

Chitwan's rescue of the rhino

WATCH OUT,' yelled Hemanta Mishra from the back of his own elephant. 'There are at least six rhinos here. Let's go.'

Our elephants took off, smashing forward through dense undergrowth to cut out the one animal we were after. I clutched the Cap-Chur dart-gun in my right hand and clung desperately to a rope with my left. A few inches in front of me the *phanit* steered our lumbering mount with big toes dug into the backs of its ears.

The scene, in the Chitwan National Park on the southern border of Nepal, could scarcely have been more exotic. The

Duff Hart-Davis recounts an expedition in Nepal to fit a rhino with a radio and explains how the animal's numbers have recovered

rhinos bore through the scrub ahead of us like 4,000-pound torpedoes, uttering high-octane snorts. Peacocks erupted in grenade bursts from the undergrowth and departed with outraged squawks for quieter corners of the forest. Our ten elephants swept forward in a wide crescent, 50 yards apart.

The winter sun burnt down delicious warmth; but whenever my eyes above the jungle canopy, the horizon, 70 miles to the gleamed the eternal snows of Annapurna and Manaslu, gigantic white teeth against a deep blue sky.

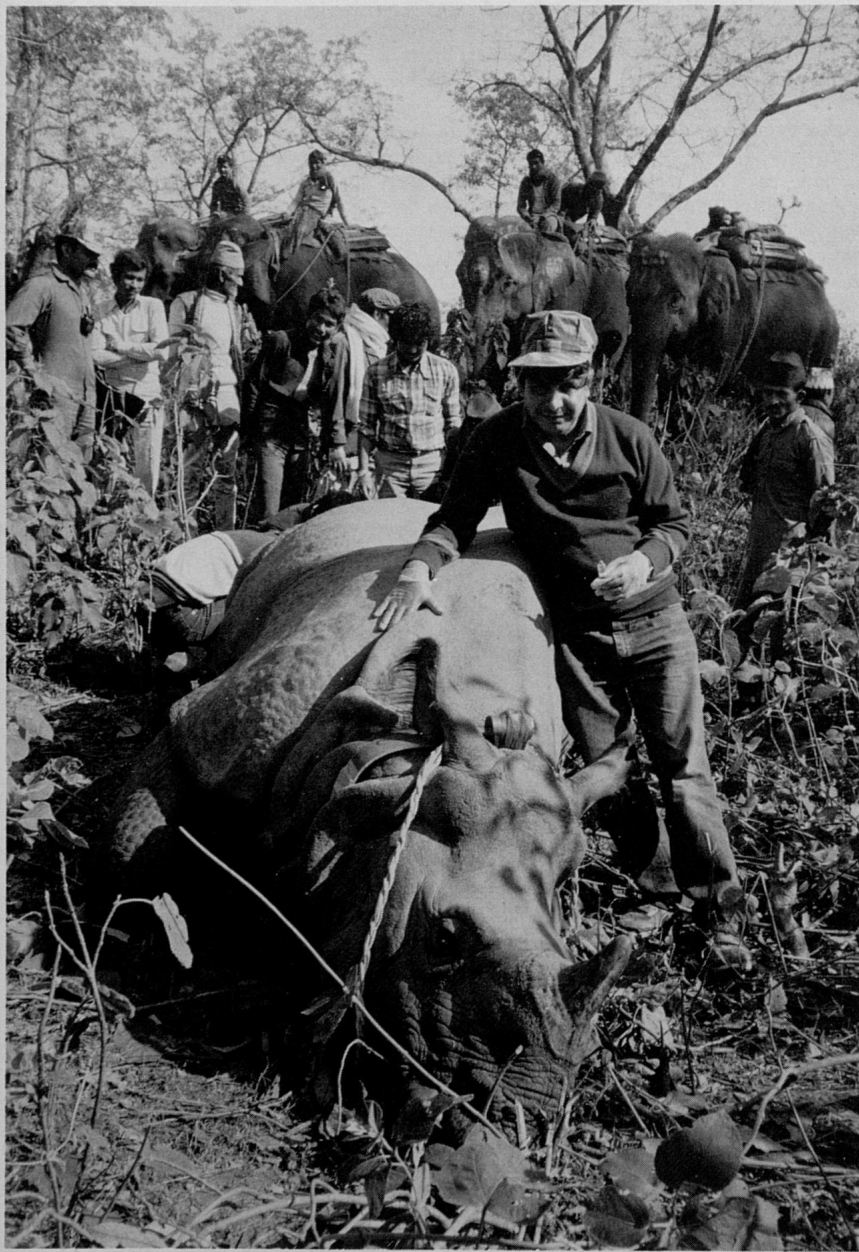
Any nervousness about the undertaking had already been banished by the buoyant good nature of Dr Mishra, a stocky, ebullient man of 41, who as deputy director of National Parks and Wildlife has darted more than 40 rhinos in the course of his research. Our mission was to dart a particular big male rhino, distinguishable by a split left ear – and him with a radio collar, so that the direction of his movements could be determined. Soon the *phanits* had got him isolated and isolated. When he was surrounded and stood still, glowering shortsightedly at us, no more than 30 yards from me, should have been easy enough to place an anaesthetic dart in his backside – but as I fired he moved, with the result that the missile smacked home into the side of his tail.

