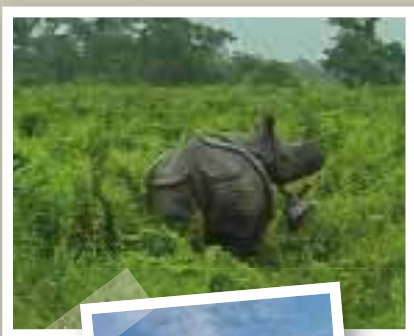


## Following the tiny steps is this good news?

The monsoon at Manas National Park (MNP) is normally hot and humid with the entire habitat a lush, green, perfect visual delight. During the 2012 monsoon season, the Park experienced two waves of flooding, once during June and the next during September. Almost the entire road network in the Park was affected and some portions washed away. It was difficult to negotiate some of the flooded areas, even on elephant. However the team's dedication to locate and observe the rhinos, to monitor their behaviour and health conditions, kept the system functional even in difficult periods.

Deba Kumar Dutta | Senior Project Officer, WWF-India  
Amit Sharma | Co-ordinator Rhino Conservation Program, WWF-India  
Anindya Swargowari | Field Director Manas Tiger Reserve, Assam



Above: A translocated rhino and her newborn calf



Right: Searching for rhino by elephant

**D**uring September 2012, when Manas NP was bearing the brunt of the second wave of flooding, an adult female, Rhino-10, was often documented using the Chengmarijhar area.

The area offers a mixed type of a habitat with woodland surrounded by big patches of swamps with tall and dense vegetation, criss-crossed by a number of small water channels.

Rhino-10 was translocated from Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary, located in the Morigaon district of Assam on 8 January 2011. After being released in Manas, she moved toward Bhuyapara range in the east of MNP, sometimes straying into the adjoining paddy fields, but since September 2012, she has mostly used the inaccessible and interior areas of Chengmarijhar. The monitoring team had a tough time keeping an eye on her and had to put in more effort to locate her on a regular basis, particularly during the monsoon when it became very difficult to locate the rhino.

On 26 September 2012, a special search operation was undertaken to locate her. The search was undertaken by two teams, each consisting of six persons on three elephants and equipped with a telemetry receiver and antennae, GPS and a camera. Both the teams were given the responsibility of scanning two different probable areas; one team started from Bhuyapara range office and the second from Betbari camp.

It was raining very heavily, meaning the search operating had to start late, around 12pm. The probable location of the rhino was plotted on a map using the triangulation technique. She was estimated to be about 4km from the Bhuyapara range office and 3.5km from the Betbari camp. One team moved in a north-east direction and the other in a north-west direction, with the plan to meet at a landmark point.

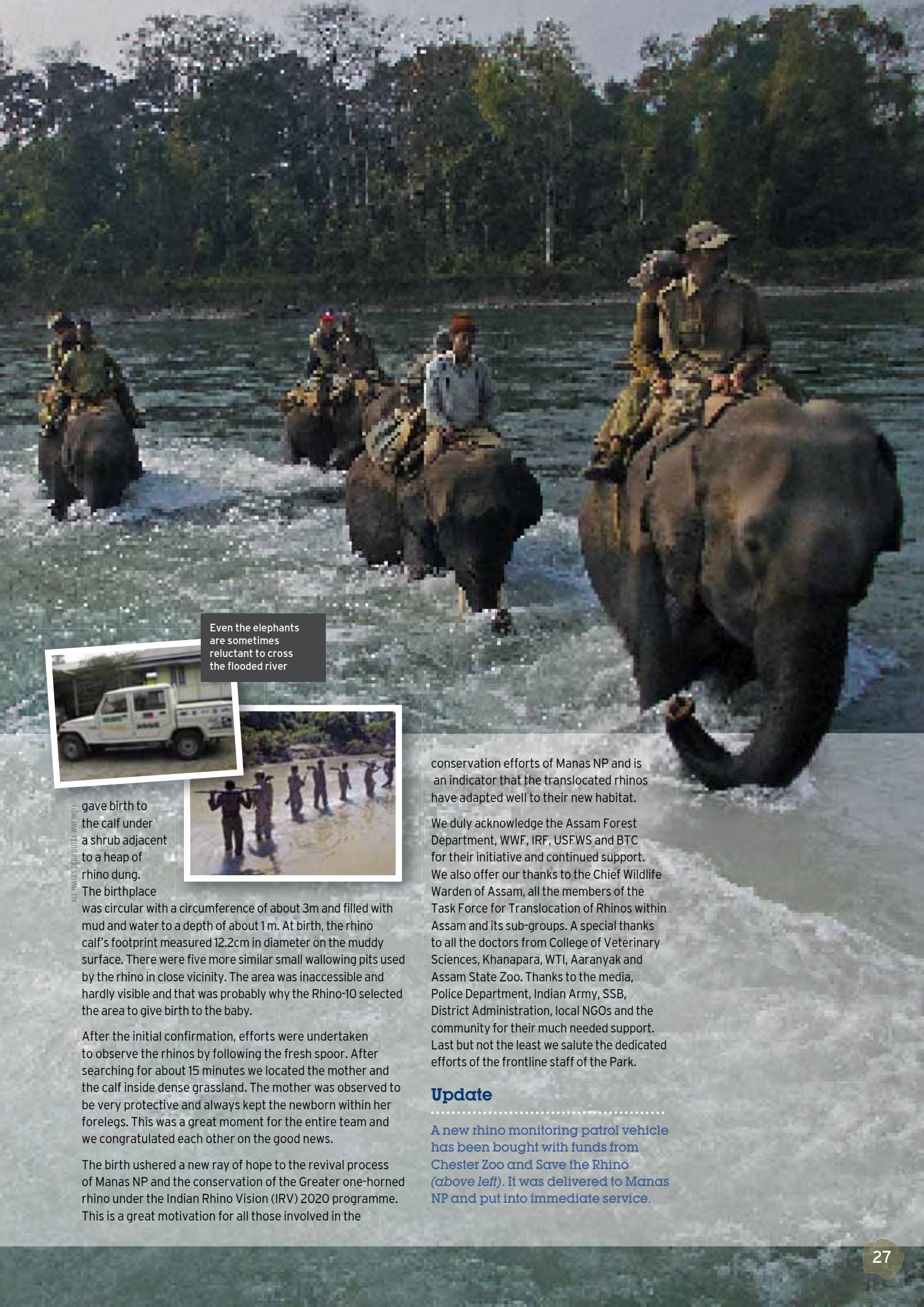
The first team moved 1km east from the Bhuyapara range office and then had to cross the Digjhar river that was full of flood water, flowing at high velocity. At first, even the elephants were reluctant to cross the flooded river, but with

