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# The Lost Rhino Family at Manas

How we lost hundreds of hours of physical, mental effort, and natural courage!!



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Udangsiri (R10) with First Manas born calf R10A

Wildlife research is full of thrill and excitement. Sometimes it could bring plenty of joy and occasional sorrows. Amidst such situations, a long duration in

conservation research of Indian rhinos gave me immense scope to learn about the species.

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However, a few encounters entangled me emotionally with the animal. Despite being a man of science, I do not have a scientific explanation for such experiences.

This is a short story about the first rhino calf born after the rhino reintroduction at Manas NP. Udangsiri (R10 adult female) the proud mother gave birth to the first rhino calf at Manas on 26th September 2012.

I still, remember the day. I spent almost 19 hours in continuous searching for Udangsiri with my team to locate the first calf. Mr. Dharanidhar Bodo, Dr. Prabhat Basumatary, Mr. Bipul Chandra Nath, and Mr. Sande Daimary were with me on the day of the rhino birth.



Elephant back to search of the First rhino calf (I am in middle on the left elephant)

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It was exciting and joyful for us to have the first Manas born rhino calf. As an official nomenclature, he got the name as R10A. This incident created new dawn for rhino conservation in Manas. It was also a great motivation for the entire rhino translocation team.

Just after birth, the mother and calf moved to the swamp areas with tall grasses. Therefore, regular observations, even on elephant back, was not possible. As a natural instinct, the mother was aggressive to intruders except for the adult male rhino (R5). Therefore, we decided to locate them once a week.



The cute R10 A nibbling grasses with the guidance of his mother

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The mother and calf were comfortably associating with the adult male and they seem to be like a small rhino family. Although Indian rhinos have loose societal bonding, we observed this unique association among themselves.



The footprint of R10 A

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A rhino associates itself with others differently in different age groups to avail of their biological needs. However, adult male, adult female, and association of wild male calf are rare.



Adult male with mother and calf wallowing together

Nevertheless, this rhino tale ended when some heartless poachers killed the mother, Udangsiri, on 29th October 2013. The eleven-month-old calf was orphaned. The entire Manas team was overwhelmed with deep sorrow and it was difficult to motivate the team in such a situation. However, we were worried about the calf and looking forward to experts' suggestions to rescue the milk feeding calf from the wild.



Hornless dead body of Udangsiri

Dr. Sonali Ghose, the then Deputy Field Director of Manas, and I undertook a preliminary survey for the possibilities to rescue the calf from the wild. However, the situation was not in favor of a rescue operation so we decided to monitor the rhino calf as much as possible.

We were also worried about the adult male's response to the young calf. Nevertheless, nature maintains its own role and responsibilities. We were surprised to locate the calf all the time with adult male rhino. It was evident that the male rhino adopted the calf in absence of his mother.

The adult male has guided the male calf until the age of 2 years 1 month 6 days. The calf was healthy and was adapting the life with the male rhino.

Unfortunately, on the 1st November 2014, poachers again killed the adult male R5 for its horn. The calf was standing just a few meters ahead of the hornless carcass of R5.

Two of my monitoring colleagues could not look at the sight and weep through the entire inspection period of the dead rhino. With a heavy heart, the team buried the same place after completion of necessary official formalities.

We lost opportunities to observe the beautiful societal behavior of Indian rhinos for the first time in the wild. A depressive situation overshadowed our enthusiasm. Our love, affection, and hard work to conserve this animal at Manas went in vain with those bullets from the poachers.

After losing the adult male association, the calf liked the same dense and swamp areas where it was born. Later, it gradually moved away from the place and sometimes even raided crops near the adjoining villages.

At the attainment of 3 years, it broadened its ranging areas and reached the central part of the Bhuyanpara range where it associated with another sub-adult female rhino named Mainao A. She was the first calf of adult female rhino Mainao.

Mainao was a rehabilitated female rhino that was introduced at Manas. In the year 2015, it was a common sight to locate all the three rhinos together in the Bhuyanpara range of Manas.





A team busy to track rhino from a top of a highland

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Mainao was raised in the Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation (CWRC) Kaziranga National Park for a certain period and then relocated to Manas. Thus, she loves the human presence and often visited the anti-poaching camps inside the park. Sometimes all three rhinos visited the camps but the male sub-adult (R10A) kept his distance from the human presence.

We were a bit relaxed to see a new companion with the male sub-adult. Sometimes we assumed all three rhinos' locations by only locating one rhino in an area.

However, the time again was not in our favor. On 5th May 2016, the poachers killed the sub-adult male (R10A) for its tiny horn. With the poaching of the entire rhino family, we lost hundreds of hours of physical, mental effort, and natural courage. Just for someone's greed, they used bullets that destroyed our

natural heritage and aspirations. We also lost the opportunity to observe newly evolved wild rhino behavior.

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### **Scientific Learning**

Usually, a loose societal bonding of rhinos is observed in the wild but in this case, we learned an unexplored chapter of rhinos. In wild, sometimes-adult females are seen to adopt orphan calves but here, the adult male rhino adopted the male calf. This association also threw light on the rhino's association pattern irrespective of age.

As per the evolutionary trend, the rhinoceros has a convoluted evolutionary history. During the course of evolution, the rhinoceros has withstood numerous natural upheavals to survive on the earth. Unfortunately, the killing of the rhinos for its horn is a rhino conservation tragedy and has threatened the entire rhinoceros species in the earth

The newly established Manas population has many setbacks during the last decade. Poaching is only a major threat to the rhino population of Manas. So, let us support to conserve this brilliant prehistoric animal of the earth and try to explore many unknown facts scientifically.

