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For rescued rhino calves in Nepal, return to the wild is a fraught option

by **Abhaya Raj Joshi** on 22 March 2023

- *Conservation officials in Nepal are considering what to do with three juvenile rhinos rescued from the wild after being separated from their mothers.*
- *One option is to return them to the wild in a national park or wildlife reserve with suitable habitat but with the risk that they could fall prey to tigers. Rhino translocations in Nepal have a poor record: only 38 of 95 rhinos transferred from Chitwan to Bardiya National Park survive, with the rest killed by poachers or farmers.*
- *That leaves a third option on the table, which is to gift the animals to a foreign country, as part of Nepal's rhino diplomacy, which would leave the young animals facing a lifetime in human company.*

CHITWAN — The chirping of birds is interrupted by the rustling of leaves and the sound of breaking twigs. It's breakfast time at the office of the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) in Sauraha on the fringes of Nepal's Chitwan National Park.

As trust officials munch their bread with sips of tea, three juvenile rhinos tuck into their own meal, grazing under the watchful eye of their caretaker. One of the rhinos even tries to finish off the leftovers of a human breakfast.

These greater one-horned rhinos (*Rhinoceros unicornis*), now habituated to living with humans, were rescued from different parts of the national park after being separated from their mothers. Officials now face the daunting challenge of sending them back out into the wild, ensuring that they can survive amid threats from predators and poachers.



They've named the three rhinos, all females, Pushpa, Anjali and Pooja. Pushpa was rescued three years ago, Anjali two years ago, and Pooja in October last year. All of them were only a week-old when they were brought to the trust.

“Generally, female rhinos in their first pregnancy are inexperienced about motherhood and they don't provide adequate care to their calf,” said Dr. Amir Sadaula, a veterinarian with the NTNC. “Sometimes the mother dies during delivery and other times calves get separated from their mothers due to attacks by predators such as tigers or natural calamities like floods.

“We have reasons to believe that Pushpa and Anjali were first-borns that didn't receive adequate care and Pooja was separated from her mother when attacked by a tiger,” Sadaula added.

Key challenges in readying these rhinos for a return to the wild include finding suitable habitat for them, and then drawing up a plan to gradually get them habituated to living away from humans and their interventions. The Department

of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation recently formed a committee to suggest ways, including translocation to other national parks, to address these challenges.

According to a 2021 census report, Chitwan is home to 694 greater-one-horned rhinos, a threatened species. Nearby Parsa National Park has just three rhinos, while farther west, Bardiya National Park has 38 and Shuklaphanta National Park has 17. Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve in eastern Nepal, long viewed as a potential habitat for rhinos, has none.

“We have come up with different alternatives for the three rhinos,” said Ganesh Pant, an ecologist with the department and a member of the reintroduction committee. “The first is to relocate them to an enclosure in Chitwan National Park itself, and the second is to translocate them to Bardiya, Shuklaphanta or Koshi Tappu.”

Each option, however, has its own sets of challenges. “In Bardiya, Chitwan and Shuklaphanta, we have tigers as apex predators that can kill these rhinos,” Pant said. “We’ve seen that even [enclosures aren’t safe](#) in these areas.”

The committee is thus preparing to recommend to the government that the trio of rescued rhinos be moved to [Koshi Tappu](#), home to the endangered [wild buffalos](#) and [rare birds](#) but, notably, devoid of apex predators such as [tigers](#).

“We have records that rhinos roamed the floodplains of the Koshi [River] before the 1950s,” Pant said. Local communities have also been demanding that the government translocate some iconic species such as rhinos to the reserve, which receives only a fraction of the visitor numbers that Chitwan or Bardiya enjoy.



But translocating the rhinos to Koshi Tappu isn't going to be easy, Pant said. The animals are habituated to human contact and could become easy prey to poachers targeting them for their horns and other body parts. That's why the security situation needs to be improved and the process has to be carried out step by step, Pant said.

This involves training the rhinos to forage for food on their own, and gradually reducing their dependence on human care. Currently, the rhinos are fed a combination of milk, grass and cooked corn husks. They're also being given time to interact with each other and build social bonds, which will be crucial when they're released into the wild.

Rhino translocations have a [checkered record in Nepal](#). A total of 87 rhinos were moved from Chitwan to Bardiya between 1986 and 2003, and another eight between March 2016 and April 2017. The effort was part of the government's bid to protect the species from the threats of disease and natural disaster by ensuring a viable population in more than one habitat across the country. But of

the 95 rhinos that were translocated, only 38 survive; many were killed by poachers or were attacked by local residents retaliating against crop damage.

Although rhinos have never been translocated to the banks of the Koshi, the frequent flooding of the river could impact their survival in the wild, leaving officials cautious.

“We will most likely decide about the fate of the three rhinos within a month,” Maheshwar Dhakal, director-general of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, told Mongabay.



Another option on the table, according to Pant, is to present the rhinos as gifts to foreign governments, as part of the country’s “rhino diplomacy.” In 2018, Nepal gifted two rhinos, a male and a female, to the Shanghai Wild Animal Park in China. If a return to the wild is ruled out for Pushpa, Anjali and Pooja, the trio may also find themselves spending the rest of their lives in the company of humans.