a lot of effort, the team was able to cross and continued to move as planned towards the target.

Simultaneously, the other team also experienced a lot of effort to reach the destination and we met around 3pm. It was still raining heavily so the team took a brief rest. The search started again and encouragingly we found fresh footprints to follow.

Dhanonjoy Daimary and Bimal Basumatary then tried to locate the rhino from a tall tree, as they could tell that the Rhino-10 might be in close vicinity from the strong radio signals. After a few minutes of cautious scanning and observation, they noticed Rhino-10 standing just 100m from the tree. In addition to confirming the presence of the Rhino-10, they were very excited and confused to observe a small creature in between her forelegs. They assumed it might be a calf but could not confirm from that distance through the vegetation. After a patient wait, when the rhinos moved on, they carefully surveyed the area. Along with the adult female's prints they noticed other small footprints, which called for further observation and confirmation. Rainfall intensified and the evening brought in darkness. As such, the search operation was called off to re-start the next morning. We returned to our WWF field camp at Basbari around 8.45pm that day and discussed the findings with senior Park officials and made necessary plans for the next day's search.

At 3am the next morning we set out on our mission from Basbari camp to confirm the sighting, accompanied by senior and experienced officials. We were a 12-member team that proceeded towards Chengmarijhar on elephant back, following the radio signal to the spot of the newborn rhino's first steps. The morning was sunny and bright and at 6.30am we reached the site where the rhino was observed the day before. We inspected the location for the footprints and it was confirmed that Rhino-10 was accompanied by a baby rhino. This good news meant that a translocated rhino had given birth to a baby, adding to the existing population. After examination, we could see that the mother



Even the elephants are sometimes reluctant to cross the flooded river



gave birth to the calf under a shrub adjacent to a heap of rhino dung.

The birthplace was circular with a circumference of about 3m and filled with mud and water to a depth of about 1 m. At birth, the rhino calf's footprint measured 12.2cm in diameter on the muddy surface. There were five more similar small wallowing pits used by the rhino in close vicinity. The area was inaccessible and hardly visible and that was probably why the Rhino-10 selected the area to give birth to the baby.

After the initial confirmation, efforts were undertaken to observe the rhinos by following the fresh spoor. After searching for about 15 minutes we located the mother and the calf inside dense grassland. The mother was observed to be very protective and always kept the newborn within her forelegs. This was a great moment for the entire team and we congratulated each other on the good news.

The birth ushered a new ray of hope to the revival process of Manas NP and the conservation of the Greater one-horned rhino under the Indian Rhino Vision (IRV) 2020 programme. This is a great motivation for all those involved in the

conservation efforts of Manas NP and is an indicator that the translocated rhinos have adapted well to their new habitat.

We duly acknowledge the Assam Forest Department, WWF, IRF, USFWS and BTC for their initiative and continued support. We also offer our thanks to the Chief Wildlife Warden of Assam, all the members of the Task Force for Translocation of Rhinos within Assam and its sub-groups. A special thanks to all the doctors from College of Veterinary Sciences, Khanapara, WTI, Aaranyak and Assam State Zoo. Thanks to the media, Police Department, Indian Army, SSB, District Administration, local NGOs and the community for their much needed support. Last but not the least we salute the dedicated efforts of the frontline staff of the Park.

### Update

A new rhino monitoring patrol vehicle has been bought with funds from Chester Zoo and Save the Rhino (above left). It was delivered to Manas NP and put into immediate service.