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বন্যপ্রাণ সংখ্যা

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# Banabithi

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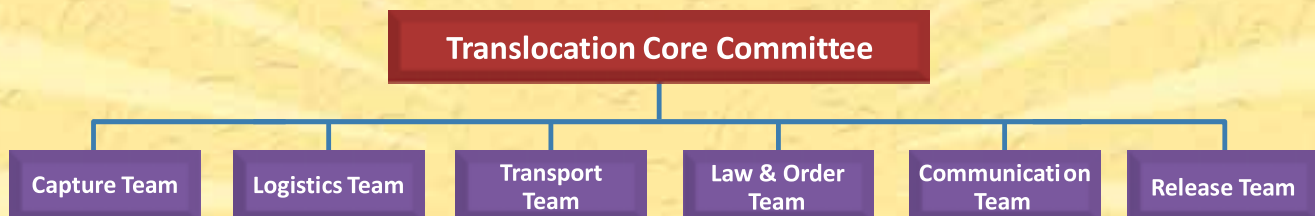
# Experience of Rhino Translocation in Assam

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**Introduction:** On January 2011, I got the opportunity to join “Indian Rhino Vision (IRV) 2020” program in Assam & gained great experience regarding translocation of the greater one horned Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*). A six-member team went to Assam from West Bengal for the purpose of gathering experience regarding rhino translocation. Besides me the other members were Dr. Ashok Kr. Singh, VO, Jaldapara; Sri Bimal Debnath, FR, Gorumara North Range; Sri Buddhadeb Mandal, FR, Jaldapara; Sri Amitabha Pal, DR, Jaldapara; Sri Bijay Dhar, BS, WL Division II.

Though Rhino is considered as vulnerable by IUCN, it is still in high risk for its survival in Assam because of severe threats from poachers, wildlife trafficking, fragmentation and degradation of its habitat in the past couple of decades. Assam is one of the last strongholds of the Indian Rhino with a total population of 2201 as estimated by the Assam Forest Department in the year 2009. “IRV 2020” is an ambitious joint project of the Government of Assam, WWF India, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Aranyak – a NGO and the International Rhino Foundation - that aims to attain a population of 3000 wild rhinos in seven of Assam's Protected Areas with enough habitat, by the year 2020. This time program was set for translocation of Rhinos from Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary to Manas National Park. Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary has the highest density of rhino population in the world with over 80 rhinos in about 16 square km area.

**Planning for Translocation:** On 16<sup>th</sup> January 2011 afternoon we reached Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary from Guwahati, located about 40 km east for planning of the operation. Translocation of rhino is a carefully planned operation that involves capturing and moving rhinos with minimal stress. This requires some expert team which was collectively designated as Translocation Core Committee. The composition of the team is represented below.



- 1. Capture Team:** This include some senior forest officials, expert team of vets, dedicated darting team & other support staff.
- 2. Logistics Team:** The logistics team iwasresponsible for making all the arrangements involved in the whole translocation process at the sites of capture, during transport and release. This team worked in close co-ordination with all the other teams.
- 3. Transport Team:** This team was responsible for making all the arrangements for transporting the rhinos from the site of capture to the release site guiding the logistic team in close co-ordination with the Security/ Law & Order Team.
- 4. Law & Order Team:** This team ensured the safety and security of the team members from the crowd of neighboring village during the operations as well as during transport and controlled traffic in the route that would be used for transportation of captured rhinos.

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**5. Communication Team:** This team formulated communication strategies and interacted with the media, public and VIPs. This team provided press release, arranged press coverage of the event along with filming of the whole process. The team also responsible for awareness and public support campaigns with the help of the other teams.

**6. Release & Monitoring Team:** The release team was responsible for undertaking all the activities related to the release of the Rhinos and the monitoring team is responsible for the long term monitoring of the Rhinos in its new habitat.

Meeting with all the team members is very much essential for successful translocation operation. After such meeting in the evening we came back Guwahati at night in the midst of heavy rain with a little bit anxiety, as overnight raining might postpone the program.

**Day of operation:** On 17<sup>th</sup> January 2011, in the early morning, we reached Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary. The weather was clear & everything seemed perfect. We along with other personnel moved near the place of operation. Cranes, earth moving machinery, trucks loaded with logistics also reached that place. Loading of dart with a combination of drugs done here. CAPTIVON™ 98 (Etorphine Hydrochloride 9.8mg/ml) was used as immobilizing agent & Acepromazine maleate (10mg/ml) was used as sedative.

