

The Jungle Express

June 2008

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A trip back home

STORY OF TRANS-
LOCATION OF TWO
WILD RHINOS FROM
POBITORA WILDLIFE
SANCTUARY TO
MANAS NATIONAL
PARK.

BY TARIQ AZIZ

In April of 2008 when trucks carrying two wild Indian rhinos arrived at the Manas National Park, the long awaited moment of homecoming came to end. Manas NP saw the first glimpse of rhinos after a painful gap of 18 years.

the Department of Forest and Environment, Government of Assam, along with its partners the WWF, International Rhino Foundation and the US Fish and Wildlife Services in reconstructing Manas NP.



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The vision to bring back rhinos to all its old homes in Assam was finally put into action through the Indian Rhino Vision 2020 (IRV 2020) Programme. The first lucky rhinos were two males from Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary. As a part of this ambitious project, the Government of Assam and conservation groups will work to translocate up to 20 rhinos to the park over the year from their homes in both Kaziranga NP and Pobitora WLS and finally seek to build a 3,000 strong population distributed over seven protected areas in Assam and Northeast India. The last two years have seen extensive engagement of

Manas : Regaining lost glory

Lying in the foothills of the Himalayas on the Indo-Bhutan border, Manas National Park is known for its breathtaking scenery and wildlife, and is a World Heritage Site. Home to the Tiger, Pygmy Hog and Golden Langur as well as Elephants, Wild Buffalo and Indian Bison, once it was common to see its native, the Indian Rhino too. (contd.)

(contd.)

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“We will patrol the park day and night. Even if we don't have food, we will take our water bottles,” pledges local forest guard Dhan Chandra Doley.

But the glory of Manas was damaged by a violent local ethnic conflict in the 1990s. An armed struggle caused massive upheaval and destruction of the Park's infrastructure, including destruction of anti-poaching camps, roads and bridges and killing of forest staff. Manas NP a World Heritage Site since 1985, was declared 'in danger'. The last rhino in Manas disappeared in 1996. And with the disappearance of the endangered pachyderm, it was on the brink of being de-listed.

Pobitora : A sanctuary with no room for more rhinos

The burgeoning numbers of these endangered prehistoric-looking animals crowded into Pobitora in Northeast India is, according to conservationists, a huge achievement and the result of strong anti-poaching legislation and active community engagement.

“Not a single rhino has been poached here in the last two years,” says Divisional Forest Officer in-charge of Pobitora. “We couldn't have done it without public support”. Pobitora now boasts the highest density of rhinos in the world, with more than 80 rhinos in less than 18 square kilometers of rhino habitat. For the rhinos selected to be moved to their new home in Manas, IRV 2020 carries high hopes: The programme hopes to lessen pressure for food and space in both Kaziranga and Pobitora; to reduce the straying of rhinos into nearby villages; and to help rejuvenate Manas National Park.

Moving a two-tonne rhino

Moving a rhino is no easy task. It required months of planning and careful staging, like a piece of theatre involving a cast of hundreds. A Task Force was initially

created to over see the work of IRV 2020. It also created a Translocation Core Committee with Mr BS Bonal, COO Wildlife, as its Chief. The TCC made elaborate plans required to move the rhinos.

To begin with, the rhinos were carefully identified for translocation: those that are young and healthy to be founder stock for the new population. These chosen rhinos were tracked for months and when the time came, they were driven to a place where they could be tranquillised. Trained domestic elephants and their mahouts, were asked to 'shepherd' the rhinos to an area. Once darted and tranquillised by the Veterinary Officer, intensive care was taken by a team of veterinary doctors, to monitor the condition of the rhino. Radio collared, the rhinos were rolled to a specially built sledge which then was pulled into the crates by a bulldozer. The trap doors of the crates were closed and then the tranquillised rhinos were revived. Large cranes moved the crates into the trucks, ready for the journey to Manas. Over the last few months, roads from Pobitora to Manas were mended, and bridges rebuilt in preparation for this historic journey.

At their release into Manas, the rhinos were greeted like film stars. “We will patrol the park day and night. Even if we don't have food, we will take our water bottles,” pledges local forest guard Dhan Chandra Doley. “We are ready to look after the rhinos, whatever it takes.” This is a sign that their park and their way of life may be on the rise.

Thanks to the Indian Rhino Vision 2020, wild rhinos will once again roam the wilderness of Manas National Park.