

## NEWSFLASH

# Helmeted Hornbill *Rhinoplax vigil* to receive strengthened legal protection in Thailand

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On 8 March 2021, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment of Thailand announced that Helmeted Hornbills *Rhinoplax vigil* would be afforded the highest protection level after being added to the Reserved Wild Animal list under the Wildlife Conservation and Protection Act B.E 2562 (WARPA 2019). The Helmeted Hornbill is one of 13 species of hornbills native to Thailand and is found in several fragmented pockets in the south of the country, as well as four other countries: Brunei, Indonesia (Kalimantan and Sumatra), Malaysia and Myanmar. This Critically Endangered bird is the only species of hornbill to share the highest level of national protection under WARPA (2019), along with other threatened species including Sarus Crane *Grus antigone*, Mainland Serow *Capricornis sumatranensis* and Dugong *Dugong dugon*.

The WARPA was initially enacted in 1992 to regulate the hunting, breeding, possessing and trading of reserved and protected species, with exceptions made for scientific research and breeding or possession in licensed zoos. However, the small fines and short prison terms under the original Act were insufficient deterrents considering the high financial rewards associated with wildlife trafficking. The government therefore amended WARPA in 2019 to enhance wildlife protection by increasing the scope of the law and penalties. Reserved species under this Act are afforded the greatest level of protection—Helmeted Hornbill will be the twentieth species on this list once the legal process is completed, which is expected within a year.

Recent population estimates for the Helmeted Hornbill indicate that there are as few as 100 birds left in the wild in Thailand (The Nation 2021), highlighting the precarious status of this species. Previously, the punishment for trafficking Helmeted Hornbills was a fine of up to US\$32,000 and/or 10 years' imprisonment. However, once the legal process of increasing protections for this species has been completed, the penalty will increase by 50% to a US\$49,000 fine and/or 15 years' imprisonment. This will represent the highest penalty in all the Helmeted Hornbill range states.

Helmeted Hornbills are heavily poached for their ivory casques throughout their range (Beastall *et al.* 2016). Among hornbills, this is the only species with a solid (not hollow) casque and, as

such, it is the most valuable hornbill in the illegal wildlife trade. For Thailand, both a source and a consumer country, there is still demand at the local level for Helmeted Hornbill casques, known as 'golden jade' among illegal wildlife traders. Phassaraudomsak *et al.* (2019) found in their study of the online hornbill trade in Thailand, that of 546 hornbill items listed for sale in 173 posts, 83% of items originated from Helmeted Hornbills. Thousands of individuals are still trafficked to China, where the casques are carved and sold for intricately carved ornaments, rings, pendants and other decorative items. The bulk of the Helmeted Hornbill casques originate from Indonesia (Collar 2015, Beastall *et al.* 2016), although poaching of the species does occur in other range countries. Demand for the ivory casques of the Helmeted Hornbill appears to have risen very sharply, although the species is legally protected at some level in every range state. Helmeted Hornbills have been listed in Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) since 1975. Despite these protections, trafficking has flourished. Without serious monitoring, site-level protection, investigation of trade networks and strong enforcement of the law, the crisis facing this species in Indonesia could rapidly escalate in other range countries.

## Legal protection of Helmeted Hornbills in all range states

- **Brunei:** fully protected under the **Wildlife Protection Act (1981)**—maximum fine is US\$1,417 and a one-year term of imprisonment.
- **Indonesia:** protected status under the **Conservation Act 5 (1990)** and **Government regulation 7 (1999)**—maximum fine is US\$7,490 and up to five years' imprisonment.
- **Malaysia:** protected status under the **Peninsular Malaysia & Federal Territories Wildlife Conservation Act (2010)**, **Sarawak Wildlife Protection Ordinance (1998)** and partially protected under the **Sabah Wildlife Conservation Enactment (1997)**, where hunting with a license is allowed in Sabah—maximum fine is US\$23,000 and five years' imprisonment.

- **Myanmar:** partially protected under the **Forest Department Notification No. 583/94 (revised 2014)**. The possession of souvenirs or use for traditional costumes is permitted but requires registration with the local forestry department. The maximum fine is only US\$36 and seven years' imprisonment.

Source: Jain *et al.* (2018).

Helmeted Hornbills continue to face significant challenges. The species' reliance on old tree cavities for nesting makes it highly vulnerable to habitat destruction (Poonswad *et al.* 2013), while the high prices commanded for the birds are an attractive source of income for local hunters and traffickers and are driven by increasing demand for hornbill products from countries such as China, resulting in a drastic decrease in the hornbill population (Phassaraudomsak *et al.* 2019). However, with committed stakeholder collaboration, it is possible to reverse this trend by increasing protection and penalties (as demonstrated in Thailand) by empowering local communities to address behavioural change (Poonswad *et al.* 2013, Jain *et al.* 2018) and by working to reduce demand.

## References

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**Plate 1.** Female Helmeted Hornbill *Rhinoplax vigil*, Malaysia, August 2009.