At 7.00 AM the darting team along with vets set out on elephant back to begin the first operation. One adult male rhino darted at 7.30 AM. As soon as the darting team sent message via walkie-talkie all rushed to that particular place. The rhino lost consciousness at 7.50 AM & it was monitored by the tranquilizing team by approaching him cautiously. It was in sternal recumbent position. Then it's both eyes were covered with a cloth, both ear canals plugged with cotton and buckets of water poured over it to keep its body temperature down. While the vet team busied themselves taking measurements, temperature, pulse, respiration rate, length, height etc. and collecting samples (blood), the radio collaring team started fixing the radio collar around the neck. The dart was taken out and the wound sprayed with antiseptics. Necessary medications along with antibiotic administered. Anthrax vaccine was also administered. For identification purpose, ear notch was made by cutting ear pinna at different places of each rhino so that after release it can be identified from distance. Following type of data sheet was prepared for gathering information & keeping records –

Sl. No.	Date	Place	GPS	Sex	Body Wt.	Radio Collar Code	Ear Notch Pattern	Horn Length	Length	Height	Forefoot circum.	Neck Girth
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13

Immob. Drug & dose	Reversal Drug & dose	Sedative Drug & dose	Pulse	Temp.	Resp.	Medicines Given	Vaccine Given	Any Other
			(Every 15 minutes)					
14	15	16	17			18	19	20

During the veterinary care an excavator began digging a cavity about a foot behind the sleeping rhino. Length, breadth & depth of the cavity were made in such a manner so that a specially designed sledge/stretcher could be placed into this cavity. The rhino was flipped over on to the stretcher & tied with a strong rope with the stretcher. The stretcher along with the rhino was then pulled out of the cavity by the excavator and dragged about 50 mts away towards the specially designed wooden crate. The crate had two sliding doors on both sides that could be lifted to open the cage. By pulling & pushing the stretcher, the



rhino was put inside the crate & untied. One door of the crate was kept closed and the door near the rhino's head was kept half open. A vet entered the crate and removed cotton plug from ear canal, administered antidote drug intramuscularly for reviving the rhino and uncovered the eyes. Antidote here used is TREXONIL® (Naltrexone Hydrochloride – 50 mg/ml) – a pure opioid antagonist. After 3 minutes the rhino revived & the time was 9.03 AM. During this period stretcher was carefully removed from the crate to provide the rhino a better foothold during transportation. Once it was out, the sliding doors of the cage were secured using iron strips bolted on the door. As soon as the rhino gained a foothold it began punching the walls & ceiling of the crate with its horn. A crane was brought in for lifting the crate onto the back of the truck. Firstly lifting of the crate should be done for a foot or two in the air only to find that whether it is tilting to one side or not. If so, the steel ropes should be readjusted and the help of excavator's hand should be taken before final lifting. The first rhino was successfully loaded on to the truck and parked in shaded areas and the rhino was splashed with water at regular intervals to keep it cool and to protect it from the scorching temperature.

Success of the first attempt increased confidence of the whole team. After taking rest for about half an hour the whole team left for capturing the next rhino. Within 3:10 PM four rhinos (one single adult male, one single adult female & one mother-and-calf pair) were placed in four crates & loaded on four trucks successfully.

The movement of the rhinos in convoy started from Pobitora WLS to Manas NP (distance 250 km approx.) at about 5.40 PM in the evening with the trucks carrying the rhinos in the center. A Police escort vehicle with flashing lights led the convoy with the rhinos, and the traffic of cities and towns was regulated throughout the journey by the police for passing the convoy smoothly. At Khanapara, weighing of the trucks with the empty crates as well as the crates with rhinos was done in order to get the weight of the respective rhinos. The veterinary team kept monitoring the rhinos at regular intervals and water was poured over them periodically to keep them cool. The vehicles in the convoy kept contact with each other through walkie-talkies. We reached Manas NP at about 4.30 AM next day. At about 8.30 AM release of rhinos started one by one. All the rhinos charged violently on the truck & disappeared in the nearby grassland after release.

### **Photographs of some moments:**



**Mother & its juvenile male calf**



**Radio collaring & veterinary care**





**Ear notch was made by cutting ear pinna**



**Digging a cavity for stretcher by excavator**



**The rhino flipped over onto the stretcher**



**Placing of stretcher inside the crate**



**Rhino is now ready to revive**



**Administration of reversal drug**





**Loading crate on to truck**



**Charging & biting vehicle just after release**

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