

Restoration by translocation



Translocations are the backbone of the ambitious Indian Rhino Vision (IRV) 2020—a partnership among the government of Assam, the International Rhino Foundation, the World Wide Fund for Nature, the Bodoland Territorial Council, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service—which aims to attain a population of 3,000 wild Greater one-horned rhinos in seven of Assam’s protected areas by the year 2020. As part of this initiative, two males and two female rhinos were translocated from Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary to Manas National Park on 17 January 2011.

Dr Bibhab Kumar Talukdar | Chair, IUCN SSC Asian Rhino Specialist Group;
Secretary General, Aaranyak; Asian Rhino Coordinator, International Rhino Foundation



The animals moved in January join two females that were moved to Manas in late December 2010, and five existing rhinos (two males translocated under IRV2020 in April 2008 and three females rescued in Kaziranga and then rehabilitated in Manas).

Translocating the rhinos will help create a viable population of this vulnerable species that has recovered from fewer than 100 animals in the early nineteenth century to more than 2,850 today.

Pobitora, where the rhinos were captured, boasts the highest density of rhinos in the

world, with more than 84 rhinos in less than 18km² (4,450 acres) of rhino habitat. To minimise the chance of loss from disease and other disasters including straying out, the rhinos need to be spread among other parks. The translocations will lessen pressure on Pobitora’s rhinos for food and space, and hopefully reduce the number of rhinos straying into nearby villages, which can lead to injuries to people and animals. The other stronghold for Greater one-horned rhinos is Kaziranga National Park, which holds 2,048 rhinos (2009 census), or 72% of the total population. So it is imperative that these animals are spread out.

Moving a rhino is no easy task. The moves are the result of months of meticulous planning for every possible situation that

might arise from capture to release, all with the aim of keeping both the animals and the people involved safe. Under the guidance of veterinarians, field workers, park guards, conservationists and forest department officials, the four animals moved in January were captured and released within 24 hours. Veterinarians darted the animals with tranquilisers, then transported them 250 km in crates specially designed to hold the 1.5 to 2 ton animals. Each rhino has been radio-collared and will be closely monitored by WWF-India and Manas National Park staff.

Manas National Park, once an icon among India’s many spectacular wildlife reserves, was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1985. Rhinos were once common in the park, but violent civil conflict beginning in 1989 caused massive damage to the park’s infrastructure, including destruction of anti-poaching camps, roads and villages. Until recently, the last rhino seen in Manas was in 1996. A tremendous international collaboration has rebuilt the Park’s anti-poaching camps, repaired roads and bridges, and begun to repopulate Manas with rhino. The arrival of the rhinos has been heralded by local communities, who had been blamed for the demise of the Park. Kampa Borgoyari, deputy chief of Bodoland Territorial Council said: ‘We are committed to bringing Manas back to its former glory, and the homecoming of the rhinos is part of that effort.’ The Assam Forest Department is also equally committed to upholding the sanctity of Manas National Park by putting rhinos back in the wilderness of Manas in collaboration with IRV2020 partners and supporters.

In an effort to move ever closer to the 2020 goal, additional translocations, to move more rhinos to Manas and to other former ranges, are planned for the coming year. Before translocations to additional sites can occur, adequate security must be re-established and local communities must become involved and engaged in conservation as has happened in Manas.

Grants

Grants from Chester Zoo (£7,000) and Stuttgart Zoo (€4,000) together with one from Save the Rhino’s core funds (£3,500) helped pay for the January translocations. The IRF in the US meanwhile has recruited many other zoos and funders to support IRV2020. Our thanks to everyone involved.

ALL IMAGES AMIT SHARMA



To improve the security of Manas National Park, members of the local community, some of whom used to be poachers, have been hired, trained and equipped as guards