

# CONSERVATION IN ACTION IN NEPAL

By Michael Dee

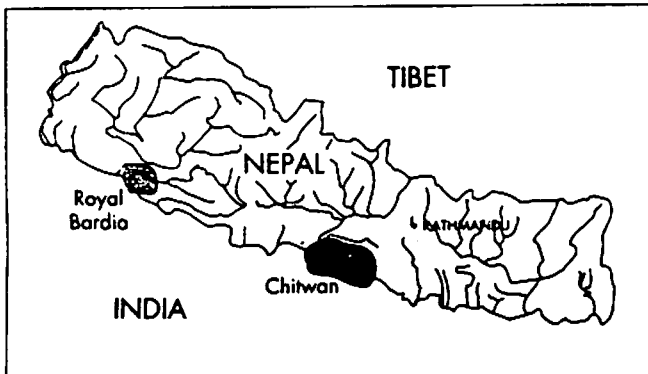
The ultimate goal of the 1989 SSP Masterplan developed for greater one-horned Asian rhinos is to develop a genetically diverse and demographically stable captive population capable of long-term, self-sustaining survival. Through genetic and demographic analyses, it was determined that recruitment of additional founder stock from the wild is necessary if this goal is to be attained.

In communications with Dr. Hemanta Mishra, Director of the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation in Nepal, I learned that the Royal Chitwan National Park in Nepal was starting to reach its carrying capacity with respect to greater one-horned Asian rhinos. Even though Chitwan has over 350 square miles of protected area, only a small portion is suitable rhino habitat. Rhinos were known to be leaving the park to forage in farmers' fields.

With this in mind, Los Angeles Zoo Director, Dr. Warren Thomas, Minnesota Zoo Director of Conservation, Dr. Ronald Tilson, and I travelled to Nepal in February of 1990 to meet with Dr. Mishra to discuss the possibility of bringing eight to ten animals out of Nepal to help bolster the captive North American population. So far, as a result of that meeting, one pair of rhinos was shipped from Chitwan to the Ft. Worth Zoo last May, and a tentative agreement was formulated to bring another rhino to the U.S. in the Fall of 1990.

After meeting with Dr. Mishra in Kathmandu, our group was invited to visit the King Mahendra Trust Research Facility in Chitwan. There we were greeted by Dr. David Smith and his Nepalese associates who gave us a tour of the compound. Dr. Smith is in Chitwan gathering data on small carnivores and also studying the population structure of sloth bears. The team had captured and radio-collared a male sloth bear the morning of our arrival.

Located in the lowlands of Nepal where the monsoon season lasts for two to three months, Chitwan National Park is relatively flat and consists of part forest and part flood plain. In the plains the elephant grass grows twelve feet high - this is the habitat of the rhino.



*The current range of the greater one-horned Asian rhino in Nepal is indicated by shaded areas.*



*A radio-collared male greater one-horned Asian rhino in Royal Bardia Wildlife Sanctuary, Nepal. (Photo by M. Dee)*

Accompanied by guides, our group rode out into the high grasses by elephant to look for rhinos in the field. In less than one hour, we saw six rhinos. The animals appeared to be quite calm and we were able to get very close without any undue stress to either the elephants or the rhinos. However, problems arise during the grass-cutting season, a two-week period during which the local villagers are allowed into the park to cut down the elephant grass before it is burned off. It is at this time that "rhino-human" contact is assured, and each year four to five grass cutters are killed by rhinos.

On a return visit to Nepal last April, I visited the Royal Bardia Wildlife Sanctuary where nine rhinos were translocated from Chitwan in 1988. One male was killed because it was found raiding villagers' crops, but the rest seem to have adjusted to their new surroundings quite well. In fact, as a result of breeding, there are now thirteen rhinos in Bardia. However, they did not appear to be as calm as the animals in Chitwan. The eight rhinos I observed were easily upset and it was very difficult to get close to them.

I also re-visited Chitwan in April. Interestingly, this time, female rhinos with calves seemed to be everywhere. Searching by elephant-back for three days, over 20 rhinos were seen in less than eight hours.

The population of rhinos in Chitwan is around 400 at the present time. Poaching does not appear to be a problem as the Royal Nepalese Army has its headquarters in Chitwan, and the entire area is guarded by troops. However, as a result of animals leaving the park's boundaries and the fact that numerous villages surround prime rhino habitats, animal-human conflict is likely to start occurring at a rapid rate.

The King Mahendra Trust has taken an aggressive stance in preserving Nepal's wildlife. Hopefully, with continued rhino relocation efforts, such as the Chitwan to Bardia moves, and by transporting a few additional animals to zoos, both the wild and the captive greater one-horned Asian rhino populations will continue to thrive.