Rare case of rhino poaching jolts conservation community in Nepal

by Abhaya Raj Joshi on 23 January 2023

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- *A rare case of rhino poaching in Nepal has sent alarm bells ringing among conservationists, who say the method used could easily be replicated throughout the buffer zone of Chitwan National Park, the rhinos' stronghold.*
- *Poachers appeared to have electrocuted a female rhino and her calf using a cable connected to a nearby temple's power supply.*
- *Conservation officials say there's a large number of grid-connected temples and other community buildings throughout Chitwan's buffer zone that could serve a similar purpose.*
- *The incident is a rare setback for Nepal, which recorded zero rhino losses to poachers in six of the past 12 years, and only six poaching-related kills out of 165 rhinos that died in the past five years.*

KATHMANDU — When residents of Nandapur village on the western fringes of Nepal's Chitwan National Park rushed to the scene of a rhino death near the Narayani River on Jan. 20, they found a heartbreaking sight.

A 14-year-old female rhino lay lifeless in a pool of blood along with her 4-year-old calf. The mother's horn had been sawn off; the calf had yet to grow a horn.

"Our post-mortem shows that the two rhinos were most likely electrocuted," said Bijay Kumar Shrestha, a veterinarian at Chitwan National Park, home to 694 of Nepal's 752 greater one-horned rhinos (*Rhinoceros unicornis*).

A greater one-horned rhino inside Chitwan National Park. Image by Jonas Gratzer for Mongabay.

“This is the first time in living memory that we’ve seen poachers kill rhinos in such a way,” he told Mongabay. “In the past, poachers would open fire at rhinos and security forces would hear the sound. But there’s no sound produced when the rhinos are electrocuted.”

Officials said they had so far only seen rhinos accidentally zapped by electrified fences put up by residents living near the park to fend off animals such as wild boars and monkeys. When such deaths were reported, the horn would be intact. But this time around, the rhino and its calf were deliberately electrocuted to extract the adult rhino’s horn, Shrestha said.

In the past five years, 165 rhinos in and around Chitwan have died. Of these, only six were killed by poachers. In fact, Nepal received international accolades for recording zero poaching of rhinos in 2011, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2019 and 2020. (Because rhino deaths are only officially attributed to poaching when the horn is removed, it’s possible more poaching attempts took place than the numbers reflect.)

A Chitwan park official familiar with the latest poaching discovery said the incident took place only a few hundred meters from a local temple. He said he suspected the poachers were familiar with the area and hooked up a cable to the temple's power supply line to set up their ambush.

"During the autopsy, the animals were found to have more fat in their body than usual, suggesting that they didn't venture into the jungle much and limited their movement to a small area," said the official, who asked not to be identified because he wasn't authorized to speak on the sensitive issue. "This meant that anyone frequenting the area would know where to find them at any given point in time."

A semi-submerged greater one-horned rhino in Chitwan National Park. Photo by Alex Dudley for Mongabay.

The official added that visibility on the banks of the Narayani River is very poor at night during winter, making it highly unlikely that an outsider would be able to pull off such an act.

Following the incident, authorities and local residents have expressed concern that poachers will now start using the same method to kill more rhinos, given the number of grid-connected community buildings, such as temples, dotted across the buffer zone on the fringes of the national park.

There's roughly one temple or community building per square kilometer (or 2.6 per square mile) in Chitwan's 729-km2 (281-mi2) buffer zone, according to an official at the Department of Wildlife and National Parks, who asked to remain anonymous for fear of retribution. These buildings have access to electricity and are often unguarded at night. The temples in particular, leave their lights on at night, making it easy for poachers to plug in wires to electrocute wild animals.

Another park official said that the density of such easy-to-access electricity sources is so high that prospective poachers don't need to draw wires longer than a few hundred meters. In the past, officials have seen people use wires as long as 800 meters, or half a mile, to fence off their land, he added.

"We have seen a proliferation of temples and community buildings across the buffer zone in the past few years," said Birendra Mahato, director of the Tharu Cultural Museum and Research Center in Sauraha, near Chitwan National Park. "Construction in the buffer zone is heavily regulated, and the park needs to provide permission for any activity. However, in the case of temples, it's easy for the people to convince park officials as it involves religion. Similarly, it's easy to get funding for it as local politicians are also happy to support such projects for popularity."

The park official who provided data on the density of temples in the buffer zone of the park said it's also possible the poachers in the latest incident used a battery to set up the ambush. "As doing so would require a lot of expertise and time, poachers may not have taken that route," he added. "However, if they did so with batteries, then the alarm bells would ring louder as it would be far more difficult to catch the culprits."

Maheshwor Dhakal, director-general of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, said the army and police have been called in to investigate the incident, and expressed optimism that the culprits would soon be brought to justice.

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