Again he bolted but for only a short distance. Then he stood once more. After ten minutes, he began to sweat and forth as the cocaine-based drug took effect; then he sank down on his belly. After bombarding him with darts and provoking no reaction, Dr Mishra knelt down and pulled his tail. Still he did not stir: he was out cold, and the rest of us climbed down to help fit his collar and take his vital statistics.

These could hardly be called vital statistics: lying on his front, he looked like an inch the incredible hulk, jacked up and increased and knobby prehistoric creature. His head was inclined to the left and I tried to push it over so that I could measure the incisor tooth on the left side, I was quite unable to shift it. The men were needed to turn his right side and neck on to the other cheek.

Working with Eric Dinan, a biologist on loan from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, Dr Mishra covered his eyes with a sack, removed a hypodermic dart, disinfected the skin and checked the animal. In half an hour he was ready to inject the antidote but he did so the rest of us scrambled for safety, ten feet off the ground. The rhino came round quickly, struggled to get up, tottered a few steps, and then fell back looking – as well he might – rather pleased but already transmitting.

The rescue of the greater one-horned rhino has been Nepal's conservation success so far. Chitwan jungles of Chitwan were famous



Dr Hemanta Mishra about to administer the antidote to revive the rhinoceros.

hunting preserve of the Ranas, the aristocratic dynasty who ruled the Himalayan Kingdom from 1842 to 1950. It was in Chitwan that foreign rulers and potentates were invited for big game shoots, all conducted on an immense scale. For the visit of King George V in 1911, for instance, 600 elephants were assembled from all over the kingdom, and the bag during the 11-day operation included 39 tigers, 18 rhinos, four bears and several leopards.

Yet with the collapse of the Rana regime, thousands of squatters and poachers invaded Chitwan, cutting trees and killing game. By 1970 when the late King Mahendra declared that the area should become Nepal's first national park, it was estimated that barely 100 rhinos remained and that, unless they were afforded immediate protection, they would be extinct within ten years.

Now, with energetic management, the position has changed. The 500 square miles of the park are guarded by units of the Nepalese army; poaching and encroachment have been eliminated, and scientific studies of both rhinos and tigers have been made with the help of the Smithsonian Institution. The result is that the rhino population has grown prodigiously to more than 400, and the plain fact is that there are now too many heavyweight grazers in Chitwan; along the northern boundary of the park they cruise forth at night into the farmland and play havoc with villagers' crops, in some places destroying 90 per cent of the vegetation.

In February Dr Mishra and his team began the Herculean task of shifting a dozen young animals to another park at Bardia – darting them, heaving them on to sledges, dragging them into huge crates and loading them by crane on to trucks for the eight-hour journey to the west. Although Bardia is teeming with tigers, it has no rhinos as yet. The idea is to establish the nucleus of another breeding herd in a separate area so that, if an epidemic wiped out the rhinos in Chitwan, at least another group would have a chance of survival.

Translocation, however, will not solve the problem of overpopulation on its own, and the present monarch, King Birendra, said recently that the time is approaching when surplus rhinos and tigers will have to be culled selectively. Fifteen years ago, when the tiger was on the verge of extinction and India launched Project Tiger to save the species with a gift of a million dollars from the World Wildlife Fund, any such idea would have been unthinkable; now it is inevitable.

