

Endangered Javan Rhinos Need More Secure Conservation Site: Study

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A new collaborative study published on Tuesday (09/05) underlined the urgency of creating a safer conservation area for the remaining few Javan rhinoceros — *Rhinoceros sondaicus* — due to risks from natural disasters at their present site.

The study, entitled "Preventing Global Extinction of the Javan Rhino: Tsunami Risk and Future Conservation Direction," published in the *Conservation Letters* journal, was conducted by conservationists from Indonesia and around the world, including authors from Ujung Kulon National Park Authority, World Wild Fund Indonesia, Indonesian Rhino Foundation, Global Wildlife Conservation and Colorado State University.

"What we found in this study should create a good momentum for our efforts to save the Javan rhino, considering that we are racing against time," WWF Indonesia conservation director Arnold Sitompul said in an official statement issued on Friday (12/05).

Javan rhinos are in the critically endangered category on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species. Poaching has left only a single, isolated population of Javan rhinos in Ujung Kulon National Park, Banten.

Using a camera trap, the researchers found the population of Javan rhinos in 2013 was 62, which increased to 63 in 2015. They claimed the number to be near the national park's current carrying capacity.

The national park itself is located on the southwestern edge of the island of Java, within close proximity to Mount Anak Krakatoa volcano and Indonesia's Sunda Arc, an area of converging tectonic plates which often cause earthquakes and may lead to tsunamis.

A 10-meter high tsunami is projected to occur within the next 100 years, which could drown 80 percent of the national park's high-density population of rhinos.

Mount Anak Krakatoa poses an additional threat for the rhinos as well. Its eruption would be strong enough to create big waves of up to 8 to 21 meters.

The study stressed tsunami is not the only threat to the rhinos. Other threats include poaching, outbreak of disease and loss of food due to proliferation of invasive species.

Establishing new colonies

Brian Gerber, a postdoctoral fellow at Colorado State University and one of the authors of the study, highlighted the need to shore up the population of Javan rhinos to ensure the survival of the species.

"The Javan rhino is the most endangered land mammal in the world," he said. "We need the social and political will to move things forward and establish additional populations."

Discussions to establish a second population of Javan rhinos have been going on for over two decades within the conservation community and in the Indonesian government, the study said. But until today, there's no alternative conservation place for the endangered rhinos.

There are still risks in separating the current population, but according to the researchers, such risks pale in comparison to keeping the whole population in an unsafe habitat.

Moreover, information on individual rhinos obtained from cameras used in calculating the population size can help identify exact individuals to be translocated.

In the meantime, the researchers urged Ujung Kulon National Park to step up efforts in protecting the rhino population through strict monitoring and habitat management.

That includes controlling the growth of Arenga palm, which shades the forest floor and prevents growth of plants that rhinos consume.

"We're proud of our achievement to boost the Javan rhino population, as revealed in this study," Ujung Kulon National Park Head Ujang Mamat Rahmat said.

"We've conducted studies on prospective areas for a second habitat. In the meantime, we will improve security patrols and increase our carrying capacity through invasive species control."

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