

## Indian Rhino Vision 2020 Program

Poaching pressure remains high within India and Nepal. In 2008, 26 rhinos died at the hands of poachers in Assam, and at least eight were poached in Nepal, where populations are highly fragmented and difficult to protect. In 2009, at least 17 rhinos were poached in India and Nepal. These events occurred mostly during the rainy season when animals were forced to leave their normal ranges for non-flooded areas.

In April 2008, as part of Indian Rhino Vision 2020 (IRV 2020), a partnership among Assam Forest Department; ARP's Partner, the International Rhino Foundation (IRF); WWF-India and other NGOs, the much anticipated translocations of Indian rhinos commenced with the movement of two males from Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary to Manas National Park in Assam. The IRV 2020 goal is to "increase the total rhino population in Assam from present numbers to 3,000 by 2020, and to ensure that these rhinos are distributed over at least seven protected areas to provide long-term viability of an Assam metapopulation."

The first translocation has produced initial positive results, and will be followed by the translocation of more animals to Manas very soon, as all necessary government clearances have been obtained to import the necessary immobilization drugs. Tentative plans are in place to translocate up to 18 greater one-horned rhinos from Kaziranga National Park and Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary to Manas National Park in

March/April 2010. Along with partners from Taronga Zoo, Dr. Susie Ellis, IRF's Executive Director, travelled to India in February to meet with partners to review the translocation plans and to visit the project sites (see also Clare's report on page 8.)

Currently, more than 85% of the Indian rhino population inhabits one protected national park, Kaziranga, exposing the population to the risk that a single catastrophe such as a flood or disease outbreak could again lead to serious population decline. The expansion of their distribution will reduce stochastic risks and reduce the population pressures in any single habitat by ensuring a better distribution of rhinos over suitable ranges. This is essential for the species' metapopulation management and long-term survival.

Support for moving rhinos to Manas in the local administration and among local communities is in place, as is enhanced security within the Park. The key to the success of the initiative will be the safe capture and translocation of the animals as well as the ability to both continuously monitor and provide for their security.

The expected conservation output of this project will be the successful establishment of an Indian rhino population in Manas National Park. Rhinos once flourished here, but were wiped out due to heavy poaching pressures in the past. (Due to enhanced security measures and strong local support, the park is once again safe for rhinos.)

Rhino selection for translocation is based on age, sex, health and other variables as laid out in the Translocation Protocol for Indian Rhinos, which is based on successful translocations carried out in Nepal between 1986 and 2003.

Animals will be monitored daily for overall behaviour and well-being by a team of biologists using radio-collars



Indian Rhino. Photo: Taronga Conservation Society

and direct observation. The team will also monitor the behaviour and habitat use of the rhinos over the long-term. Location data will be transformed onto a GIS domain with layers of vegetation mapping and other management parameters. These analyses and conclusions will provide critical data for improving management practices and identifying other needs for making the program successful, in addition to providing information and experience for further translocations, and management of protected areas. Measures undertaken include building a number of new camps and making operational old camps for protection patrol teams to use, in addition to recruiting and training 150 new guards from local communities. A wireless network for communication and vehicles for transportation also have been provided to quickly foil illegal incursions into the Park. A fence has also been constructed along the southern border of the park to prevent park encroachment and to keep translocated rhinos from wandering out of the park and into unsafe areas. Effective translocation, monitoring and survival of these first 20 rhinos to Manas National Park will be the key indicator as to the probability of success for subsequent phases of IRV 2020.

The program will be carried out in partnership with WWF-India, the Assam Forest Department, and the IRF assisted by the ARP. All partners will continue to assist the Assam Forest Department in the IRV 2020's implementation, first in Manas and then in other National Parks.

World Wide Fund for Nature India (WWF India) was established in 1969 and over the last 36 years has been working to conserve wildlife and wild lands in India. With its network of state/divisional and field offices across India, WWF-India is the largest and one of the most experienced conservation organizations in the country.

WWF-India staff have worked diligently with local community organizations and government and park authorities to implement recommendations from a formal security assessment, including boosting Manas' security force by around 150 people, the majority from local communities. The Bodo Territorial Council, leaders of the regional ethnic majority, now has completed 11 guard posts as recommended by the security report, from which the guards will work.

In addition to training more than 150 community members as guards and monitors, the IRV 2020 team

has coordinated with the local political and civil leadership to organize public meetings and other activities to cultivate community involvement in and support for the rhino conservation program. There has been a long history of conflict between wildlife and people in Assam. To cultivate public support in favour of rhino conservation in particular and wildlife conservation in general, the IRV 2020 team has employed a two-pronged strategy of providing local employment and training, combined with regular public meetings and communications, to build an atmosphere that favours conservation in and around Manas National Park. At least three large meetings per year are held with local parties, including the Bodo Territorial Council, to continue to engender support for IRV 2020. Additionally, local community members are hired for any employment opportunities that arise, including construction of the fence along the southern border of the park.

With a program as significant as the rhino translocations in Assam, it is critical to communicate the correct information on the program to all constituencies, in particular, via the media. The IRV 2020 has a Communications Strategy which will guide these interactions, with a short-term aim of at least three major stories per year about post-translocation events. Because of the sensitivity of the moves, the Government of Assam will closely manage media coverage of the first translocations, and will organize press conferences for releases of print and photographic coverage.

Additional funding for the translocations is being provided by the IRF through US and European zoos, as well as private donors, who have made pledges to support IRV 2020 as part of their commitment to in situ conservation. WWF is also providing funding through its extensive network. Partial funding has been provided by the US Fish & Wildlife Service for guards and monitors for the translocated population in Manas.

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**Thanks to a successful grant application to the Taronga Conservation Society, ARP has been able to contribute \$10,000 to this important project. Taronga Zoos hold the only Indian Rhino population in Australia and have contributed greatly to our Indian Rhino programs. Thank you so much!**