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ANIMAL KEEPERS' FORUM



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Rhinos Recover in Nepal's National Parks

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Environmental News Service

New Delhi, India

Nepali environmentalists and government officials are seeing years of nature conservation work pay off in an increased number of Greater Asiatic one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) living in Nepal's national parks. Hunted to near extinction for their horns which bring high prices on the Asian medicinal and Arab ornamental markets, rhinos in Nepal's protected areas have now begun to recover.

The population of endangered rhinos is now 612, according to Rhino Count 2000, the government's rhino census report released 31 May. An estimated 450 one-horned rhinos were found roaming in the country's protected areas in 1994 when the first scientific rhino count was conducted.

Royal Chitwan National Park, a UNESCO's World Heritage Site that is one of the world's best rhino habitats, has the greatest number of rhinos - 544 according to the new census. A similar census conducted in 1994 put the one-horned rhino population in Chitwan at between 446 and 466.

Royal Chitwan National Park in central Nepal is the indigenous habitat for one-horned rhino, while other protected areas are relatively new habitats for animals. Since 1986, the Nepal government have been trans-locating rhinos from Chitwan National Park to Bardiya and Shukla Phanta national parks. The latest census counted 67 rhinos in Royal Bardiya National Park in the western Terai, the southern plains region of Nepal. Bardiya, which lies 500 kilometers (310 miles) west of Chitwan, received its latest group of 10 rhinos translocated from Chitwan Park two months ago.

A lone rhino is wandering in the Royal Shukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve in the far western region of the country, the census found. Dr. Tirtha Man Maskey, director general of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, says the government is contemplating trans-locating a few Chitwan rhinos to Shukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve in the far western region of the country "so as to maintain viable population of the endangered mammals." Though a high incidence of rhino death has been observed in the past several years, wildlife officials are hopeful that the population of this highly endangered wild species will continue to go up. Days before the census began on 2 April, officials put the rhino death toll in and around the Chitwan National Park in the past 20 months at over 60.

Initiated by the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, the Rhino Count 2000 was supported by the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation, the World Wide Fund for Nature and the United Nations Global Environmental Facility. The finding of the census has recorded the rhino population growth rate in Chitwan at 3.88%, up from 3.7% in 1994 rhino count. Of the 544 rhinos recorded in Chitwan, 492 are surviving inside the 932 square kilometer park while the number of rhinos living outside in the park's buffer zone has been put at 52.

The 1994 census had put the rhinos inside Chitwan Park at 411 and those outside at 29. Officials say that "armed security guards have been put on alert in the parks' surrounding villages to ensure safety of the rhinos roaming and residing outside the protected area." They claimed that anti-poaching units too have been alerted and strengthened to keep track of the activities of poachers. Since their introduction five years ago, anti-poaching units have been a successful initiative for the protection of wildlife in Nepal. Dr. Maskey says of the rhinos surviving in Chitwan, 62 % (337) are adults, 16 % (88) sub-adults and 22 % (119) are calves.

In Bardiya National Park, 57 % (38) are adults, 30 % (20) are sub-adults and 13 % (9) are calves, he said. Dr. Maskey believes that the rhino population will continue to increase. "Higher female population in both parks will "definitely help the number to go further up" in the years to come," he predicted.

In 1950, the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation found about 800 one-horned rhinos in the Chitwan valley. But the population nose-dived in the following years due to rampant poaching. The population went from 300 in 1959 to just 100 in 1966. But after the government's declaration in the early 1970s of Chitwan forest as Nepal's first national park, the rhino population started to increase. As a result of strict wildlife conservation laws, enforced by the security forces in the protected areas, the rhino population went up to 300 animals in 1978.

The one-horned rhino, which was found in abundance from Pakistan to Myanmar at the turn of the 20th century, today survives in a handful of protected areas in Nepal and in India's West Bengal and Assam states. The rhino population in India is estimated at 1,300.

