

Mongabay Series: [Asian Rhinos](#)

In Nepal, the rhino evokes national pride

by Alex Dudley on 1 August 2017

- *Nepal's greater one-horned rhinos were historically revered for their spiritual potency as well as for their value as thrilling quarry for sport hunting.*
- *The rise of wildlife tourism in the 1960s and 70s brought awareness of the economic value of live, free-roaming rhinos — helping to increase support for conservation.*
- *As rhino numbers soar, leading to increased human-wildlife conflict, conservationists are working to ensure rhinos don't become victims of their own success.*

KATHMANDU, Nepal — When Nepal adopted a new constitution in September 2015, lawmakers anticipated conflict over the rights of ethnic minorities and women, the delineation of provincial boundaries and the official adoption of secularism. In the midst of these negotiations, a more surprising bone of contention arose: the designation of the national animal.

Under previous constitutions, the domestic cow held that honor, out of respect for Nepal's Hindu majority. However, lawmakers from the country's indigenous communities lobbied for the greater one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) to replace the cow as the national animal.

The Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities argued that elevating the rhino as a national emblem would appropriately reflect the new government's secularism and further legitimize the country's successful rhino conservation efforts. Ultimately though — in a move widely perceived as a consolation prize for conservative Hindu groups — the government opted to retain the cow as the country's national animal.

The failure to award this distinction to the rhino disappointed conservationists and the indigenous communities around Chitwan National Park, the country's main rhino stronghold. Nevertheless, the very debate over acclaiming the rhino in that capacity demonstrates strong national pride in the species and in its comeback in Nepal from near-extinction.

"The rhino deserves to be [the national animal]," said Kunda Dixit, senior editor of the English-language *Nepali Times* and a conservation enthusiast. "The Indians already have

the tiger, so I think our main claim to fame is the conservation of rhinos. I think the way they have sprung back is just amazing. It's one of our success stories."



Rhino statues on the steps of the 17th century Siddhi Lakshmi Temple in Bhaktapur, Nepal. Photo by Alex Dudley for Mongabay.

Revered, but also hunted

As detailed in conservationist Hemanta Mishra's 2008 memoir, *The Soul of the Rhino*, Nepalese have long viewed the rhino with curiosity and reverence. Mishra, one of the original engineers of Nepalese conservation, recounts his family taking part in the Saradya, a day of worship for the spirits of departed ancestors, when he was aged five. During the ceremony, his father asked him to retrieve the *khaguto*, a cup made from rhino horn in which milk and water were offered to placate the souls of ancestors.

Chitwan's indigenous Tharu people have long attached particular respect to rhinos. While they reportedly refrained from hunting the animals, certain Tharu castes gathered, boiled and salted the meat (which they believed offered health, courage and strength) from carcasses. The Tharu also believed that keeping a horn under a pregnant woman's pillow would allow for a quick and smooth delivery. Such uses for rhino body parts have long been barred under current conservation law, but the Tharu still eagerly gather rhino urine, long considered a remedy for asthma, ear infections, and tuberculosis.

The Nepalese royal family, on the other hand, valued the animals as dangerous and thrilling quarry for sport hunting. Upon overthrowing the Shah dynasty in 1846, Jung

Bahadur Rana, the founder of the country's last royal line, declared the rhino a "royal animal" that only the ruling family and its guests could pursue. The same year, Chitwan was established as a private hunting reserve.

Subsequently, Nepalese royalty and visiting European dignitaries slaughtered shocking numbers of animals. According to Mishra, an eleven-day hunt led by King George V killed 39 tigers (*Panthera tigris*) and 18 rhinos in 1911. The last extravagant hunt, in 1938, saw 120 tigers and 38 rhinos slain by Lord Lithgow, Britain's viceroy to India.



Tourists on elephant back observe two greater-one horned rhinos. Photo by symmetry_mind via [Flickr](#).

The rise of rhino tourism

Despite this carnage, Chitwan acted as a refuge against rhino poaching because of the harsh penalties for trespassing on royal property and for targeting royal game. "Before the 1950s, when there was no poaching in Chitwan, [that was] because Chitwan was a royal hunting area," National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) officer Naresh Subedi recalled in an interview in Kathmandu. "No civilians were allowed to go hunting there. If somebody hunts there, he's hunted." Chitwan therefore became the last redoubt for Nepal's rhinos as deforestation and poaching eradicated them elsewhere.

When Nepal initiated its tourist industry in the 1950s, its stunning Himalayan scenery provided the original drawcard. The country's wildlife assets, by contrast, were overlooked both by foreign visitors and by the national tourism board. But in 1963, American hunter John Coapman, visiting Chitwan to shoot tigers, realized that far greater revenue could be generated by elephant-back safaris to shoot rhinos with a

camera rather than a rifle. Coapman thus sought to offer an exclusive wilderness adventure to wealthy tourists.

