

INDIA'S PRIDE IN ITS GREATER ONE-HORNED RHINOS



KELLY RUSSO

At the start of this year I was privileged to travel to Assam in India on a trip organised by the International Rhino Foundation (IRF), to see the progress of the Indian Rhino Vision 2020 programme and plan the next steps. The trip was led by Bibhab Talukdar; IRF's Asian Rhino Programme Coordinator and Susie Ellis, IRF's Executive Director.

Susie Offord | Deputy Director

IRV 2020 is a partnership between the Assam Forest Department, the Bodoland Territorial Council, WWF, IRF, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Save the Rhino has supported the IRV 2020 since 2005 through IRF. The goal of IRV 2020 is to have a wild population of at least

3,000 Greater one-horned rhinos in the Indian state of Assam, spread over seven protected areas, by the year 2020.

We travelled to Manas National Park, which is located in the eastern Himalayan foothills and is home to around 21 rhinos,

all of which are part of the IRV 2020 expansion programme. While driving to the Park it was evident that human population growth and agricultural expansion are putting immense pressures on the local wildlife, and so these national parks are a lifeline for rhino habitat. Unfortunately, in recent

years poaching has increased in Manas, with seven rhinos poached in the Park since translocations began. This is due to recent uprisings of heavily-armed local insurgents, threatening the lives of both rhinos and

rangers. During our visit several meetings were held to discuss the best course of action to stop the poaching, and activities to tackle these problems are planned for the next few months.

After Manas we travelled to Laokhowa-Burhachapori Wildlife Sanctuary where we were greeted by Assam's Forest Minister Rakibul Hussain, who is a strong supporter of the programme. It would be impossible to carry out a successful programme such as IRV 2020 without strong government support. Laokhowa-Burhachapori is the next planned location for rhino translocations with four rhinos to be translocated later this year. It is located between Orang and Kaziranga National Parks and is an important habitat corridor for rhinos. We were taken around by Mr Shiv Kumar the Divisional Forest Officer managing the Park. Mr Kumar and his team were very professional, organised and motivated. We left the Park feeling hopeful that this will become a great haven for a new rhino population to grow.

After Laokhowa-Burhachapori we travelled to Kaziranga National Park, which is home to approximately 2,300 rhinos. Kaziranga is a popular tourist destination in Assam and it is evident that the rhino is the main tourist attraction. There are statues and signs of the rhino everywhere; it is clear this is a nation that feels very strongly about the importance of its rhino. We spent two days exploring the Park and visiting anti-poaching camps, during which we counted 120 rhino! There are not many places in the world where you can still see this number of rhinos and nowhere where you can see this number of Greater one-horned rhinos. The other amazing thing about this place is how close rhinos live to people; you can see rhinos from the main road and from people's houses. This is only possible because of the fantastic anti-poaching teams and the support of the local people who clearly love their rhinos.

In a time when we are bombarded with horrific stories of daily rhino poaching, it was incredibly motivating and heart-warming to visit an area where, although it is still facing its own difficulties, overall rhinos are doing well. This is very much down to the support of the people, the Government of Assam and the fantastic work of IRV 2020.



ALL IMAGES BILL KONSTANT UNLESS NOTED

Above: Mr Shiv Kumar gives a briefing on the planned rhino translocations

Right: The team at Laokhowa-Burhachapori Wildlife Sanctuary

Below: Ranger sleeping quarters at an anti-poaching post



MAIN IMAGE: KELLY RUSSO



Elephants are used for monitoring patrols in Kaziranga National Park