In Chitwan, as in some parts of India, tigers are increasing beyond the reserves' ability to sustain them. In Nepal only three or four people have been killed in recent years by man-eaters, but at Dudhwa, just

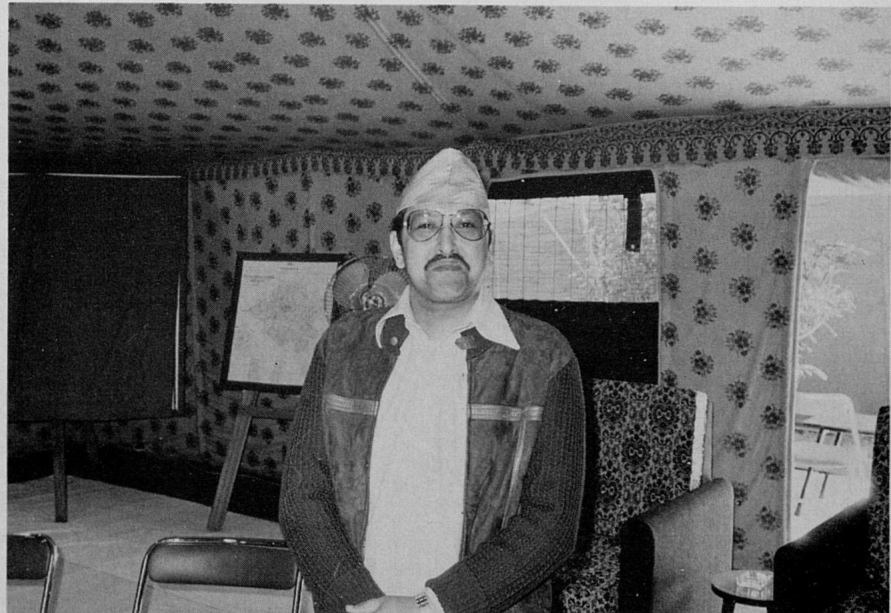
over the border from Bardia, the tigers' toll in the past five years has amounted to more than 120 human victims.

Whether or not the Nepalis will have the nerve to sell licences to trophy hunters is another matter. But they know full well that there are American hunters who, denied any chance of shooting a tiger by the ban imposed in 1972, would pay a fortune for the right to kill one big cat, especially if it was a convicted man-eater. Nepal is extremely short of funds for conservation as for everything else, and the idea of earning perhaps \$500,000 from one tiger, which will have to be culled anyway, must be tempting.

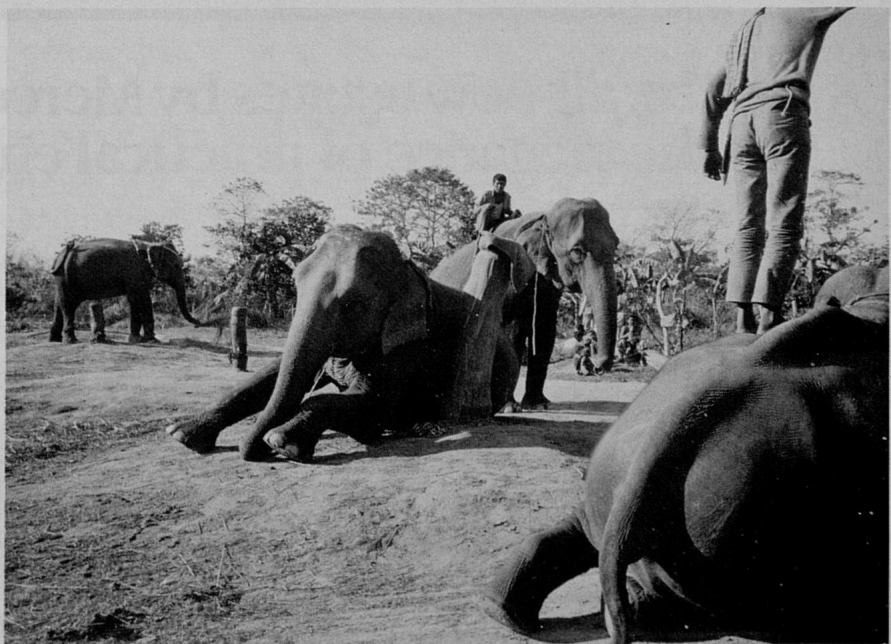
Fortunately Nepal has a realistic and energetic approach to wildlife manage-

ment, exemplified both by the King and by his brother Prince Gyanendra who recently set up a non-government body, the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation, to focus effort on environmental problems. One study which the Trust has commissioned is of the snow leopard, whose numbers have sunk perilously low; another is of the deleterious impact which tourism is having on the southern approaches to Annapurna.

In a country beset by severe threats to its own people – a primitive economy, deforestation, drastic erosion of soil in the mountains and overpopulation – it is encouraging to find such a positive, determined attitude to animals and their habitat.



King Birendra, who has a realistic approach to wildlife management in Nepal.



The government elephant camp at Sauraha in the Chitwan National Park.