After obtaining a concession from the Nepalese government, Coapman opened the Tiger Tops lodge in Chitwan in 1965, with its elevation on stilts mimicking the famed Treetops Hotel in Kenya's Aberdare National Park. The lodge tempted such luminaries as Hillary and Chelsea Clinton, Mick Jagger, Henry Kissinger and Steven Seagal with its rustic charm and the promise of hair-raising wildlife encounters.

Upon arriving at the hotel's airstrip, tourists were ferried by elephants to the lodge, scanning for rhinos and other big game en route. Heightening the thrill, Coapman used buffalo carcasses to bait tigers at night, allowing lucky guests the opportunity to quietly approach the big cats on foot through the dense jungle. Not all clients enjoyed the privilege of a tiger sighting. Yet, as recounted by Mishra, even those who did not were captivated by the thrill of stalking rhinos in the high grass.

Coapman's reckless financial habits forced him to cede Tiger Tops to a British businessman in 1971. Nevertheless, the lodge's economic windfall had by then awakened the Nepalese government to the value of wildlife tourism, and in particular, live rather than dead rhinos.



A greater one-horned rhino in Nepal's Chitwan National Park. Photo by Alex Dudley for Mongabay.

Spurred by the prospect of tourism profits, as well as concerns from local and international conservationists over the rhino's impending extinction in the country, King Mahendra declared Chitwan as Nepal's first national park in 1973. Instead of acting as a killing field for rhinos at the hands of the royals, Chitwan would offer their salvation.

The rhinoceros thus provided the original impetus for nature conservation in the country.

"If we talk about conservation in Nepal, Chitwan ... was established to protect rhino," reflected Kamal Kunwar, Chitwan's former chief warden and the current Chief Conservation Officer of Shivapuri Nagarjun National Park. "The first priority [was] rhino. From 1973 up to now, we have twenty protected areas because of the rhino. Because of the rhino, the [ecosystem] is protected."

Although Chitwan's rhinos were protected from poaching, royal hunts continued periodically. In Mishra's memoir, he recounts having to assist with the *tarpan*, a ritual sacrifice of a male rhino by the king to ensure the dynasty's longevity. The king wounded the rhino, cut its chest open while its heart was still beating, plucked out the heart, and offered it to his ancestors. Despite his opposition in principle to the slaying of a rhino, Mishra believed that cooperation with the royals was necessary to ensure their continued support for conservation.

In any case, the general upheaval caused by the rural Maoist rebellion against Nepal's monarchy from 1996-2006 proved far more catastrophic to rhino numbers than the occasional *tarpan*. By the war's conclusion, fewer than 400 remained in the country. Moreover, even after the abolition of the monarchy in 2008, and hence the end of the *tarpan*, poaching continued to ravage the surviving rhinos as Nepal struggled to find its political footing.



Two greater one-horned rhinos cross a river. This semi-aquatic species spends much of its life in water, particularly during the hot season. Photo by Alex Dudley for Mongabay.

Rhinos as a source of revenue, and a national symbol

Experts attribute the stemming of rhino poaching in Nepal over the last half decade not only to the resumption of army anti-poaching patrols in Chitwan and vigorous enforcement against wildlife trafficking networks, but also to widespread appreciation for the rhino's financial and symbolic value.

"Sadly, the rhino does not have the same religious reverence [in Hinduism] attached to it as cobras, langurs, elephants, or even tiger," Shubash Lohani, Director of Sustainable Landscapes at WWF, said in a phone interview. "But the Tharu have lived with rhinos so long that they consider it part of their culture. So it means different things for different people, but they still relate to the animal."

Upon the civil war's end in 2006, some Maoist factions, perceiving national parks as a western implant, proposed degazetting Chitwan. But locally, both Tharus and non-Tharus strenuously resisted such a measure. In just eight days, schoolchildren around Chitwan gathered more than 100,000 signatures for a petition demanding that the government abide by rhino conservation. This activism ultimately compelled the government to release its five-year rhino conservation action plan, with 30 percent of Chitwan's revenue channeled to anti-poaching operations.

"In every house [in the buffer zones], children go to study," said Shankar Chaudhary, a Tharu officer at the NTNC's Chitwan office, commenting on the economic opportunities arising from conservation and nature tourism.

Besides the monetary benefits of safeguarding rhinos, a dedicated political campaign espoused by the Nepalese media promoted their intrinsic value as a national icon and

stigmatized poaching. "We took most of the media people to Chitwan and to see the rich wildlife Chitwan holds," recalls Ganga Jung Thapa, the NTNC's Executive Director. "It really took off. People started getting more and more news on this ... Whenever there was a rhino translocation, we took the media operation ... Nowadays when something happens, there is big media coverage. We don't have to do anything because people want to see what is happening to the rich wildlife Nepal has."

Lohani credits this campaign with gaining popular support for the goal of zero rhino-poaching in Nepal. "We found that if you tied wildlife to national pride, people became motivated to go the extra mile to stamp out poaching," he said.



