

MANAGE India

A Safe Home for Rhinos

Rhino relocation project in Assam adopts new strategies to counter poaching and reach the target of 3,000 wild rhinos by 2020



Photo courtesy: Assam forest department



The release team, along with security personnel, overseeing the release of rhinos in Manas

COVER STORY

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- 3 Letter from Managing Director, PMI India
- 4 By Invitation
Project Risk Management in Large Capital Projects
- 10 Article of the Month
Why Ethics Matter at Work
- 11 Chapter News
- 13 R.E.P. Update
- 14 Champion Update
Champion Designate Graduation Ceremony

6

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A Safe Home for Rhinos

Rhino relocation project in Assam adopts new strategies to counter poaching and reach the target of 3,000 wild rhinos by 2020

BY PANCHALEE THAKUR

Photo courtesy: Assam forest department



After making the long road journey from Kaziranga, rhinos set foot in their new home, Manas National Park

The Manas National Park in Assam along the Indo-Bhutan international border that was once a thriving home of the one-horned rhinoceros is fighting to regain its lost glory by relocating rhinos from Kaziranga National Park and Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary, and creating the right conditions for rhinos to grow their numbers in the wild. Manas had lost its entire population of around 100 rhinos during the Bodoland ethnic unrest of over a decade that ended in 2001. The Manas rhino relocation project is part of the Indian Rhino Vision (IRV) program that aims to grow the rhino population in the wild to 3,000 by the year 2020.

The IRV 2020 is a joint initiative of Assam forest department, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and International Rhino Foundation (IRF). It was formulated by the Task Force for Translocation of Rhinos within Assam in November 2005. It is a multi-partner program where government departments are working together with international organizations, local non-government organizations (NGOs), and local communities to reach its objectives.

According to the latest census, the wild rhino population in Assam has grown to 2,544. Manas has 31 rhinos, of which 18

have come from the Pobitora and Kaziranga since 2008. Eleven calves have taken birth in Manas.

Principal chief conservator of forests (wildlife), Assam Government, Mr. Rajendra Agarwalla, says, "Reintroduction of wild rhinos in Manas under IRV2020 is marked as a great conservation success story because the rhinos have adapted well. It has provided the necessary initial impetus for the revival of the park."

Nine rhinos in Manas were initially raised in the Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation (CWRC) in Kaziranga. CWRC is a joint facility of the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI), International Fund for Animal Welfare, and the Assam forest department near Kaziranga National Park that rehabilitates rescued animals before releasing them back in the wild.

Dr. Rathin Barman, deputy director, WTI, cites the success story of one such rescued rhino. "Mainao was less than a month old when she got separated from her mother during floods in Kaziranga in 2003. She was brought to CWRC and raised by our staff. She was the first to be relocated to Manas in 2006 and is now a proud mother. We have relocated nine

Photo courtesy: Assam forest department



Wildlife officials point to the 11 calves born in Manas as an indication of the project's success

such rhinos to Manas, of which three have given birth," says Dr. Barman.

However, recent incidents of poaching have put the spotlight back on security in these protected wildlife zones in Assam. As many as seven of the relocated rhinos have fallen to poaching in Manas. There have been recent reports of poaching from Kaziranga as well.

Project objectives and team

The long-term objective of the task force set up by the Government of Assam is conservation of rhinos in Assam through enhanced protection, habitat management, and range expansion. The objective of its IRV 2020 project is to have a rhino population of 3,000 in the wild in Assam spread over seven protected areas by the year 2020. The task force would work towards securing the existing rhino population in Kaziranga National Park, Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary, and Rajib Gandhi Orang National Park, and re-introduce rhinos in the potential habitats of Manas National Park, Dibru Saikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary, and Laokhowa-

Bura Chapori Wildlife Sanctuary through wild-to-wild rhino relocations from Kaziranga and Pobitora.

The task force includes conservationists and officials from both the government and non-government sectors. The project partners are WTI, WWF-India, Aaranyak, International Rhino Foundation, US Fish and Wildlife Services, the Bodoland Territorial Council, and several local community-based organizations.

The task force set up two expert groups – the Security Assessment Group to assess the current state of security in the potential areas for rhino conservation and suggest ways to strengthen it, and the Habitat Assessment Group to determine the feasibility of the project in these identified areas.

Mr. Amit Sharma, co-ordinator, Rhino Conservation Program, WWF-India, says, "Protection is key in the conservation of rhinos in any park and when the decision was taken in 2005-06 to re-introduce rhinos in Manas, it was a huge challenge as the park was not in any proper shape from a security point of view. However, its habitat was found to be quite suitable."



