THE CHALLENGES OF EXPANDING INDIA'S RHINO POPULATION

A true success story, the Greater one-horned (Indian rhino) has been brought back from fewer than 100 animals in the early 1900s. Today, more than 85% of the world's Greater one-horned rhino population inhabits Kaziranga National Park in Assam, India.

Susie Ellis, PhD | Executive Director, International Rhino Foundation

Having most of the animals in one population puts it at risk from catastrophes such as floods or disease outbreaks, which could lead to a serious population decline. It is never wise to have 'all the eggs in one basket' because a single disaster could wipe out a century of progress in a very short time.

The need to spread India's rhino population out in the vast areas still containing good habitat led to the development of the ambitious Indian Rhino Vision 2020 (IRV 2020) programme in 2006. IRV 2020 aims to increase Assam's Greater one-horned rhinos to 3,000 animals spread out among seven protected areas by 2020. The programme is a partnership among the Government of Assam, the Bodo Territorial Council, WWF-India, the US Fish & Wildlife Service and the International Rhino Foundation (IRF). The protected areas to where rhinos will be moved include Manas National Park and the Burachapori Wildlife Sanctuary, areas in which rhinos once were common.

In Manas, violent civil conflict beginning in ~1989 caused massive damage to the Park's infrastructure and resulted in the loss of its rhino population. However, we are well on the way to rebuilding the population. 18 animals were translocated to the Park between 2008 and 2011, under IRV 2020, and another eight animals were rescued from floods in Kaziranga, hand-reared, and released into Manas by the Wildlife Trust of India. The programme has had highs and lows over the past several years: eight of the IRV 2020 animals have been poached, but 11 calves also have been born, the most recent in July 2015. It is interesting to note that the recent mother gave birth to her first calf in April 2013 and the second calf now after almost 26 months. The father, one of the first animals moved to the Park, was poached in November 2014. Sadly, all of the breeding-age males have been killed and there is now no breeding male in the Park's 31 rhinos.

The last three poaching events can be attributable to an insurgency movement in the area, over which IRV 2020 partners have no control. Until security issues are resolved, IRV 2020 partners are not investing further resources, except for a Save the Rhino–Chester Zoo-supported 'community livelihoods' project.

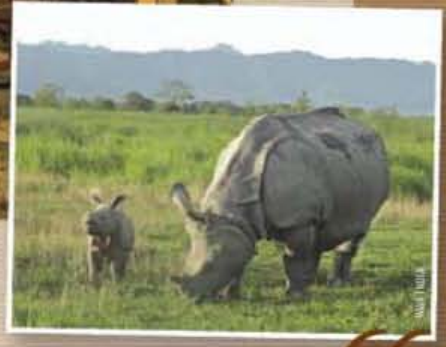
Because of its decaying infrastructure and loss of species, the UNESCO World Heritage Commission placed Manas on the 'In Danger list' in 1992, just seven years after it gained World Heritage Site status. Its designation as a World Heritage Site was reinstated in 2011. The IRV 2020 rhino translocations, as well as tiger conservation projects in the area, greatly assisted this process. IRV 2020 provided a boost in terms of infrastructure development, manpower deployment (e.g. home guards and others), community support mobilisation and tourism growth in the Park.

In November 2014, disheartened by the rhino poaching losses in Manas, IRV 2020 partners convened a population modelling workshop in Guwahati, Assam, to review progress with IRV 2020 translocations to-date and to discuss future rhino moves. The workshop, led by Dr. Phil Miller of the IUCN Conservation Breeding

Top right: Constructing the boma fence at Burachapori-Laokhowa Wildlife Sanctuary

Above: Local villages around Manas and Burachapori received piglets as part of a community livelihoods project

Main: Greater one-horned rhino



Specialist Group focused on:

- Discussing and determining the real numbers needed for the long-term success of the IRV 2020, taking into account the experience in Manas with poaching losses
- Modelling predicted population growth rates and the numbers of rhinos needed to make translocations a success
- Discussing ways to ameliorate known threats as well as unforeseen events

The models created at the workshop suggest that the introduction of additional rhino into Manas National Park would likely not be necessary if poaching could be eliminated over the long-term. As this is unlikely in the near future, translocations would almost certainly be required to substantially increase the Manas rhino population over the next one to two decades. However, translocations can only be successful if poaching pressure is reduced to less than one animal poached every year – which may not be a realistic goal at this time. Until the current intensity of poaching is reduced to zero for several years, the IRV partners will not move more animals to the Park, as this would be an unwise placement of a precious resource.

Burachapori, the next site for IRV 2020 translocations, also once held a significant population of rhinos. In 1955, 41 animals (25 males, 12 females, and one calf of unknown sex) were documented in the area. By the early 1980s, Burachapori was home to more than 70 rhinos. However, in 1983–84, poachers killed more than 40 rhinos within a matter of weeks. The rest of the surviving rhinos fled to safer protected areas nearby, such as Orang and Kaziranga National Parks.

The habitat in Burachapori is still of good quality and can readily support a re-established rhino population, but as population models demonstrate, a new population cannot tolerate poaching. Using lessons learned in Manas, particularly about the importance of round-the-clock, pro-active protection, the animals will be contained within a well-protected large (1.5km^2) boma in Burachapori for at least 6–12 months before being released into the Park. The IRV 2020 partners plan to move the first six rhinos from Kaziranga later in 2015. Stay tuned!

Grants

Since October 2014, Save the Rhino has sent £11,043 to IRV 2020, including $7,500 from SRI Inc. and £1,847 from Chester Zoo for community livelihoods around Manas and Burachapori, and €5,000 from Opel Zoo towards fence costs for Burachapori-Laokhowa Wildlife Sanctuary Complex.

Unite for rhinos

Save the Rhino has just six full-time and one part-time member of staff. Even with the help of our fabulous donors, volunteers and supporters, we can't save the rhino all by ourselves. Instead, we have worked hard to build great relationships with other donor agencies.

Cathy Dean | Director, SRI

I hugely enjoy my monthly skype catch-ups with Dr Jo Shaw of WWF-South Africa and Dr Susie Ellis of the International Rhino Foundation. Over the past few months, we've discussed many topics, including the practicalities of the next AfRSG meeting, grant reports and proposals for our respective donors, the UK's government's Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund and prospective projects for that, and a number of controversial rhino-related issues that have arisen. One of these, the proposed development of synthetic rhino horn, resulted in a joint statement by the IRF and Save the Rhino criticising the plans.

We also work closely with zoos in the UK and Europe, who want help with channelling their support to rhino conservation efforts in Africa and Asia. With the enthusiastic support of Friederike von Houwald, based at Basel Zoo and Chair of the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria's Rhino Taxon Advisory Group, we have recruited around 25 zoos that raise funds for rhino conservation each year.

We've also recently started liaising with Kira Mileham, the IUCN's Director Specialist Group Partnerships, who will be presenting on in- and ex-situ relationships at various upcoming international conservation meetings, using the African Rhino Specialist Group as the blueprint for successful partnerships.

There are many other organisations with which we discuss our work, whether its news from a particular field programme or choosing which database to support our fundraising, for example. David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation, the Royal Foundation, Save African Rhino Foundation, Tusk Trust and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. We can be so much more effective if we unite for rhinos.