
Rhino conservation

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The Greater one horned rhino or Indian rhino is one of the most endearing emblems of Indian Subcontinent's rich biological heritage and the State animal of Assam. Indian rhino represents the pride of Assam and Assamese people. Presently, India holds 75% of world wild Indian rhino population.

This iconic animal is now highly vulnerable as witnessed by recent declines. Once, the rhinos ranged in the entire stretch of the Indo-Gangetic Plain across northern Pakistan, northern India, Nepal, Myanmar, Northern Bangladesh and Brahmaputra valley of Assam. However, as a result of habitat fragmentation, rapid socio-economic changes, poaching and being a K-selected species (long gestation, long calving intervals, slow maturation and single offspring), range and population of this species gradually declined over the last 400 years and by the 19th century, the rhino population became restricted only to the Terai grassland of Northern Uttar Pradesh, Southern Nepal and Northern Bengal in addition to the Brahmaputra valley of Assam.

By the beginning of the 20th century, the species was close to extinction and was estimated fewer than 200 rhino remained in the wild. There were studies which mentioned limited distribution and critically threatened population status of rhinoceros. The general outlook on rhino conservation was altered gradually since Imperial government's promulgation on conservation and protection issues of wildlife.

The first attempt at conservation of rhinos was in Assam through Assam Forest Regulation 1891 and subsequently the Assam Rhinoceros Pre-

vention Act 1915. This act was again upgraded in 1954 as Assam Rhinoceros Act, 1954. In Bengal, the initial control for rhino conservation came through Indian Forest Act, 1927 followed by Bengal Rhinoceros Prevention Act, 1932. Jaldapara and Garumarah were declared as rhino-bearing areas of Bengal and were provided legal protection. Following the acts, protection and conservation scenario was improved and by the end of 1975 wild rhino population were increased to less than thousand. Simultaneously, conservation effort of India and Nepal helped to increase the global wild Indian rhino population dramatically since 1975. Indian Rhino population is now larger compared to two other Asian species (i.e. Javan rhino and Sumatran rhino).

In Assam, rhino population is now distributed in four major protected areas (viz. Kaziranga National Park, Manas National Park, Rajiv Gandhi Orang National Park, and Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary). Due to multiple conservation efforts, Indian rhino population in Assam grew about 71% in between 1999 to 2018. By 2018, the population grew to 3,550 in Terai Arc Landscapes of India and Nepal, the rhino ranging areas of Assam and North Bengal. It is the only large mammal in Asia to be downlisted from endangered to vulnerable on the IUCN Red List of Endangered Species.

As megaherbivores, Indian rhinos are globally threatened due to habitat conversion, fragmentation and poaching to fulfill the illegal demand of their horn and body parts. During the period of thirty four years (1985-2019), more than 800 rhinos in Assam were killed by poachers for horns. Rhino poaching is a major threat for the sur-

vival of the species. As a result of poaching, two resident rhino population in Manas National Park and Laokhowa Wildlife Sanctuary were wiped out during the early eighties and nineties.

During this period, much effort has been put forward to protect this species. The Indian Rhino Vision 2020 Program was designed in 2005 to manage rhino population in Assam but there is no other broad institutionalized mechanism in place to manage entire rhino population across India. Therefore, it was the need of the hour to have a broad national rhino conservation strategy. The Government of India has released National Conservation Strategy for the Indian rhino on February 2019 by setting a goal to distribute Indian rhinos across 5% more areas than their present distribution. The strategy focused on five major points of actions- 1. Strengthen protection, 2. Expand present distribution range, 3. Research and monitoring 4. Trans-boundary engagement and 5. Enforcement.

Due to security concerns, out of five broad actions, two are specially formulated to protect the species to ensure growth potential, constraint of habitat extent and other detrimental factors. These are expected to be achieved through collaborative arrangement with civil society organizations, judiciary, and general communities by maintaining available resources. The stronger protection is directly linked to available resources. So, there must be a streamlined mechanism necessary to maintain available resources in all the protected areas in respect to its protection status.

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