

## Saving the endangered, one step at a time

Forty years after the world's first World Environment Day on June 5, 1972, the Indonesian government, in partnership with several conservation organizations including the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), declared 2012 the International Year of the Rhino.

The initiative is strongly supported by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. During his World Environment Day speech at the Presidential Palace in Jakarta, the President voiced his advocacy for increased awareness for and preservation of the critically endangered animal.

"Let's make the International Year of the Rhino a push for us to form international cooperation to help preserve our rhinoceros species. The role of the public and other related parties is crucial for the success of the initiative," Yudhoyono said.

In line with the initiative, the Indonesian government has also committed to establishing a high-level rhino task force of national and international experts to help to allocate sufficient resources to protect the remaining rhino populations, and to ensure that there is regular and intensive monitoring of all rhino populations in the country.

Indonesia is home to the world's two most endangered rhino species, the Javan rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*) and Sumatran rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*). Ironically, it is also home to some of the most cruel illegal hunters, sellers and buyers of rhino horns. These individuals and groups have contributed to the practice of turning rhino horns into jewelry, souvenirs and ornaments, among other commodities that sell for relatively high prices.

What they forget is that the real price of the rhino horn is much more than just numbers.

"The rhino poaching crisis has demonstrated that there is no single solution to addressing the illegal wildlife trade, which is an increasing global phenomenon. For this reason, a multi-pronged approach involving the collaboration and cooperation of a diverse range of partners is critical," stated Yolán Friedmann, CEO of the Endangered Wildlife Trust.

According to Friedmann, the wildlife trade is estimated to be the third-largest form of illegal trade after drugs and human trafficking. This might not seem very surprising since the WWF reported that the Javan rhinoceros was declared extinct just recently; while the Sumatran rhinoceros is listed on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species as "perilously close to extinction".

The continual decline of the Sumatran rhinoceros would undoubtedly contribute to the decline of Indonesia's biological diversity. Today, the species is estimated to have less than 200 survivors.

One might question why rhinos are getting all this attention while there are other similarly endangered animals. Although rhinos make up only some of the world's many endangered species, they are the ones closest to extinction. After more than 50 million years of existence on this planet, there is an acute probability of the rhinos' complete extinction within our lifetime. This fact was acknowledged by Forestry Minister Zulkifli Hasan.

He said, "One of the programs of the Forestry Ministry is the protection of endangered animals, such as rhinos, tigers, elephants and orangutans ... Among those, the rhinos are closest to extinction. For this reason they need special attention from all of us. In this context, we are inviting and encouraging all stakeholders and world organizations to join the effort to save the rhinos."

Aside from Indonesia, the International Year of the Rhino is also supported by conservationists and the governments of Bhutan, India, Malaysia, Nepal, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

The future of rhinos, and every other endangered species, largely depends on immediate action. With the ratio between humans and endangered species continuing to increase over time (the United Nations estimated the human population to reach 9.1 billion by 2050), we should include these animals' survival as one of our priorities.