A mural of a rhino in Sauraha, the gateway town to Chitwan National Park. Photo by Alex Dudley for Mongabay.

Too much of a good thing?

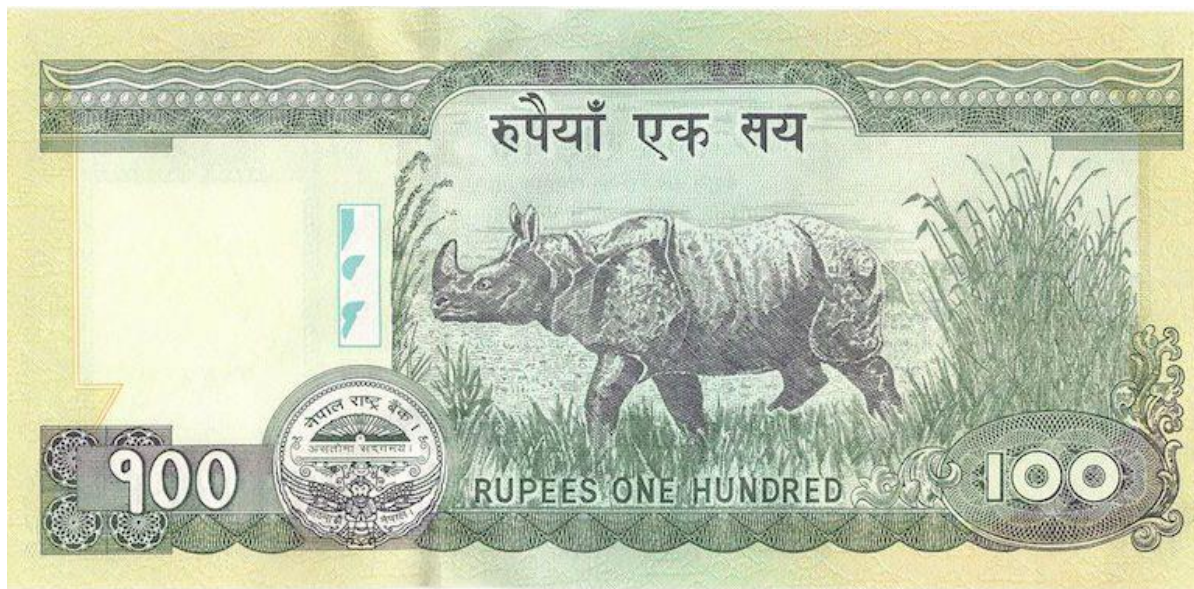
"Within Chitwan, 90 percent of tourists come to see the rhino," Kunwar said. "The people love to see [and] protect the rhinoceros because it is a national celebrity." Thapa similarly affirmed the primacy of rhinos to Chitwan's tourist industry: "If you have a rhino at your hotel, you will have more guests," he said.

However, Nepali conservationists recognize that with the rise in rhino numbers, local enthusiasm for conservation could falter as the animals cause crop destruction-and

human casualties. Since May 2015, when a [rampaging rhino killed a 61-year-old woman](#) in the city of Hetauda (near Chitwan), [nine people in the park's vicinity have died in rhino attacks](#). While the lack of public retaliation highlights the value Nepalese place on protecting rhinos, such support cannot be taken for granted in the long run.

"That's an up-and-down battle," Dixit said. "I think now there's a slight erosion of local support for the park...mainly because conservation has become too successful. So there are all these rhinos getting outside, crop-raiding, [walking through the streets of towns](#) ... I think at the public relations level, a little more has to be done to make sure that opinion of the buffer zone people does not turn against conservation."

To prevent Chitwan's rhinos from becoming victims of their own success, the translocations of rhinos from Chitwan to Bardia and Suklaphanta National Parks seek not only to create an alternative population in the event of a natural disaster but also to prevent overcrowding. Furthermore, the Nepali government recently doubled the amount paid for medical treatment from injuries caused by wildlife (formerly \$1,000), and to families of villagers killed by animals (previously about \$5,000). It is hoped that these measures will sustain public goodwill towards rhinos, thereby preventing a resurgence of poaching.



The back of a 100-rupee note, depicting a greater one-horned rhino. Photo by Mike Frysinger via [Wikimedia](#).

Encouragingly, following a [rhino poaching incident in Chitwan in April](#) — the first recorded since 2014 — a large group of tour operators, nature guides, and indigenous activists quickly convened a "mourning rally" in Sauraha, the main gateway to the park. The local community protested the illicit horn trade and demanded the apprehension of the culprits.

Perhaps the most vivid illustration of the rhino's national significance, both financially and inherently, is its representation on the 100 Nepalese rupee (USD\$1) note. "A rhino in Nepali language is synonymous with hundred rupees," Dixit said. "So when I say, 'Give me a rhino,' it means, 'Give me a hundred rupee note.'" This depiction offers a fitting metaphor for the rhino as a national treasure in more ways than one.