

## SUCCESSSES & FAILURES IN INDIAN RHINO CONSERVATION

by

Dr. John B. Sale, U.N. Wildlife Adviser

The species population of around 1,700 is centred on Kaziranga in Assam, which has over 1,000 animals (developed from 30 in 1912), and Chitawan in Nepal which has 400 animals (developed from 75 in 1962).

This distribution has resulted from contraction of the species' former range, which stretched from the Indus valley in present day Pakistan to the borders of Burma. Causes include excessive hunting and habitat loss to agriculture attempting to provide food for 20 % of the world's human population.

India's recent rhino conservation efforts stem from the establishment of a Rhino Management Committee in 1979, under chairmanship of the author. There was an apparent need to disperse the over-concentration of rhinos in the eastern state of Assam, in order to avoid "biological" disasters such as disease, drowning due to floods and poaching, and political instability which could jeopardise conservation in the area. Accordingly, the Committee drew up a priorities list of possible translocation sites, headed by Dudhwa National Park which had suitable Indian rhino habitat, as well as good management according to a prepared plan. An additional point regarding Dudhwa was the need to fill the "Coarse grazer" gap in the grazing mosaic left by the local extinction of the rhino at the end of the last century which was adversely affecting the Swamp Deer population in Dudhwa. Preparations for a translocation of 30 individuals included inspection of potential donor sites in Assam; experients in capture and transport methodology (assisted by Dr. Mike Woodford, Chairman of the SSC Veterinary Specialist Group) and preparation of holding stockades and a rhino area perimeter fence (electrified) enclosing some 19 km<sup>2</sup> in Dudhwa.

In 1984 five rhinos (2;3) were caught and held on site in stockades, pending the air/road journey to Dudhwa at the end of the 10 - day capture period. Further captures in Assam being impossible, the government of India made an agreement with His Majesty's Government of Nepal to obtain four young adult female rhinos in exchange for 16 domestic elephants, in 1985. The four rhinos were trucked directly from their capture area surrounding Chitawan National Park to Dudhwa.

The results to date of the translocation of nine (2;7) rhinos to Dudhwa during 1984/1985 are as follows :

1. Mortalities resulting from translocation - one elderly female.
2. Births 5 (all from young adult females translocated); one was killed by a tiger as a newborn, others doing well).

3. Other mortalities : one male, from old age in 1989.  
one adult female, as a result of intervention to treat a  
medical problem.

There is an outstanding need to translocate a further 20 animals  
into Dudhwa in order to meet the original target of 30 for a  
founder population.

In Nepal, dispersal of the Chitawan population resulted in  
translocation of 13 animals to Bardia Reserve in western Nepal in  
1986. Of these, one animal died of old age, one was poached after  
wondering out of the reserve and an adult male wandered over the  
border into nearby India (this may yet return to Bardia). Five  
calves have been born, bringing the current total of this group  
to 16. All adults have settled into regular home ranges.

Encouraged by this initial success, a further 25 rhinos were  
translocated from Chitawan to Bardia early in 1991, with WWF  
assistance.

In conclusion, the apprehension on which the Dudhwa translocation  
from Assam was based have proven well founded in that losses due  
to annual flooding and poaching continue. Final pronouncement on  
the translocations would be premature but early results are very  
promising in that there was only one translocation loss (out of  
47 translocated) and there have been 10 births. There is clearly  
no need to consider a captive breeding strategy for this species  
at the present time but that rather further translocation should  
be seen as the main form of management, in addition to strength-  
ening the protection of long-standing populations.