



WWF

NEWSLETTER

IND

2010

PANDA



Conserving Biodiversity

Rhino Translocation

Convention on Biodiversity

From SG & CEO's desk

Dear Readers,

This edition of the Panda newsletter covers the translocation of four rhinos carried out by the Assam Forest department together with WWF India and the International Rhino Foundation (IRF) from Kaziranga Wildlife Sanctuary to Manas National Park in Assam. This was the third successful translocation carried out since IRV 2020 was launched and carries with it, the story of team-work, logistical coordination, involvement of local communities and in the background, a huge preplanning exercise. The edition also brings out photographs of the Rusty Spotted Cat and the Four-Horned deer, captured on camera during the tiger estimation exercise in Pilibhit. These pictures are unique as the two species have not been photographed earlier in this part of the Terai Arc Landscape and goes to the point that we need to explore our forests and larger environs with an explorer's eye as much new knowledge reposes there.

Also included is news of our young tiger ambassadors Anusha Shankar and Devanshu Sood who visited Vladivostok as a part of a tiger summit and lend their views on conserving the tiger. The new report on trade in owl species gathered much attention and will hopefully highlight the issue for the betterment of their existence in the wild. Many other reports and events are followed in this Panda added to which is my pleasure to announce the launch of the e-newsletter of the same publication. With this, we hope to further the message of conservation and news of our activities, though a subscription copy will continue to be printed for those who would like to receive a printed version.

Ravi Singh
SG & CEO
WWF India

From the Editor's desk

Dear Readers,

I'm glad and rather proud to share that some of the challenging work carried out by our organization received accolades this year. The Salim Ali Visitor Interpretation Centre at the Keoladeo National Park, in Bharatpur, India, was conferred the Best Asian Wetland Centre Award while our education initiative in partnership with PVR cinemas grabbed the 'Highly Commendable Prize' in the Best Green Educational Project category at the Global Green Awards ceremony in London!!! Kudos to the team!

Raja and Jackie, did us proud by busting the thick skinned poachers in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra while Binge and Ben, our new inclusion for the kids section, educate children on unhealthy eating habits and the effects they have on our planet. For conservation enthusiasts like you, here is another account of our work...*for a living planet!*

Wishing you all a very Happy New Year!

May conservation be the theme of the year ahead!

Best Regards
Shaila Sam

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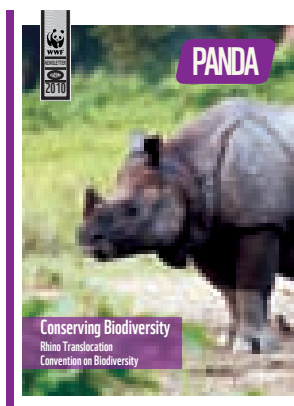
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On the Cover:
A rhino at Kaziranga
© Dipankar Ghose

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SPECIAL FOCUS

From Pobitora to Manas

*An eye witness account of the translocation of rhinos carried out in Assam
between 27-29 Dec 2010 and 17-19 Jan 2011*

Prologue

It is 5 am on a Tuesday morning towards the end of 2010 and thick fog conceals the vast grasslands of the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary, located about 60 km east of Guwahati. I'm on the back of an elephant, for the first time in my life I should add, sitting behind the mahout and hanging on for dear life with one hand while trying to shoot with a video camera with the other hand. We are following three elephants, each of which has one veterinarian equipped with a tranquilizing gun. Much ahead of them, lost in the gloom of the fog, is the locator team. Waiting behind at the elephant camp is the logistics team along with forest department officials and guards, WWF and other NGO staff as well as a host of other support staff. All of them are part of the team tasked with translocating rhinos from Pobitora to Manas National Park in northern Assam under the Indian Rhino Vision 2020 (IRV 2020).

IRV 2020

The IRV 2020 is a joint programme of the Department of Environment and Forests – Government of Assam, WWF-India and the International Rhino Foundation (IRF) with support from the Bodoland Territorial Council, US Fish and Wildlife Service and the local communities. The programme's vision is to increase Assam's rhino population to 3000 by 2020, which will be done by wild-to-wild translocation from Kaziranga National Park and Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary to Manas and Dibru Saikhowa National Parks as well as Laokhowa and Burachopari Wildlife Sanctuaries.

Assam accounts for the largest population of Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*). Though rhino numbers in the state have grown from 2000 in 2005 to over 2200 in 2009, more than 90% of these live in just one Protected Area, which is the Kaziranga National Park. The IRV 2020 programme aims to secure the long-term survival of wild rhinos in Assam by expanding their distribution to reduce risks like disease, in-breeding depression and mass mortality.

Under this programme, the first phase of wild-to-wild translocations was carried out in April 2008 when two male rhinos were re-introduced into Manas National Park from Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary. The current translocations are a part of phase two of the translocations. During the second phase, a total of 18 rhinos are proposed to be translocated from Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary and Kaziranga National Park to Manas National Park in batches.

The sun is still not up but a faint glow suffuses the fog. An occasional birdcall and grunts of elephants disturb the stillness of the early morning. I slip into a pleasant limbo induced by the gentle rocking of the elephant. But it does not last long. A burst of static shatters the stillness. The locator team is contacting the veterinarians through the wireless. And they have some good news. They have found a couple of rhinos and apprise the team of the location. We rush together into the fog. By this time the sun has risen and is a pale disc hanging low in the sky. Suddenly, a little ahead of us, a silhouette resolves itself into the thick outlines of a rhino. Behind it is another rhino.