Rathin Barman

Deputy director, Wildlife Trust of India (WTI)

"Mainao, the first to be relocated, was brought to CWRC and raised by our staff. She is now a mother. Nine such rhinos have been relocated to Manas of which three have given birth."

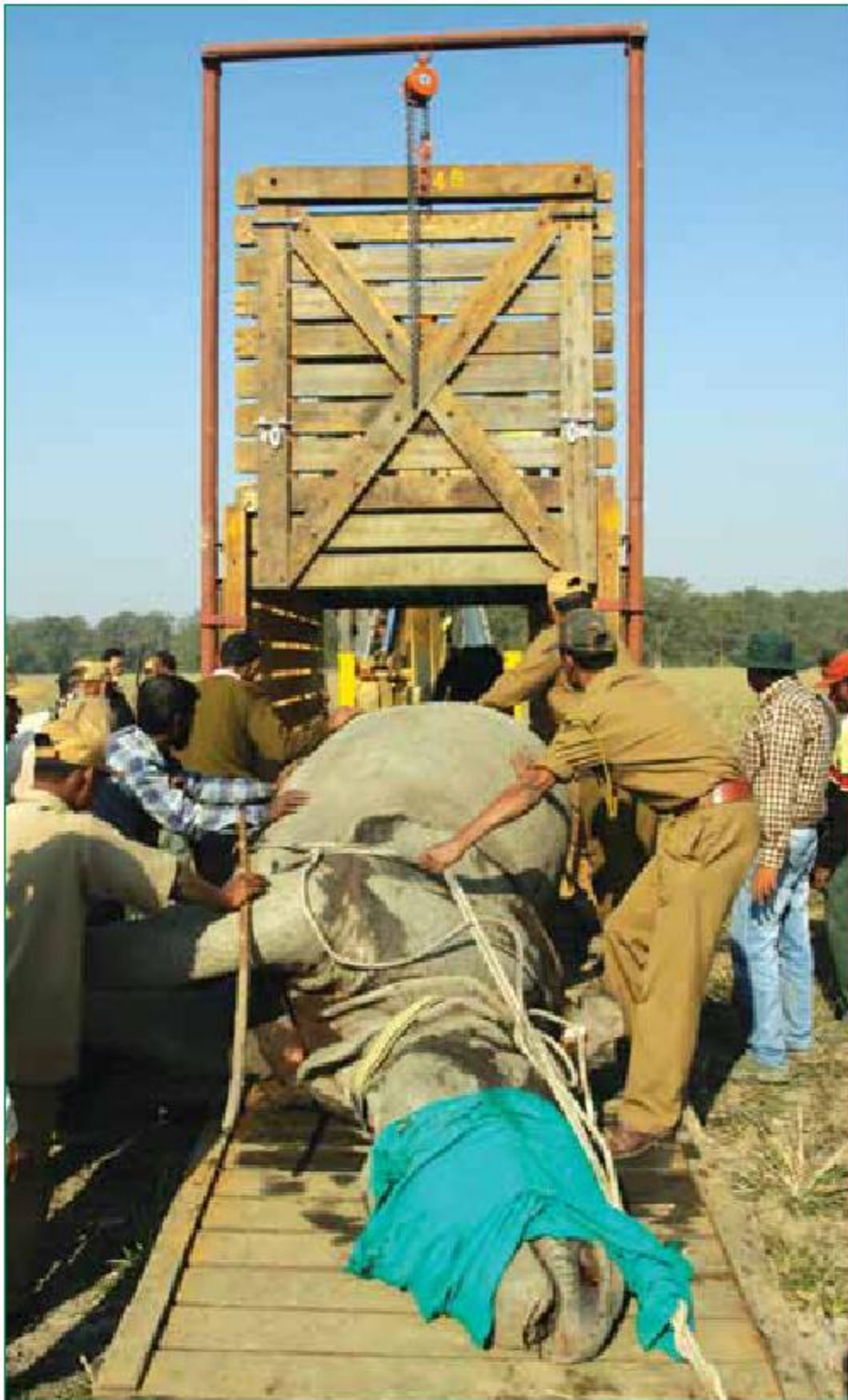


Amit Sharma

Co-ordinator, Rhino Conservation Program, WWF-India

"When the decision was taken in 2005-06 to re-introduce rhinos in Manas, it was a huge challenge as the park was in an improper shape from security point of view."

Photo courtesy: Assam forest department



A tranquilized rhino being moved to a crate for transportation to Manas

Based on the reports of these groups, the task force selected Manas National Park as the first site to re-introduce rhinos after enhancing its security.

Challenges in rhino relocation project

Manas National Park is spread over 500 sq km along the northern bank of the Brahmaputra river. During the Bodoland struggle, militants used this vast forested area to take shelter from the security forces and smuggle rhino horns across the border. A decade after the Bodoland struggle ended, Manas attained the status of a UNESCO World Heritage site. This helped bring back world attention to the neglected national park.

