

# Wildlife Times

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# Enhanced Community Support Reduces Rhino Poaching in Nepal

Rhino poaching in Nepal declined in 2008 and 2009 in contrast to the previous seven years. Among the primary reasons for this decrease were the improved law and order throughout the country and better anti-poaching efforts. NGOs allocated more resources to local communities living around Bardia and Chitwan National Parks, and an increase in tourism meant that the Parks' Buffer Zone Management Committees received more money and assistance from the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC). Lower caste people who understand the needs of the poorest were elected to senior positions on the Management Committees and User Groups in the Buffer Zones. In turn, these developments encouraged the mostly poor people of the local communities to support more fully rhino protection. Improved co-operation amongst the NGOs, DNPWC, the Army and local communities helped reduce rhino poaching in 2008 and 2009.

The Buffer Zone concept was promulgated in Nepal in 1993 for certain protected areas in order to encourage the local communities to be more reliant



**The greater one horned rhino carries a horn worth thousands of dollars on the black market in East Asia**

on economic activities within such a zone rather than illegally exploiting the resources inside the parks. The purpose was to make the communities more aware of wildlife conservation since it is in their best economic interests to reduce poaching of rhinos and tigers, large animals that make tourism profitable. The Buffer Zones were to be funded from 30–50% of the revenue raised in the protected areas, later confirmed at 50%. This new, exciting concept was set up in Chitwan National Park in 1996 but did not really get going until around 1999. For Bardia National Park the concept was also set up in 1996.

In the initial years after the implementation of the Buffer Zone concept, it was not effective in protecting the rhino as the poorest people received too few benefits. From 2001 to 2006, at least 120 rhinos were poached in and around Chitwan NP, and in Bardia NP's Babai Valley the entire rhino population was eliminated by poachers with Bardia's total rhino number declining from 67 to 30 during this time. There were other reasons for the serious rhino poaching, including a breakdown in law and order throughout Nepal, but the local communities were not particularly helpful in preventing poachers and traders



**Rhinos in Nepal prefer the grassy swamp areas and are less frequently seen feeding in the forests**

from moving in and out of the Buffer Zone areas contiguous to the two Parks.

Fortunately, the Buffer Zone concept relevant to wildlife conservation was implemented more successfully in 2008 and 2009. This improved community concern for protecting rhinos has greatly helped to reduce poaching.

### **Rhino poaching in Nepal in 2008 and 2009 Chitwan National Park**

In 2008 there were about 400 rhinos in and around Chitwan NP of which 7 rhinos were shot. All except one were killed inside the Park. The authorities retrieved only one horn. In 2009 10 rhinos were poached, seven inside the Park and 3 in the Buffer Zone; officials retrieved three horns. Poachers wounded two rhinos in July/August 2009, around the tourist area of Sauraha, but due to the quick response from the Park

staff, the poachers did not have time to remove the horns from the injured animals.

Poachers and middlemen who had been arrested in 2008 in 2009 gave information on prices. There was one exceptionally high price, when in 2009; a gang killed a rhino with .303 rifle. The gang removed the 1 kg horn and sold it to a trader in Kathmandu supposedly for NRs. 1,400,000 (USD 19,178).

### **Bardia National Park**

There were only two rhinos known to have been poached in Bardia NP in 2008 and none in 2009, mainly because some Army and ex-Army people who had been directly involved in the poaching and selling of horn were arrested in 2008.

A businessman from Kathmandu paid NRs. 200,000 (USD 3091) to the poachers for a rhino horn which was split evenly amongst

the four gang members. Similarly, a woman of Tibetan origin, resident in the town of Nepalgunj, purchased the horn for NRs. 900,000 (USD 12,329) on behalf of a trader who may have been an ethnic Lama.

### **Increased security in Nepal**

The signing of the Peace Accord in 2006 ended a 10-year civil war. Subsequently, fighting in the countryside decreased and security greatly improved in Nepal. Consequently, the Nepalese Army resident in Chitwan NP was able to re-occupy more former Army posts. In addition, in mid-2008 a company of troops was added to the battalion in the Park, which improved the frequency and effectiveness of anti-poaching activities.

In Bardia NP the Nepal Army occupied only seven posts in 2004, but by December 2007 six more were re-established (Martin and Martin 2006, Martin et al. 2009). By the end of 2009, Nepal Army personnel occupied 19 posts. During the insurgency, the Army could not move around the Babai Valley as it was diverted to counter insurgency operations. By 2008, Army personnel spent most of their time carrying out anti-poaching activities once more.

### **The buffer zone communities**

Till 2005, the conservation efforts carried out by communities living in the Buffer Zones of Chitwan and Bardia NPs were not

particularly effective. This was due to a decline in the money paid into the Buffer Zones as a result in the drop in tourist numbers, and the fact that the Buffer Zone Management Committees received this money automatically whether they adequately protected rhinos or not. In addition, the communities within the Buffer Zones had not been well informed on how to deal with conservation issues nor motivated to implement a successful anti-poaching strategy. These problems continued in 2006 and 2007.