The First Attempt

The elephant I'm on falls back a little while the elephants of the tranquilizing

team take up a triangular position to box in the rhino and enable correct targeting. Each tranquilizing gun is loaded with a diluted solution of the powerful narcotic-Etorphine. I'm told one undiluted drop of which, if exposed to bare skin, is capable of killing an adult human within minutes! However, the rhino doesn't play to their plan. It quickly cuts through the fourth side before the veterinarians can take proper aim. We follow him and there begins a fruitless chase that lasts more than an hour and a half. By this time the sun has climbed the eastern sky. The fog has also cleared improving visibility. The tranquilising team decides to leave this 'unsporting' rhino alone and they move to a different location with the locator team. I return to the base camp to join the remaining translocation team there. I'm actually grateful for the chance to dismount the elephant, even if it was an enjoyable experience, as it was not easy shooting with one hand while hanging on to a rope with the other hand.

The Second Attempt

The locator and tranquilizing teams then move off to a new location in another part of the Sanctuary in the hope of having better luck at finding rhinos. But little did they know that lady luck would play hide & seek until early afternoon. After a series of near misses, partial hits and uncooperative rhinos the tranquilizing team finally meets with success and manages to tranquilize a female. The rest of us rush to the new location to find the rhino tottering with her concerned calf hovering nearby. A decision is taken to tranquilize the sub-adult rhino also as it is a female too and more importantly would keep the mother and her calf together.

The mother quickly falls asleep and the logistics team swings into action. A bulldozer is brought in to dig a shallow trench next to the tranquilized rhino so



Indian Rhino
© Anil Cherukupalli

that a platform can be placed there onto which the rhino can be rolled. This is soon accomplished.

Meanwhile, the veterinarians conduct a quick examination of the rhino including measuring its length and breadth, taking a blood sample and ear marking for correct identification later. A radio collar with a GPS locator is affixed around the neck of the rhino to facilitate tracking of the rhino post-release in Manas.

After the examination, the rhino is rolled onto the platform and the bulldozer then moves the platform to where the crate (that will be used to transport the rhino) is located. Next, a

carefully coordinated exercise is undertaken which first involves bringing the rhino into the crate with the platform followed by administration of the revivant and removal of the platform once the rhino is awake to fully close and lock the crate. A crane is then brought in to carefully raise the crate and lower it onto a truck.

Throughout this operation the rhino is watered at regular intervals to keep it cool. The same sequence is repeated



A tranquilized Rhino

© Anil Cherukupalli

for the sub-adult female as well. Once the rhinos have adjusted to the crates we retire for a quick lunch and a trip back to our rooms to pack our luggage.

The Release

It is time now to start the long road journey through the night to Manas National Park, located about 260 km away in the north of Assam. The convoy starts with a police van in front providing security, followed by the trucks with the rhino crates behind which various other vehicles such as

the veterinarians and ours follow.

Except for a temporary breakdown of one of the rhino trucks and the crane driver temporarily losing way, the journey through the night passes off uneventfully. We reach Manas just as dawn is breaking at around 5 a.m.

Everything is ready there. Two ramps have been hollowed out for the trucks to facilitate the release of the rhinos. Everyone takes a short break as the

trucks make their way to the release site. The release site is a small clearing in front of dense grasslands. The trucks are in place. The post release rhino monitoring and tracking teams are ready on elephants nearby. We make our way to one of the machans set up next to the release site to observe and record the proceedings below. The crates are then lowered from the trucks by the crane. The doctors do one last check of the rhinos within. They seem to be fine and look ready to get out and explore their new home. People are cleared from the site. It is time.

First, the gate of the crate containing the calf is raised. She comes out, understandably a little miffed at being confined in a crate for the night. So she tries to bite the truck. She then turns around and runs to her mother's crate, the gate of which is also being raised. The calf passes in front of the mother and veers off. However, in the heat of the moment and since rhinos have poor eyesight they both miss seeing each other and the calf vanishes into



© WWF-India

The ramp prepared for the rhino trucks in Manas

the jungle. The released mother instantly goes over to her daughter's cage. She then wanders over to some feed from her daughter's cage kept under a machan. There are about 10 people on the machan including me observing and recording the proceedings. She is huge and fills the viewfinder of my video camera. For a moment I'm stunned as the sheer size of the rhino belatedly hits me. Quite literally, as if reading my thoughts, while turning away from the machan the rhino below us hits one of the wooden pillars of the machan with her side. The whole machan is rattled and sways but fortunately for all of us the rhino moves forward and the machan stays. The rhino is presumably following the smell of her calf as rhinos have an excellent sense of smell.

The rhino then moves to the truck of her daughter again but this time approaches the driver's window. The

driver inside is shocked to suddenly find this huge rhino filling up his window. He shrinks back and fortunately for him, the rhino also moves away. She then veers off into the adjacent grasslands and eventually into the forest.

The post-release monitoring and tracking team soon sets off on elephants after her to track her by her GPS radio collar and check if she has united with her calf. We all heave a sigh of relief and the translocation team is happy that, except for the brief period of excitement towards the end, everything has gone according to the plan. The story has a fitting end with the news coming in a few days later from the monitoring team that the mother and daughter had united and were settling down in their new home. Happy endings happen in the natural world too.



The two rhinos released during the first phase of translocation



© Anil Cherukupalli

Two of the four rhinos released during the second phase of the rhino translocation

Epilogue

A second phase of translocation soon followed in the New Year from 17th to 18th January 2011 and this time a total of four rhinos were translocated. In spite of the huge task of translocating and releasing four rhinos, never done before in India, the Translocation Core Committee ensured that everything went without a hitch.

These translocations will contribute to reviving the past glory of Manas National Park and ensure that Assam's Rhino population will have a safer future by having breeding populations in several protected areas.

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