The initial assessments showed huge gaps in security – severe shortage of security staff, lack of forest camps, dilapidated roads, no vehicles, and lack of a wireless infrastructure.

There were more than 100 job vacancies. Only 16 camps existed, of which only a few had security personnel. Re-introducing rhinos to Manas meant enhancing the national park's capacity from ground up – from recruiting and training scores of forest guards and caretakers, to repairing the existing infrastructure and acquiring new vehicles and equipment.

Phase-wise project implementation

The security group made multiple assessments and presented the findings to the task force. It was decided to move a total of 20 rhinos to Manas, of which four would be relocated in the first phase starting in 2008. As a part of the training phase, two male rhinos were transported from Pobitora to Manas in April 2008 by a special team of wildlife and security personnel. Before release, the rhinos were radio collared and monitored closely to understand how well they were adapting to the new environment. Thereafter, 16 more rhinos were relocated to Manas.

A Translocation Core Committee (TCC) was set up in November 2007, whose roles were to:

- Plan, execute, and monitor the capturing, transporting, and releasing of the rhinos from the source protected area to the target destination
- Constitute different teams that may be required for executing the various activities
- Assign works to the various teams

There were several risks involved in the relocation operation. Activities for this operation were divided into three stages: preparatory/planning stage, implementation (capture-transport-release), and post release.

The preparatory stage involved minute planning. The TCC listed out different resources required for the move and reached out to the right people and organizations, including forest officials, veterinary doctors, wildlife specialists working or retired officers with experience of such operations in Nepal or in rhino conservation. It also prepared a list of trained elephants of the department and private owners who could be used during the darting operation.

There were several teams – a capture team with a dedicated darts team for tranquilizing rhinos, release and monitoring team, logistics team, transport team, security team, and communications team that formulated strategies and managed media relations, filming of the event, and designing awareness and public support campaigns.

The implementation stage involved locating, capturing, transporting, and releasing rhinos. Some key activities were to prepare the site for successful release and training of the Manas staff on the monitoring of the released rhinos. As a part of training, they used domestic cattle to try out the radio collars.

Photo courtesy: Assam forest department



Forest guards who patrol the park now have better technology to report suspicious activities and closely monitor released rhinos

The post-release stage involves continued protection of the rhinos from poaching and monitoring to ensure they have adapted well to the new surroundings. The team uses both standard traditional methods and radio telemetry to monitor rhinos on a regular basis.

Approaches to conservation

For the first time in the history of conservation in Assam, the ranging (how far they spread out) of rhinos is being regularly monitored by dedicated teams with the use of high technology. The combined team of forest officials and WWF have also been documenting rhinos' post-release behavior and ranging patterns. The data generated by the field teams are fed into a GIS platform with the support of the WWF team and mapped for better understanding and management decisions.

However, three years after the first two rhinos were relocated to Manas, the first incident of poaching took place. Since then, seven rhinos have been killed, raising serious questions about the park's security situation.

The forest department is now involving communities around these protected areas in their anti-poaching efforts. "Community-based organizations are important partners in wildlife conservation. The eco-development committees constituted by adult members of the fringe villages share useful information with the park authorities and help us in preventing poaching," said Mr. Agarwalla.

During the past one year, the team has been regularly reassessing the situation to identify gaps in security and take corrective measures. Patrolling staff in Manas now uses cameras and devices enabled with global positioning system to locate and monitor the movements of wild animals such as rhinos and tigers.

Photo courtesy: Assam forest department



The Assam forest department has acquired new vehicles and wireless equipment for better monitoring of the 500 sq km park

The relocation of the two remaining rhinos have been put on hold till the team is satisfied with the security situation at Manas.

Project outcome

After the return of the rhinos to Manas, the flow of tourists is slowly picking up. Through the IRV2020, there are now targeted programs with the local community to spread awareness, build partnerships, and promote livelihood options. All these developments are paving the way for a trans-boundary conservation initiative between India and Bhutan. Recently there have been efforts to even promote tourism across the border.

The task force has now identified the Laokhowa-Burachapori complex for re-introducing rhinos. The habitat team has already given the green signal, and the security team has made recommendations. The team is working on the recommendations with the help of funds from WWF, IRF, USFWS, and the government. The Government of India has given permission for the relocation of 10 rhinos in the first batch. The first round of relocations from Kaziranga to Laokhowa-Burachapori is expected to take place by early 2015.



Rajendra Agarwalla

Principal chief conservator of forests (wildlife), Assam Government

"Reintroduction of wild rhinos in Manas is marked as a great conservation success story because the rhinos have adapted well providing the impetus for revival of the park."