### **Chitwan National Park**

There is 1 Buffer Zone Management Committee, 21 User Committees and 1,700 User Groups that are involved in deciding how the money earned by the Park will be allocated and spent by the local communities in the Buffer Zone.

The Buffer Zone Management Committee for Chitwan allocates 30% for conservation projects to protect wildlife, 30% for building schools and roads, 20% for income-generating projects such as poultry and pig farming, handicrafts, and tailoring enterprises, 10% for administration and 10% for education. The conservation and education expenditures are particularly relevant to rhinos.

### **The Buffer Zone User Committees**

Groups spend more money on conservation projects



**Esmond Martin meets some members of the Mrigakunja user committee at their office near Chitwan National Park**

compared to educational ones, although the latter are probably equally important for rhino conservation.

In 2008 and 2009, the major conservation projects included erecting fences to protect crops from wild animals that stray out of Chitwan NP and improving the management of grasslands for rhinos. Other projects support the youths who voluntarily patrol in the Buffer Zone to arrest poachers and to report illegal weapons.

National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) increased its support in the Buffer Zone by improving the people's livelihoods, safeguarding people and crops from wild animals, and by helping to protect rhinos that wander into the Buffer Zone. NTNC set up a fund in 2005 and 2006 of NPR 5,000,000 (then worth USD 69,444), the interest on which is used to pay informers, to patrol outside the Park boundary and to help maintain anti-poaching vehicles.

NTNC, along with assistance from the Darwin Initiative, ZSL and the Parks' staff have erected fences to deter wild animals from going into farmers' fields. NTNC has also been encouraging local communities not to over-exploit the natural resources of the forest by encouraging other forms of economic activity and paying the start-up costs. These include supporting alternative energy sources such as biogas plants and supplying tree seedlings and setting up monitoring system for rhinos.

WWF Nepal works with the communities in the Buffer Zone to reduce human-wildlife conflict and aids income-generating projects such as goat keeping, pig farming and biogas plants, support eco clubs at schools and carryout awareness programmes on the importance of conservation to protect the rhino. WWF Nepal spent NRs. 800,000 (USD 12,365) in 2009 for informers and for intelligence gathering on potential poachers and

wildlife traders. The laymen coached by Ram Prit Yadav, who patrol on daily basis the community forests and collect information on poachers, are paid NRs. 700-2000 (USD 10-27 a month).

The Park staff members also have improved relations with the communities in the Buffer Zone. An assistant warden based at Chitwan NP headquarters at Kasara oversees the management and co-ordination of the Buffer Zone activities for DNPWC. The Park helps support the management of the Buffer Zone User Groups by employing staff, including a sub-engineer to estimate the cost of development works.

### **Bardia National Park**

There is one Buffer Zone Management Committee, but 15 User Committees and at least 226 User Groups that are involved in deciding how the money is allocated.

NTNC has recently given greater assistance to Buffer Zone communities in order to ensure that the rhinos remain safe and thus continue to attract tourists to the Park. A rhino identification system was started in June 2008, with financial support from the Darwin Initiative and technical assistance from ZSL. The Darwin Initiative has helped fund NTNC to put a lot of effort into community education and the mentha processing plants.

WWF Nepal is increasing its help to the User Committees

in the Buffer Zone. Support is given to 104 youth volunteers who have been assembled by the User Group Committees since 2008 to gather information and patrol the outskirts of the Park, especially in the Karnali River area. In response, it has contributed to the construction of 34 km of electric fencing on the western bank of the Karnali River to prevent large mammals from leaving the Park. The Fund also helps to motivate the local community by implementing rhino conservation education projects and by supporting new forms of income, such as furniture making and the extraction of oils from plants to sell commercially.

### **Conclusion**

The official decrease in the number of rhinos poached in Nepal in 2008 and 2009 compared to the number killed between 2000 and 2007 can be attributed to five main factors: improved security in the country, a system set up by the Darwin Initiative to monitor rhinos, more efficient use of informers, increased support for projects in Chitwan and Bardia NPs' Buffer Zones by the NGOs and DNPWC, and greater commitment by local communities to protecting rhinos.

This in turn has encouraged local people to put a higher priority on wildlife conservation. The Buffer Zone User Groups' decision-making process about how to use their revenue has become

more democratic and the relationships between the Parks' senior staff and the Buffer Zone Management Committees have become stronger. Furthermore, improved law and order in the Terai region has allowed the Buffer Zone volunteer anti-poaching units to become more effective. It has also encouraged the NGOs to put more resources into the Buffer Zones as there are now greater chances of success. Most notable has been the contribution of NGOs for scientific patrol-based monitoring, transparent monthly reporting and annual status reporting of rhinos; community education; problem animal work including fencing; strategically planting non-palatable crops and starting mentha processing; and initiating new APU systems involving over 100 community-based anti-poaching volunteers.

Effective cooperation and transparency amongst the DNPWC, NGOs, Army and the Buffer Zone Management Committees are essential. It is imperative that the communities living around Chitwan and Bardia NPs continue to receive significant benefits, for which they are accountable from the DNPWC and NGOs to sustain their motivation and efforts towards protecting rhinos.

*(Based on the Esmond and Chryssee Martin's published research article in Pachyderm no 48, July-December 2010)*