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After 250 years, rhinos set to make comeback in west UP

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MEERUT: One-horned rhino, listed as vulnerable on the IUCN Red List, is set to return to western Uttar Pradesh, an area where it roamed freely 250 years ago.

Buoyed by the results of the relocation of five rhinos to Dudhwa national park in 1984 - four from the fields outside the Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary and one from Goalpara, the forest department has now decided to repeat the experiment in the floodplains in Muzaffarnagar and Meerut districts. Currently, Dudhwa is home to 32 rhinos.

Mukesh Kumar, chief forest conservator, Meerut zone, told TOI, "Few people are aware of the fact that until mid-18th century, rhinos used to thrive in Ganga swamps of western UP. Rampant poaching accompanied by political turmoil of those times, however, entirely destroyed them in this belt. At present, only 1,700 rhinos are present in the jungles of Assam that constitute 70% of the species in the entire world. Apart from that, 600 are in various zoos of the country and another 500 in Nepal."

The species was present in northern Bihar and Awadh region (formerly Oudh) at least until 1770 as indicated in maps produced by Colonel Gentil, a French army colonel who worked in India and is known for the collections he made of historic manuscripts and artefacts from India and for his cartography and documentation of Mughal history.

On the former abundance of the species, Thomas C. Jerdon, a British physician, zoologist and botanist who described various species found in India, wrote in 1867, "This huge rhinoceros is found in the Terai at the foot of the Himalayas, from Bhotan to Nepal. It is more common in the eastern portion of the Terai than the west, and is most abundant in Assam and the Bhotan Dooars."

The animal is now set to make a comeback in its erstwhile habitat in the western part of the state. Kumar said, "During a survey conducted recently, we found an ideal location for the reintroduction of the rhinos in this belt. The area is Haidarpur Ahtmal and Kalyanpur which are actually swamps of Ganga river at the border of Muzaffarnagar, Bijnor and Meerut districts."

"If we are successful in reintroducing the Great Indian Rhinoceros in this region, it will be a big draw for tourists. Our aim is to develop Hastinapur wildlife sanctuary into a tourism-friendly destination," Kumar added.

According to Sushil Awasthi, forest conservator, Meerut circle, "We have proposed to extend the reach of Indian Rhino Vision 2020 to this part of UP as well. The programme was launched in 2005 with an aim to increase the population of one horn rhinos to at least 3,000 by 2020. Now we have requested the Species and Landscape Division of WWF to conduct a technical survey of the area."