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Rare Sumatran Rhino Found for First Time in 40 Years

The female animal is being moved to a more secure location in an attempt to bolster the endangered species.



This female Sumatran rhino has been captured in Borneo, with the goal of moving it to a location that is more secure from poachers.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ARI WIBOWO, WWF-INDONESIA

By **Brian Clark Howard**

PUBLISHED THU MAR 24 12:31:29 EDT 2016

Sumatran rhinos had been thought extinct from Kalimantan, the Indonesian part of Borneo, and hadn't been physically encountered in the area for 40 years. But on Tuesday, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) announced the safe capture of a female Sumatran rhino there, in what the group calls "a major milestone for rhino conservation in Indonesia."

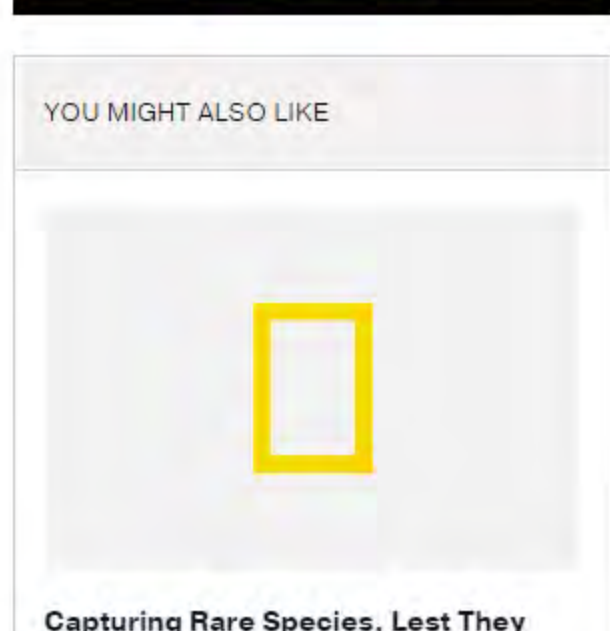
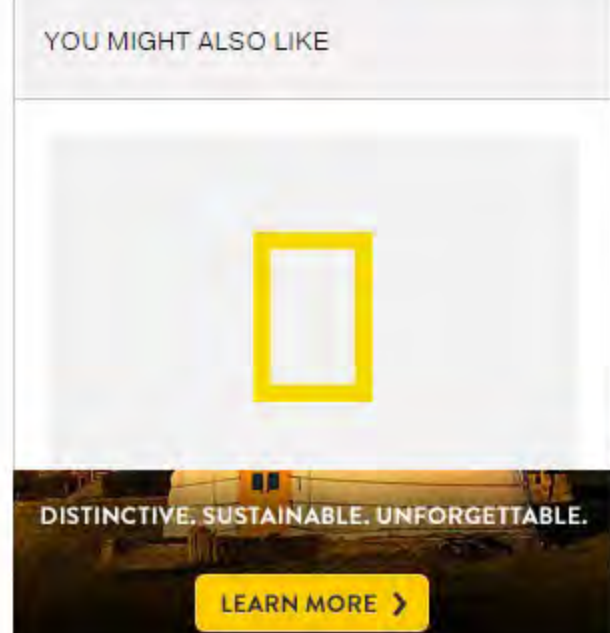
The rhino is thought to be between four and five years old. It was captured safely in a pit trap in Kutai Barat in East Kalimantan on March 12. The animal is being held in a temporary enclosure before it is airlifted via helicopter to a more secure place about 93 miles (150 kilometers) away.

There, the rare rhino will be better protected from poachers in what officials hope will become the second Sumatran rhino sanctuary in Indonesia. At least three other animals are expected to be moved there in the near future, in the hopes of starting a more stable breeding population.

"This is an exciting discovery and a major conservation success," Efransjah Efransjah, the CEO of WWF-Indonesia, said in a statement. "We now have proof that a species once thought extinct in Kalimantan still roams the forests, and we will now strengthen our efforts to protect this extraordinary species."

