant across Southern Africa, have slumped to their lowest level in two decades. Javan rhinos (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*) may now number barely 50. Sumatran rhinos (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*), scattered and elusive, can be counted in the dozens. Each life lost is not only an individual destroyed, but a step toward the silence of extinction.

The toll is driven by a market as ruthless as it is irrational. In East Asia, horns are still traded as medicine and trophies, worth more than gold or diamonds despite being nothing more than keratin, the same substance as fingernails. Syndicates that smuggle drugs and guns also move rhino horn. Guards patrol with outdated rifles against poachers armed with modern weapons. Climate change has compounded the danger: parched savannas and withered forage leave animals weakened and exposed.

Yet the report doesn't end in despair. Greater one-horned rhinos (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) in India and Nepal have rebounded from near-extinction to more than 4,000. Black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*) numbers are inching upward. Communities in Africa and Asia are restoring habitats and taking pride in living alongside these giants. Dehorning has reduced killings by four-fifths in some regions. Even technology offers glimmers of hope: the first successful IVF pregnancy in a rhino was recorded last year.

To lose the rhinoceros would be to tear a living page from Earth's history. That outcome is not inevitable. The report makes plain that with vigilance, political will and community resolve, the decline can be halted, even reversed. Against long odds, recovery remains within reach. That should be the message of today, World Rhino Day.

Banner image: Sumatran rhino at the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary. Image by Rhett A. Butler/Mongabay.

