

It was a hot and humid afternoon of July 2002. Kaziranga was flooded and animals were dispersing in search of high ground. I was relaxing in my office chair after a hectic day of supervising the construction work of

Saviours of wildlife



Forest Department, the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) and the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW). Not only rhino calves, many injured/orphaned/displaced animals have since been rescued

Photos: Subhamoy Bhattacharjee

DR. RATHIN BARMAN writes about the thriving two-decade journey of the CWRC at Kaziranga.



Bengal Florican release



Tiger release in Kaziranga

the animal enclosures which we were planning to use to house the rescued animals. Construction work was in full swing at the Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation (CWRC) in Panbari near the Kaziranga National Park (KNP). CWRC was to become the only such facility in the country to rescue and rehabilitate injured and marooned wildlife.

Suddenly, the phone rang and on the other side was N.K. Vasu Sir — the then Director of KNP. He informed me that a rhino calf had been found alone in the western range and it needed urgent care. Within five minutes, Dr. Bhaskar Choudhury and I took the animal rescue van and drove to Bagori. It was a female calf, approximately one week of age, as we could see that the umbilical cord was still intact. It was injured as well, as it had probably rolled into the flood water and got separated from its mother. Dr. Choudhury was worried about the calf's injuries and it was dehydrated too. We instructed the staff to look for the mother and decided to take the calf to CWRC for further care

and treatment.

CWRC was still under construction then and we were not prepared for such a rescue. When the calf arrived at CWRC, we were struggling to find a proper milk bottle. A staff member brought a human baby milk bottle from his house and we tried to feed the baby rhino with it. But the bottle was too small for a rhino calf. I immediately instructed Mahadeo Das, our rescue van driver, to go to the Bokakhat market and get a two-litre Coke bottle. The bottle arrived in 20 minutes; we emptied it, washed it thoroughly, filled it with human baby milk formula, fitted a nipple and tried to feed the baby rhino. The baby rhino slowly started taking the milk! Dr. Choudhury was relieved. That was CWRC's first rescued baby rhino. Since then we have rescued many baby rhinos from Kaziranga, housed and nursed them at CWRC and subsequently released them to the wild again.

Two decades earlier, on August 28, 2002, the CWRC was formally inaugurated as India's first-of-its-kind rescue centre for injured and marooned wildlife, attached to a national park. It is a joint effort of the Assam

by the team at CWRC and subsequently released to the wild again after proper care and treatment. The CWRC had once rescued a tiger from a dry well, a beautiful clouded leopard from under someone's bed in Karbi Anglong, hundreds of open-bill storks when their nesting tree was destroyed in a storm, and another tiger from someone's bedroom. Once, we had rescued a tiger from Tezpur town but we had to place it in police lock-up as our vehicle carrying the cage from Kaziranga had broken down on its way to Tezpur.

Rehabilitation of rescued elephant calves is another major activity that the CWRC team has been experimenting with for the last two decades. Elephant calves are rescued under various circumstances and a major percentage of them are rescued from tea garden trenches. CWRC has been trying to send back these rescued elephant calves after proper care and treatment. So far the team has been successful in sending around 40 per cent of these rescued elephant calves back into the wild. Elephants have a very long life, so this experiment needs more time to prove that

elephant calves can join a wild herd again if they are properly hand-raised at specialised facilities.

CWRC was initially established to address the rescue needs of the wildlife of Kaziranga, which arises under various circumstances like floods or man-animal conflict situations. Two well-trained and experienced wildlife veterinarians and ten animal keepers handle the day-to-day operations of CWRC. Now, this facility has proved to be one of the most unique animal rescue facilities in India which not only gives service to Kaziranga and Assam, but also renders help to many other states of India. The CWRC is also a place to train wildlife veterinarians and biologists. Many volunteer veterinarians and biologists from around the world come to CWRC every year to have hands-on experience of wildlife rescue and its subsequent treatment and care at the CWRC, followed by its rehabilitation procedures. In the last two decades, CWRC has handled more than 7,000 animals, out of which 65 per cent could be sent back to the wild again. Without CWRC, many rescued animals would have died and some of them would have landed up in zoos, which is a lifelong imprisonment for them. Wild animals have every right to get a second chance to go back into the wild once they are injured or caught under various circumstances. If all efforts fail to send them back to the wild, captivity should be the last option.

Apart from the main centre at Panbari, currently, the CWRC has two satellite facilities called the Mobile Veterinary Services (MVS). These are the Eastern Assam MVS at Guijan, Tinsukia (Dibru Saikhowa National Park) and the Western Assam MVS unit at Charaikhola, (Chakrasila WLS). Through these facilities, our trained staff can handle the rescue and rehabilitation needs of any wildlife in the respected areas.

The CWRC model can be replicated in other protected areas of the country so that a proper scientific temperament and protocol can be followed while addressing the rescue needs of wildlife in distress. With the rise in human-animal conflict situations all over, such a set-up would come handy for management issues. This would also save important wildlife, which might otherwise die for the lack of an expert hand in quick time.

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