

CONSERVATION

Assam State Zoo supplies rhinos to West Bengal

by Lucy Vigne and Esmond Martin

The year 1995 will be a memorable one for rhino conservationists in West Bengal. On 17 October two male Indian rhinos were translocated from the state zoo of Assam to two protected areas in West Bengal, Jaldapara and Gorumara. The purpose was to enrich the genetic potential of West Bengal's small wild rhino population.

The two rhinos, named Ratul and Madhu, had been rescued as babies after monsoon flooding had separated them from their mothers in and around Kaziranga National Park.

Ratul arrived in Assam State Zoo, situated in the capital city Guwahati, in 1987 at the age of seven months, while Madhu was brought there in 1989 at the age of one month in very poor condition.

The West Bengal State Government bought the male sub-adult rhinos, which were then 8 years 8 months and 6 years 3 months old, for 650,000 rupees (US\$19,000) each. (The rupee price, officially called the 'book value', is low as it was set by the Assam government a long time ago.) This money all went to the Assam State Treasury, as does the very low zoo entrance fee of three rupees (US\$0.09) for an adult. The zoo itself does not



Many rhinos are brought to the Assam State Zoo after being separated from their mothers during the monsoon flooding. (Photo: Lucy Vigne)

receive such revenue directly – regrettably, considering that it needs funds and plays a major role in rearing orphaned rhinos. Five other rhinos which are still in the zoo were rescued from various parts of Assam and sent to the zoo for their survival. For example, in July 1995 two male calves from Kaziranga were transported by jeep to the zoo, one having been washed out of the Park by the monsoon, the other having been attacked by a tiger.

Immediately prior to Ratul and Madhu's move out of Assam, the zoo had 13 (9.4) Indian rhinos. This zoo and San Diego Wild Animal Park have by far the largest number of these animals in captivity in the world, and have contributed greatly to the genetic pool of the species. Assam Zoo has also sent its rhinos to other zoos and protected areas in India to encourage further breeding in other states. The zoo will not sell its female rhinos, however, wanting to keep them to breed in Assam.

Ratul and Madhu were moved to West Bengal in lorries. No tranquilizers were given. The rhinos were kept in acclimatization enclosures of five hectares each in Jaldapara and Gorumara for several months. After their arrival, Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary had 35 rhinos in its 216 km² of lush habitat, and Gorumara had 18.

Importantly for the future of West Bengal's rhinos, in 1995 the small Gorumara Wildlife Sanctuary was increased in size almost tenfold, from 8.65 to 79.46 km², and was upgraded to a national park. This was a considerable feat, as the state has a very large and poverty-stricken human population. In order to help improve the lives of villagers living around both Gorumara and Jaldapara, eco-development programmes are being established. These in turn should help to improve the attitude of villagers

towards the protected areas and the rhinos.

Of further significance in West Bengal, no rhinos fell to poachers in either 1995 or 1994, and only one, an adult female, was poached in 1993. The chief wildlife warden for West Bengal, S. Roy, is confident that the state's rhino population will continue to expand in numbers. It is especially encouraging, as this area had, in the middle of the last century, one of the highest concentrations of rhinos on the sub-continent, with hundreds roaming northern West Bengal, until legal hunting and land clearance obliterated nearly all.

It is time for rhinos in Jaldapara and Gorumara to make their mark once more, rather than to dwindle away – which, in the mid-1980s, did nearly happen. And it is wise of the governments, with the help of the Assam State Zoo in particular, to support the expansion of a healthy rhino population in West Bengal, as well as in Assam. As the old adage says, 'Don't keep all your eggs in one basket.'

Recovery programme for pygmy hog

Nearly ten years after its conception, a recovery programme for the pygmy hog (*Sus salvanius*) was launched with the signing of an International Conservation Management and Research Agreement on 16 February 1995 in New Delhi, India. This agreement, the first of its kind in India, was signed by the secretaries of the Ministry of Environment and Forests and Assam State Government, the IUCN/SSC Pigs and Peccaries Specialist Group and Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust. The European Union is supplying most of the funds for the first three years of the programme.