



## NEPAL

# The curse of the horn

Poachers have taken advantage of civil unrest to target rhinos.

Poachers killed more rhinos in Nepal between mid-2000 and mid-2003 than anywhere else in the world. At least 91 rhinos succumbed during these three years in and around Royal Chitwan and Bardia National Parks. Most were shot, but six rhinos are known to have been electrocuted and one poisoned.

Poachers were after the rhinos' horns, of course. It's known that a gang next to Chitwan has received between \$2,000 and \$3,500 (£1,050 and £1,800) for an adult horn weighing just under a kilo, a huge amount of money in Nepal, where the per capita income is only \$240 a year. The horn may then pass through the hands of businessmen, until a trader in Kathmandu buys it for \$10,000 a kg, before exporting it to China.

Until 1998, Nepal's rhino conservation strategy had been one of the most successful in the world. Rhino numbers had risen from around 95 in 1968 to 550 by late 1997.

Then poachers started to kill them: 20 in 1998 and 1999 combined, and 15 in 2000, all in Chitwan. Between July 2001 and July 2002, 41 rhinos are known to

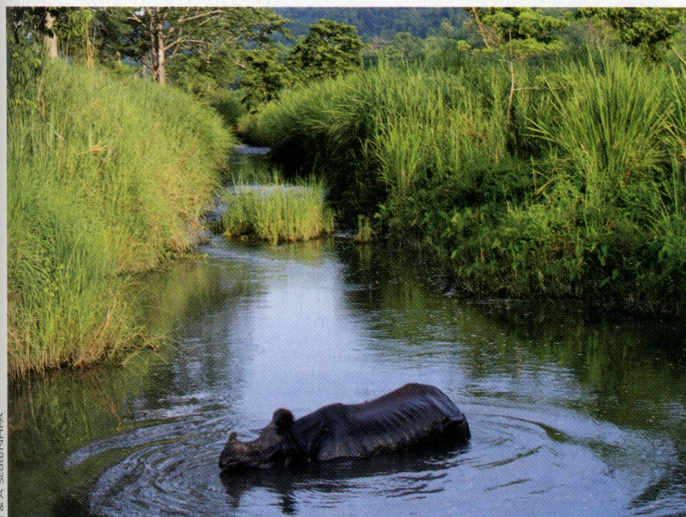
have been taken, the highest number since the government established national parks.

There are several reasons for the increase. The army abandoned 24 of its 32 guard posts in Chitwan, concentrating all its men into only eight, heavily fortified posts, because of fears of an attack from Maoist insurgents. In Bardia, the army abandoned half the guard posts to fortify the others.

A second reason was that, after 1998, the Department for National Parks and Wildlife Conservation's anti-poaching strategy fell apart, while co-ordination between the different agencies faltered. The main private funding organisation for Chitwan's intelligence work became disillusioned and cut off support between 2002 and 2003.

But, in 2003, the department brought in a new and effective anti-poaching strategy, and funding for intelligence resumed. Co-ordination improved among police, forestry and especially army staff and the parks department. Thus, from July to December 2003, poachers shot dead only one rhino in Nepal. Chitwan staff found the body with the horn removed.

**Esmond Bradley Martin**



Safe again. Nepal has cut rhino poaching after several bad years.

Another year, another species goes extinct. It's as if no one cares any more about the loss of natural heritage. Well, do you?

The Yangtze River, in China, is one of the noisiest, busiest and dirtiest thoroughfares in the world. Its basin is home to 400 million people – one person in every 15 on Earth lives in this environmental disaster zone.

It's not surprising, then, that the Yangtze river dolphin, or *bajji*, is on the critical list. In recent years, this 2.5-metre dolphin with small eyes and puffy cheeks has been facing a mindboggling barrage of threats, including entanglement in fishing gear, electrocution from fishing operations, overfishing, collisions with ships, noise pollution, illegal hunting, damming of tributaries, drainage for land reclamation, dredging, and underwater blasting. If it's not extinct already, it will be very soon.

The *bajji* was first discovered by western scientists in 1914, and was still widespread when China's 'Great Leap Forward' began in 1958. But by the time I went to search for it, with Douglas Adams in 1988, there were no more than 400 left in the entire 6,363km river.

Chinese conservationists have done everything they can but their efforts have failed. An exhaustive survey in 1997 counted a total of just 13 – and I'd be very surprised if any of them are still alive today.

It's not inconceivable that the last survivor was a male called Qi-Qi (pronounced chee-chee). He was rescued in 1980, after being severely injured on fishing hooks, and spent 22 lonely years in a small concrete tank at the Wuhan Institute of Hydrobiology. He died on 14 July 2002.

The final nail in the Yangtze River's coffin is the Three

Gorges Dam, which eloquently demonstrates China's commitment to further industrial development of the Yangtze Basin with little or no thought for its natural environment. The Chinese Government recently announced the third and final phase of the dam construction, which is due for completion in 2009. It will be the largest hydroelectric dam in the world, stretching nearly 1.6 kilometres across, towering 175 metres above the river, filling a reservoir 600km long and displacing 1.9 million people.

What's even more outrageous is that we seem to have learnt nothing from the downfall of the Yangtze river dolphin. Why hasn't it kick-started renewed conservation efforts for the other river dolphins struggling for survival in muddy rivers elsewhere in Asia and South America? They face frighteningly similar threats, as their riverine homes are degraded to serve human needs, and yet conservationists in Pakistan, India, Nepal, Brazil and other parts of their range are fighting a losing battle. The Indus river dolphin, from Pakistan, is already down to the last 1,000 survivors (and they are fragmented into tiny sub-populations by dams), and so it will probably be the next river dolphin to disappear.

But what upsets me more than anything is that the extinction of a dolphin isn't headline news. The *bajji* has quietly slipped away with barely a murmur. How can that be possible? Are we so hardened and cynical after so many lost environmental battles that we don't grieve any more?

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