

# Experiences With Reintroduced Rhinos In Dudhwa National Park, Uttar Pradesh India

*Dr Satya Priya Sinha*

HNO.IV Wildlife Institute of India, Chandrabani Dehradun—248006, Uttarakhand, India

I started my career in wildlife with fieldwork on the Gir Lion study in Gujarat and the Snow Leopard survey in trans-Himalayas. In 1987, the Wildlife Institute had an ongoing collaborative project with the Uttar Pradesh Forest Department on monitoring reintroduced rhinos in Dudhwa National Park (NP). I got an opportunity to undertake monitoring of reintroduce rhinos in Dudhwa.N.P. Before beginning the work somebody told me that the rhino monitoring project is a challenging assignment and that one researcher had left the Salukapur Rhino monitoring center because he was feeling uneasy about staying at Salukapur FRH. The FRH has ghost stories & also Dudhwa National Park was well known for the man-eating tigers.

In the past Salukapur FRH was heaven for *dacoits* (armed robbers) who regularly occupied the area during the monsoon season. This forest rest house was renovated by a well-known figure in Asian wildlife conservation, Dr Ram Lakhan Singh, India Forest Service (retired), Dudhwa NP's first director. He personally initiated the dialogue with these people and finally they agreed not to use the guest house in future.

In the past Indian one-horned rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) used to roam around in the flood plains of Rivers Ganga and Yamuna, but due to over-hunting and loss of habitat most of them were wiped out and are now restricted to small pockets of territory. After reintroducing rhinos in 1984–85 from Assam and Nepal, Salukapur became the rhino monitoring centre in Dudhwa NP. Re-introduced rhinos are kept in an area of 27 km<sup>2</sup> that is enclosed by an electric fence.

My association with the rhino monitoring programme began in 1987 and during this period a number of memorable incidences took place while working in this area, although I cannot possibly narrate all the memorable events. Salukapur is a remote peaceful place. During the dry season one can easily drive and reach within half an hour from Dudhwa FRH to Rhino Monitoring Centre at Salukapur but during monsoon you have to walk down or travel on elephant back.

On 2 March 1989, our early morning monitoring work on elephant back started as usual. As we covered few hundred meters from the main entrance of fence area the female rhino named Himrani was in front of us. Suddenly I noticed a small creature moving behind her too close. Usually in March most of the grassland areas are burned in Dudhwa NP in order to increase visibility. I told the mahout to go close to the rhino and it was a memorable moment for all of us. A small calf—still in pinkish coat—was standing nearby her mother and started milking. This was the first alive rhino calf of the reintroduced rhino population.

Immediately the news was flashed on a wireless set and concerned officers started coming to witness the rhino calf. Salukapur become an attraction for people from different areas. Although common visitor or tourists were not allowed inside the rhino area, only forest officials and staff visited this area. Mr R.P. Singh was the Director of Dudhwa NP at this time and he was very happy and always took care of this programme and used to visit regularly for hours on elephant back to monitor rhinos. We all were worried about the challenge of saving this calf from tigers. Suddenly it struck my mind to restrict this female with her calf in a small area. We created a mini nursery area of 3 km<sup>2</sup> surrounded by an electric fence. The enclosed area had all the requirements: a body of water, grassland and woodland. On both sides of the nursery, two groups of people placed their camps and elephants were kept to chase any tigers that came close to the fence or were sighted inside the fenced area.

During their stay inside the nursery, one day I found that young calf had a problem in its right ear; the auricle was badly injured and bleeding. I immediately informed the Director of Dudhwa NP. I decided to make a mix of savlon antiseptic solution, turmeric powder, a small amount of phenyl and turpentine oil. With the help of improvised pump, the mixture was sprayed on the calf and her mother. In the beginning the animals were little reluctant but later on when they started feeling that it gave them relief and kept insects away from wound site. Both of them stood still in the same place and we sprayed nicely and the calf recovered. This worked out satisfactorily and finally the female with her calf were released into the main fence.