



A Tale of *Two Places*

RESTORING RHINOS TO THEIR RANGES IN ASSAM, INDIA

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The 'Indian Rhino Vision 2020' relocation project carries high hopes... to help rejuvenate Manas National Park, a once conflict-ridden park on the border with Bhutan.

◀ A translocated rhino appearing normal and settled in the new site.

▼ The chosen rhino is darted, treated and loaded into a large crate for the journey to its new location.

Lying in the foothills of the Himalayas on the border between India and Bhutan, Manas National Park has long been considered a crown jewel among India's many spectacular wildlife reserves. Known for its breathtaking scenery and wildlife, the park is part of the largest conservation area in the region, its habitat linked with the forests of Bhutan in the north and the Buxa Tiger Reserve in West Bengal.

But the glory of Manas was damaged by a violent local agitation that began in 1989 to carve out a separate Bodo homeland within the Indian federation. An armed struggle caused massive upheaval and destruction of the Park's infrastructure, including destruction of anti-poaching camps, roads and bridges and killing of forest staff.

Declared a World Heritage Site in December 1985, Manas had fallen to a World Heritage Site "in danger" by 1992 as it became a battleground in a protracted insurgent war. The last rhino in Manas disappeared in 1996.

"I remember rhinos being here from before. They were all lost in the ethnic strife. It will be good to have them back here again," reminisced the local boatman in the park.

As part of an ambitious project called 'Indian Rhino Vision 2020' (IRV 2020), the government of Assam State and conservation groups are repopulating the park with rhinos and rebuilding the park's infrastructure to ensure they are protected. Since April 2008, the rhinos are back and are thriving in their new home.

There is a strong economic incentive for local communities, including the local ethnic community of the Bodos, to make sure the rhinos thrive.

"When tourists come, they want to see animals – it will be helpful to have the rhinos," says Dhan Chandra Doley, a local forest guard.

Ex-militia Turned Gamekeepers

Manas is in a state of renewal. Antipoaching camps funded by IRV 2020 are scattered throughout the park – some are finished, others nearly built. At each camp, forest personnel are supplemented by volunteers from the Bodo community. The volunteers, several of them ex-poachers, have swapped their civilian dress for khaki greens – a uniform for protectors of the forests and wildlife.



► The relocation was a large operation involving months of planning and trainers from all over Assam.

"I used to be involved in hunting and fighting but I learnt that Manas has to be saved for the long term. If Manas can thrive, we can all be sustained," he adds.

Kampa Borgyari, an energetic and quick-spoken man, is deputy chief of Bodoland Territorial Council. Before the first rhinos were moved into Manas, from Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary 250 kilometres away, he spoke of what the park and its rhino means to his people.

"Manas is our identity, but the last 20 years have been difficult. The local people, the Bodo people were blamed for the demise of the park. We have mobilised ourselves to bring the glory of Manas back... Now our youths work day and night around the clock to protect the park. It is unique – certainly in India and maybe throughout the world. That should be recognised."

He pauses.

"It'll be good to have the rhinos home."



Hope for the Future

Rhinos dot Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary's landscape like cattle, an unexpected sight when one considers that they are among the most critically endangered species on the planet. It boasts the highest density of rhinos in the world, with more than 80 rhinos in less than 18 square kilometres of rhino habitat. So four rhinos – two males and two females – were selected to be the first moved to their new home in Manas.

IRV 2020 carries high hopes: to lessen pressure on Pobitora for food and space, to reduce the straying of dangerous rhinos into nearby villages and once resettled, to help rejuvenate Manas National Park.

These rhinos are the vanguard of an ambitious conservation project that seeks to build a 3,000-strong rhino population distributed over seven protected areas in Assam in Northeast India. The aim is to create what's known as a viable population – the lowest possible number of individuals of a species or population that can survive in the wild without facing extinction from natural disasters.

"Having too many rhinos in one location carries a high risk, rather like having all of one's eggs in the same basket. The threat of a disease outbreak or a poaching spate makes it important to spread that risk," says Tariq Aziz from WWF, the conservation organisation helping to facilitate this project.

Moving a Two-Tonne Rhino

Moving a rhino is no easy task. It requires months of planning and careful staging, like a piece of theatre involving a cast of thousands. To begin, one must carefully choose the rhinos: those that are young and healthy to be founder stock for the

new population. These chosen rhinos were tracked for months and when the time came, 15 trained domestic elephants and their mahouts, or trainers, from all around Assam were brought to the area to "shepherd" the rhinos to Manas.

Once darted and tranquillised with immobility drugs by vets, and radio collared, the rhinos were rolled to a specially-built sledge that then was pulled into the crates by a bulldozer to be moved to their new location. Over the last few months, roads from Potibora to Manas had also been mended, and bridges rebuilt in preparation for this historic journey.

At their release into Manas, the rhinos were greeted like film stars by eager villagers, a sign that their park and their way of life may be on the rise. And since then, there have been regular elephant patrols to keep an eye on them and vigorous anti poaching patrols.

"We will patrol the park day and night. Even if we don't have food, we will take our water bottles," pledges local forest guard Dhan Chandra Doley. "We are ready to look after the rhinos, whatever it takes." ■

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