

Our rhino neighbours: can they survive?



A Sumatran rhino with her calf. [Photo: International Rhino Foundation.]

Sumatran rhinos live next door to us, in Indonesia. CHEW WEI SHAN finds out what is being done to conserve the species.

The Sumatran rhinoceros has just gone extinct in Malaysia. Their last rhino, Iman, died in November last year. Now, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) says there are less than 80 Sumatran rhinos left in the whole world. This makes them critically endangered.

Iman was a 25-year-old female Sumatran rhino. She had been suffering from painful tumours that were growing in her uterus. Because of the pain, her body went into shock, explained Datuk Christina Liew, minister of State Tourism, Culture and Environment. Iman's organs could not receive enough blood flow to keep her alive despite the Borneo Rhino Sanctuary's care.

Iman's death is a "tragic development for this species", laments Jon Paul Rodriguez, chairperson of the IUCN's Species Survival Commission.

HOW MUCH AT RISK?

WWF uses these terms to classify species according to how close they are to becoming extinct:

Least Concern → Near Threatened → Vulnerable → Endangered → Critically Endangered → EXTINCT

Smallest of rhinos

The Sumatran rhino can grow up to 1.5 meters tall, 4 meters long, and weigh over 900 kilograms. Even at that size, they are the smallest of the rhinoceros family. They are also the hairiest of the rhinos and have reddish-brown skin. They have two horns, but do not use them for fighting. Instead, their horns protect their noses as they travel through dense vegetation, and also help them to scrape mud and pull on plants for food.

These rhinos were once found all over Southeast Asia. They thrived in the mountain forests of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, and even the Himalayas. Today, there are only a few left in **isolated** pockets within Indonesia.

Poaching and habitat loss have caused the Sumatran rhinos' numbers to fall more than 70 percent in the past 20 years. They are hunted for their horns, even though horns are made of the same material as our fingernails and hair — keratin. But, as rhino horns are believed to have healing properties, they are used in traditional Chinese medicine. Some cultures in the Middle East and North Africa also use rhino horns to make decorative handles for daggers.

Now, their biggest threat is isolation, warns the BBC. Their populations are too **fragmented**. This means that they must travel very far to find a mate to have babies. The more forested areas are segmented by roads and towns, the further separated the rhinos become. Worse, if female rhinos go too long without mating, they are likely to develop tumours that then make them unable to give birth.

Last hope

“The species' last hope lies in Indonesia,” says Mr Rodriguez. “We are committed to continuing our work to support the government of Indonesia's Emergency Action Plan to save this species.”

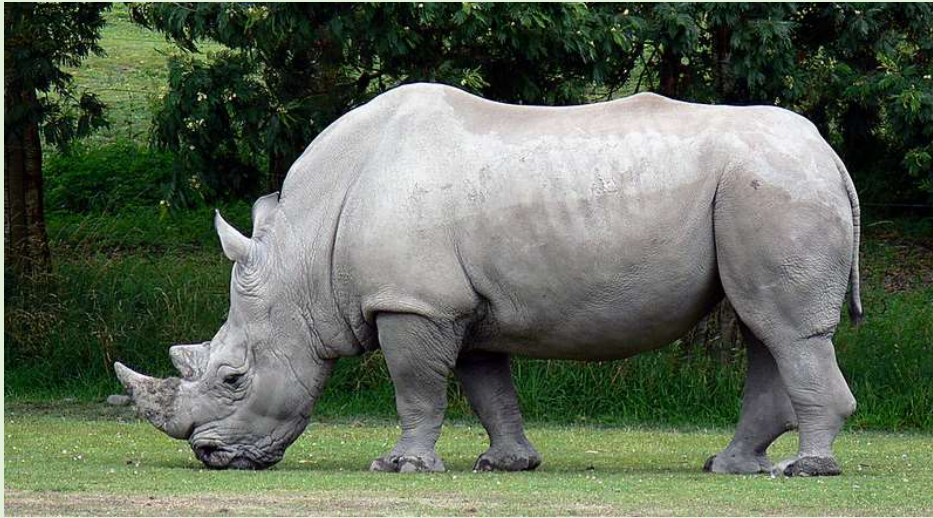
Indeed, organisations around the world are ramping up their efforts. In 2018, global organisations such as the National Geographic Society teamed up with the Indonesian government, forming an **alliance** to protect the Sumatran rhino.

The Sumatran rhino is now legally protected. Their habitats are guarded by Rhino Protection Units. These police the Indonesian

forests and catch poachers. Elsewhere, other groups such as the Sumatran Rhino Rescue capture wild rhinos and bring them into **sanctuaries**. There, scientists help the rhinos to have babies safely before releasing them back into the wild.

These conservationists are working hard to give rhinos a chance at survival. We can also all do our part to raise awareness and support these efforts in our own little ways.

Rhino conservation in Africa



A white rhino grazing on grass. [Photo: Bernard Spragg]

The white rhinoceros, also known as the square-lipped rhinoceros, is the biggest in the rhino family. It has a wide mouth and loves to socialise with other rhinos. There are two subspecies of white rhinoceros — the northern white rhino and the southern white rhino — and they are found in different regions in Africa.

Today, there are only two northern white rhinos left in the world. Sadly, both are female, so they will not be able to mate and give birth to any more baby rhinos. They live in Kenya, under the care of the Ol Pejeta Conservancy. Armed guards protect them day and night. Like the Sumatran rhino, they are nearly extinct because of poaching.

Thankfully, southern white rhinos are not yet endangered. They are classified as “near threatened” by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). About 20,000 of them still roam in protected areas across South Africa.



Black rhinos were almost wiped out by hunters, but have made a tremendous comeback. [Photo: Harald Zimmer]

The African black rhinoceros is smaller than its white counterpart. You can tell them apart by looking at their lips — while white rhinos have square lips which allow them to graze on grass, black rhinos have pointed lips which help them feed on leaves from bushes and trees.

Wildlife crimes are the black rhino's biggest threat. Because of European hunters, black rhinos had almost completely disappeared by the 1990s. But, thanks to conservation efforts across Africa, they made a tremendous comeback. Their numbers have doubled in the last 20 years, to about 5,500 now.

The black rhino is still classified as critically endangered. This rhino species too needs our help to survive.

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VOCAB BUILDER

alliance (say "e-lai-yens"; noun) = close partnership for a common cause.

fragmented (say "frag-men-ted"; adjective) = separated into several parts.

isolated (say "ai-se-lay-ted"; adjective) = remote, far away from others.

sanctuaries (say "sank-chue-riz"; noun) = places of refuge from danger.