The smallest of the world's five species of rhinos, the Sumatran is covered with patches of stiff hair, especially on its ears. Dark red-brown in color, the animals prefer to live in dense mountain forests, where they are highly elusive. They are usually solitary creatures that feed on fruit, twigs, and leaves, but they can find each other by leaving scent trails, which they can pick up with their keen sense of smell. ([Learn more about efforts to save the species.](#))

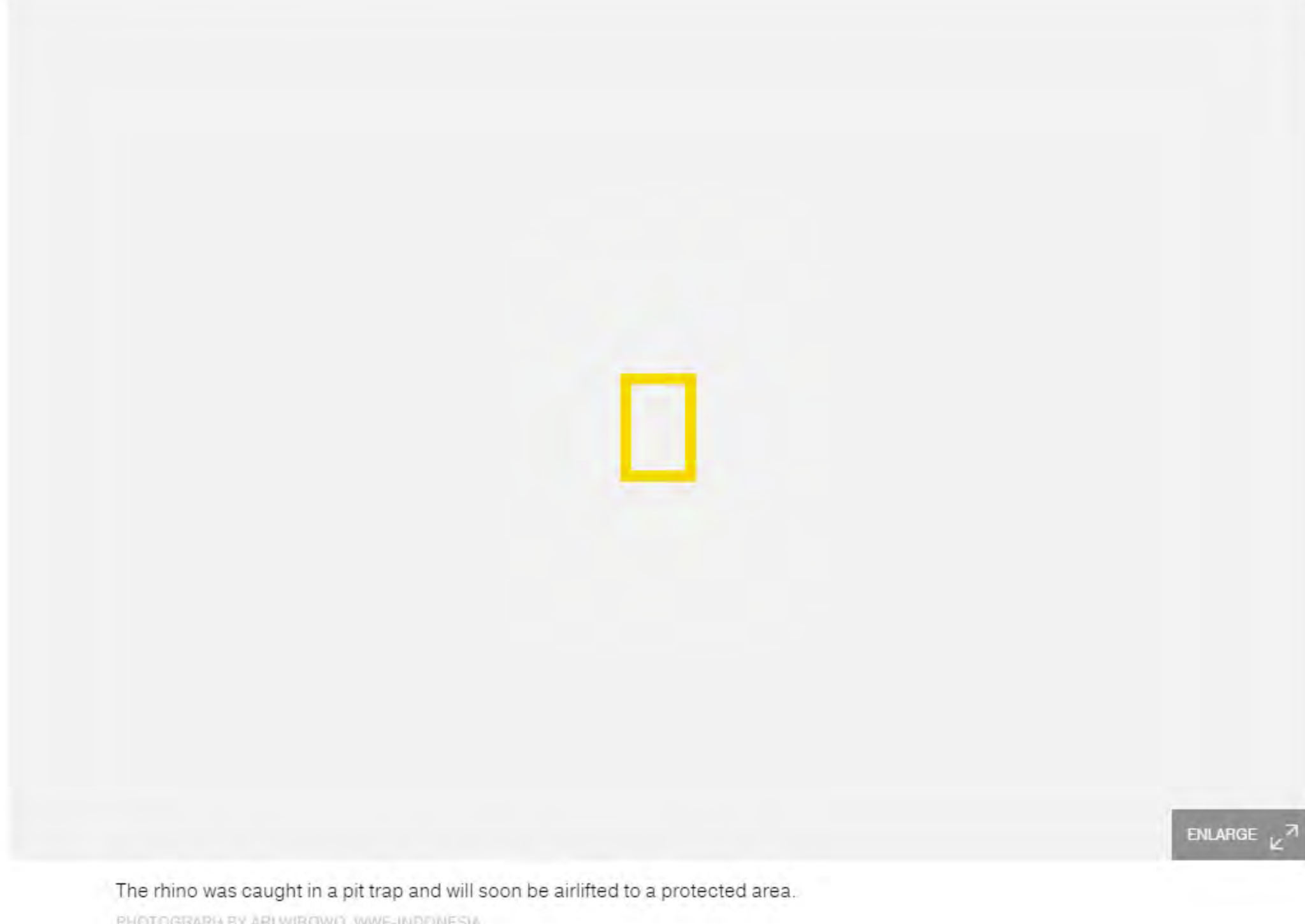
Sumatran rhinos can grow up to 1,760 pounds (800 kilograms) and reach a length of 8 to 10 feet (2.5 to 3.2 meters). About 100 Sumatran rhinos are thought to exist in the wild, mostly on the island of Sumatra, making them one of the rarest mammals on the planet.



Capturing Rare Species, Lest They Slip Away

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The rhino was caught in a pit trap and will soon be airlifted to a protected area.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ARI WIBOWO, WWF-INDONESIA

While their two horns are considerably smaller than those on African rhinos, the appendages are still prized on the black market for purported health benefits, despite scientific evidence proving that such treatments [don't work](#). Their population has been hammered over the past century by poaching and loss of habitat from deforestation, mining, and other impacts. The rhino was declared extinct from the Malaysian section of Borneo last year.



Watch: Baby Sumatran rhino born in captivity.

Although scientists had warned that the Sumatran rhino might have disappeared from Kalimantan years ago, WWF scientists kept looking for evidence of the animals. In 2013, they were rewarded with footprints and an image of one on a camera trap. Based on such work, the team has estimated there are about 15 Sumatran rhinos left in the region, split into three populations.

