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READING

A tragic tale

DEBA KUMAR DUTTA reminisces about a lost rhino family at Manas National Park.



Udangiri with her newborn calf

Wildlife research is full of thrill and excitement. It can bring plenty of joy as well as occasional sorrow. But a long duration in conservation research on Indian rhinos has given me immense scope to learn about the species. However, a few encounters have emotionally entangled me with the animal. Despite being a man of science, I do not have any scientific explanation for such experiences. This is a tale about the first rhino calf born after the rhino reintroduction at Manas National Park in 2006. Udangiri (R10 adult female) — the proud mother, gave birth to the first rhino calf at Manas on September 6, 2012.

I still remember the day. I had spent almost 19 hours with my team searching for Udangiri to locate the first calf. Dharanidhar Bodo, Dr. Prabhat Basumatary, Bipul Chandra Nath, and Sande Daimary were with me on the day of the rhino's birth. This incident was a 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 (official name 10A) moved to the swamp areas with their tall grasses. Therefore, regular observations, even on elephant back, were not possible. As a natural instinct, the mother was aggressive towards intruders, except for the adult male rhino

(R5). Therefore, we decided to locate them once a week.

The mother and calf were comfortably mingling with the adult male and they seemed to be like a small rhino family. Although Indian rhinos have loose societal bonding, we observed this unique association. A rhino associates itself with others differently in different age groups to avail of their biological needs. However, an association among an adult male, adult female and its calf is rare.

Nevertheless, this rhino tale ended when some heartless poachers killed the mother, Udangiri, on October 9, 2013. The 11-month-old calf was orphaned. The entire Manas team was in deep sorrow and it was difficult to motivate the team in such a situation. We were worried about the calf and looking forward to experts' suggestions to rescue the milk-feeding calf from the wild.

Dr. Sonali Ghose — the then Deputy

Field Director of Manas, and I undertook a preliminary survey on the possibilities of rescuing the calf from the wild. However, the situation was not in favour 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 Her own roles and responsibilities. We were surprised to find the calf with the adult male rhino all the time. It was evident that the male rhino had adopted the calf in the absence of its mother. The calf was healthy and was adapting to its life with the male rhino. The adult male guided the male calf until the age of two years, one month and six days.

Unfortunately, on November 1, 2014, poachers killed the adult male, too. The calf was standing just a few metres away from the hornless carcass of R5. Two of my monitoring colleagues could not

look at the sight and wept through the entire inspection period of the dead rhino.

We lost the opportunity to observe the beautiful societal behaviour 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 had gone in vain. After losing its adult male association, the calf seemed to like the same dense and swamp areas where it was born. Later, however, it moved away from the place and sometimes even raided crops near the adjoining villages.

At the attainment of three 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 the adult female rhino Mainao — a rehabilitated female rhino that was introduced to Manas in 2006. In 2015, it was a common sight to locate all the three rhinos together in the Bhuyanpara range of Manas.

Mainao had been raised at the Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation (CWRC) of the Kaziranga National Park for a certain period and then relocated to Manas. Thus, she loved human presence and often visited the anti-poaching camps inside the Park. Sometimes, all the three rhinos visited the camps, but the male sub-adult kept his distance from human presence. We were a bit relaxed to see a new companion with the male sub-adult. Sometimes, we could even assume the location of all the three rhinos by locating just one rhino in an area.

However, time was not in our favour yet again. On May 5, 2016, poachers killed the young sub-adult male for its tiny horn. With the death of this rhino family, we lost hundreds of hours of physical and mental effort; we also lost the golden opportunity to observe and understand a newly evolved wild rhino's behaviour. Just for someone's greed, they used bullets to destroy our natural heritage and aspirations.

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A monitoring team inside Manas National Park