

Tackling the hornbill trade in Indonesia

Final report

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Project Background

Hornbills are facing serious threats from trapping and trade, driven by demand for exotic pets, meat, traditional medicine, ceremonial uses, and luxury items. Despite these mounting pressures, the trade in many hornbill species remains poorly understood, hindering conservation efforts and obstructing attempts to halt population declines in the wild.

Indonesia is a major hub for the illegal and unsustainable bird trade, including hornbills. The country is home to 13 hornbill species, all of which are protected under national legislation. However, illegal trade, particularly to supply the pet market, continues largely unchecked. To date, limited research has been conducted to assess the scale of this trade, support law enforcement, or address the underlying drivers of demand.

To help address these gaps, this project was initiated with the goal of generating reliable data and providing a clear overview of the current status of the hornbill trade in Indonesia. By doing so, we aim to strengthen and inform national efforts to curb illegal trade and, ultimately, reverse the population declines of these iconic birds.

Our research has revealed that the illegal trade in hornbills across Indonesia is both widespread and highly visible. Numerous species are involved in this illicit trade, which continues to operate with relative ease and limited concealment. Alarming, much of the trade is conducted openly on online platforms, allowing traffickers to reach a broad audience with minimal risk of detection or prosecution.

Through our investigation, we documented multiple law enforcement cases involving the trafficking of hornbills. These cases provide clear evidence that hornbills are being targeted and traded in violation of national laws. However, our analysis also highlights a significant gap in the enforcement process: while seizures do occur, the penalties imposed on offenders are often minimal and lack the severity needed to act as a meaningful deterrent. In many instances, prosecutions resulted in low fines or short prison sentences, which fail to reflect the conservation importance of hornbills or the seriousness of the offenses.

This weak enforcement response undermines national conservation objectives and allows the illegal hornbill trade to persist largely unchecked. Strengthening legal frameworks, increasing investigative capacity, and ensuring stronger penalties are essential steps if Indonesia is to effectively protect its hornbill populations from ongoing exploitation.

The project began on 1 July 2024, with generous funding from the Ouwehands Zoo Foundation (OZH). Since then, we have secured additional support from other sources. All data needed to complete the project has been obtained and we are now in the process of wrapping up the final manuscript for publication.

Project results:

Activity 1 Carry out an extensive review of published and unpublished literature

All available literature regarding hornbill trade in Indonesia, both domestic and international, will be compiled and analysed to assist in understanding the current trade and to support prioritising further conservation actions.

A literature review has been carried out, with relevant publications and other information collected, compiled and analysed. This information has been used to support our final manuscript. This is the first time research has been carried out focusing specifically on the hornbill trade in Indonesia.

Activity 2 Carry out surveys of trade in hornbills on online platforms in Indonesia

An extensive 4-month survey recording all hornbill trade activity will be conducted on selected social media and online trade platforms.

Our Indonesian colleague successfully carried out the online trade surveys, following a tried and tested methodology provided by Monitor. All data was analysed for inclusion in our final manuscript.

Activity 3 Conduct seizure analyses in potential consumer countries

Seizure data for potential consumer countries (to be identified) will be requested from selected government authorities and NGOs. Additionally, seizure records will be compiled from open-source literature, media and published and unpublished literature.

Collection of seizure and prosecution data from Indonesia was completed. All data was analysed for inclusion in the final manuscript. Using this data, we have determined which species are most often found in seizures, where these seizures have taken place, the nationality of those involved in the crime and the penalties handed down for these crimes. We have produced a map of the incidents and made recommendations based on these findings.

Activity 4 Conduct a review of relevant domestic legislation

Relevant domestic legislation, which may include export bans for protected species, will be analysed to better understand the legality of the observed trade.

A review of legislation pertaining to hornbill protection in Indonesia was completed. Hornbills are protected by law in Indonesia and all trade encountered during this study was being carried out illegally.

Activity 5 Produce a peer-reviewed publication of the findings of this study

The knowledge and data gathered under Activities 1-4 will be used to produce a research-based, peer-reviewed report on the international trade in hornbills in Indonesia. The report will provide an overview of the scale and scope of the trade, assess its legality and include recommendations to relevant authorities to improve regulation and/or enforcement efforts.

A manuscript has been prepared and is being finalized for submission to a journal for review and subsequent publication. The paper, once published, will be provided to the donor.

Activity 6 Disseminate the findings and recommendations produced from this study to all relevant stakeholders and promote actions to be taken to ensure these species are not threatened by illegal trade.

This activity will be carried out upon publication of the project manuscript.