[Nilanga Jayasinghe](#), the WWF-US lead on Asian species, calls the rhino capture "very good news."

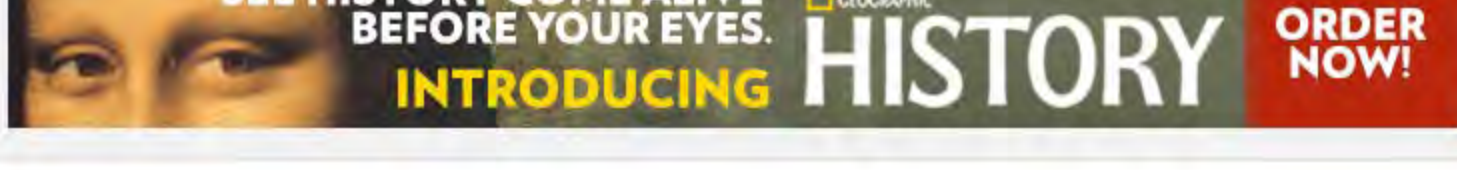
She adds, "Given the dire situation of Sumatran rhinos in the wild, it is crucial that isolated individuals such as this female become part of a managed breeding population to ensure the future of the species."

Sixty-three [Javan rhinos](#)—cousins to the Sumatran species—are also thought to remain in the wild, all in Indonesia's Ujung Kulon National Park (see photos). A few hundred Sumatran rhinos live in zoos around the world, although the animals rarely breed in captivity.

Efransjah calls the rhinos' plight "a race against time."

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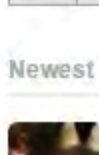
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Michelle CURLEY

2 days ago

Three Sumatran rhinos were born at the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden. Two of them, both males, were moved to the Sumatran Rhino Sanctuary in Sumatra because there were no females that could be sent to Cincinnati. The older male, Andalas, sired the calf seen in the video attached to this article and has another due in May. The younger, Harapan, arrived at the SRS in October. There are only two females at the SRS.

Like Reply



Patrick Crawley

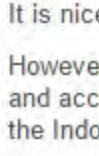
4 days ago

The story ends with the statement:

"A few hundred Sumatran rhinos live in zoos around the world, although the animals rarely breed in captivity."

This couldn't be further from the truth. There are no longer any Sumatran rhinoceros in zoos anywhere in the world, and probably less than a hundred in the wild. Nat Geo is one of the few frequent reporters on the plight of the Sumatran rhinoceros, so I'm perplexed as to how you guys got this so wrong?

Like Reply



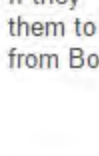
tim irvin

14 days ago

It is nice to hear a bit of good news about greatly imperilled species.

However, I agree with Marty Morse that the terminology used here is confusing and imprecise. A more clear and accurate description would be that Sumatran rhinos were thought to be "locally extinct", or "extirpated" from the Indonesian part of Borneo.

Like Reply



Marty Morse

5 days ago

If they "rarely breed in captivity", then we better come up with a better plan than capturing them (and moving them to zoos). Also wish these science writers would use the correct term; Sumatran rhinos were extirpated from Borneo (if the rhinos were extinct there would be no more of them anywhere).

4



Patrick Crawley

3 days ago

The animals are not being moved to zoos translocated to another forest which is not under such imminent threat from mining.

Like Reply



Barbara Wilson

5 days ago

So even though it is estimated that there are about 15 of these rhinos left in this area, split into three groups, one of the females was snatched up to "protect" the species, by reducing the tiny breeding population? Does anyone know if she had a baby?

1



Patrick Crawley

3 days ago

@[Barbara Wilson](#) Not quite, this female is just the first to be caught. All the animals will be trapped and consolidated to another "safer" area. This is for their own good: the biggest single threat to a Sumatran rhino species is the fragmentation of the population and inability to find a mate to breed. Most experts agree that the species only stands a chance if the animals are brought together into larger, sustainable populations. Sadly, its seems politics is at play and this animal is not destined for captivity - at four years old she's an absolute prime candidate for inclusion into one of the two well managed, semi-wild breeding centres that exist, both in need of breeding age females. At these centres they get the best of both worlds: expert medical care, reproductive management and husbandry AND huge secured forest areas of their natural habitat to roam.

When numbers get this low simple "protecting" the animals in their natural habitat is often not enough. Just look at the situation with the Javan rhino: 30 years of excellent protection, but the population has barely grown by 10. Turns out the "natural habitat" wasn't so ideal for the rhinos.

Like Reply