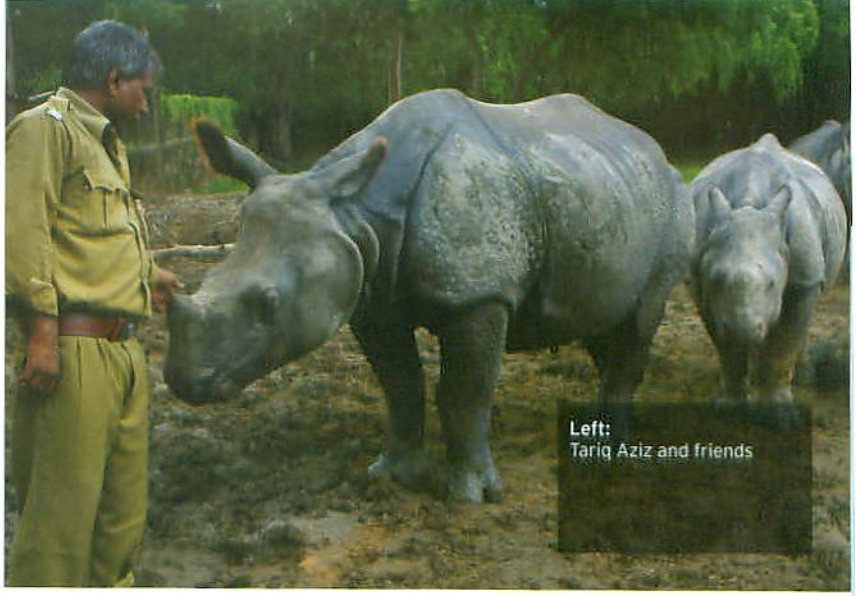
India:

New pastures for Greater one-horned rhinos



RANDY REICHES

Left:
Tariq Aziz and friends

Randy G Rieches
Curator of Mammals
San Diego Wild Animal Park

India's current population of rhinos is about 2,000, a seemingly safe number but still below what may be needed (3,000 or more) for long-term survival of the species. Moreover, about 1,900 of India's rhinos are in the state of Assam - with 1,700 of them in Kaziranga National Park. Restricting 85% of the population of the Greater one-horned (Goh) rhino (Rhinoceros unicornis) to a single protected area is very risky. It is a situation in which rhinos are most susceptible to catastrophes.

Densely-packed rhinos in a protected area can also be problematic. In Pabitora, a small reserve with about 100 rhinos in just 32 square kilometers, the rhinos have clearly exceeded carrying capacity. Kaziranga may also be approaching its carrying capacity. The rhino population actually needs to be reduced to protect the habitat and mitigate the increasing human-wildlife conflicts as rhinos venture out of the protected area and into agricultural areas.

Indian Rhino Vision 2020 (IRV2020, previously introduced in The Horn) therefore aims to:

- Increase the numbers to more viable levels overall
- Adjust numbers to be in balance with the habitat (so reduce population in reserves like Kaziranga and Pabitora and increase numbers in other reserves)
- Expand the distribution to provide more security against catastrophe befalling vulnerable, dense populations
- Involve local communities more in the protection and stewardship of the rhinos

The International Rhino Foundation's Indian conservation partners have been working very hard to accomplish all of the tasks required to start the relocation program laid out in IRV2020. Assessments of the areas destined for rhino reintroduction have been undertaken, and infrastructures of the parks designated for the first rhino relocations are being built or rebuilt as necessary. Efforts are being made to involve local villages in these relocation activities. Rhino relocation teams from Nepal are helping train relocation teams from Kaziranga and Pabitora.

At the same time, we have also been looking to develop zoo-based (or intensively managed as opposed to extensively managed) Indian rhino populations. The captive population of Indian rhinos around the world serves as an insurance policy for the species. However, an infusion of new genetic material into the North American captive population is vital to sustaining gene diversity vital for long-term viability. This new blood can be provided by excess males in Indian zoos. In contrast, India's zoos lack enough females for satisfactory reproduction and need new bloodlines as well.

By the end of this year, three female rhinos from San Diego Zoo's Wild Animal Park are scheduled to be transferred to the quarantine facility at India's Delhi Zoo. Two will be taken to the Sanjay Gandhi Biological Park in Patna, and one will remain at the Delhi Zoo. In exchange, two captive male rhinos from Patna and one from Delhi Zoo will be transported to the United States. All three males are young animals that are destined to play an important role in this international effort, which seeks to maximise genetic diversity and the global breeding potential of captive populations.

STEVE AND AMI TOON

Right:
Young Greater one-horned rhino contemplates Kaziranga National Park, India

IRV2020

IRV2020 is being supported by the EAZA Rhino Campaign, and proceeds from Rhino Trek India will also be donated by Save the Rhino to IRV2020. The project is a collaborative endeavour between the Department of Environment and Forests of the Government of Assam, in partnership with the Bodo Autonomous Council and the two primary NGOs involved from the outset - the International Rhino Foundation (IRF) and the World Wide Fund for Nature India (WWF India). Randy Rieches is a Board member of the IRF.