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# Low-key return for rescued rhino calves to Nepal's Chitwan National Park

by **Abhaya Raj Joshi** on 18 May 2023

- *Two of three rhino calves rescued from the wild have been returned to Nepal's Chitwan National Park in what officials say was a low-key and low-cost release.*
- *The two female greater one-horned rhinos had been cared for at a facility on the outskirts of the park after being abandoned by their mothers.*
- *Officials had debated whether to move them to other parks with smaller rhino populations or to gift them to foreign countries as part of Nepal's rhino diplomacy.*
- *A third rhino calf, rescued last October following a tiger attack, is also expected to be released back into Chitwan once she is deemed old enough and ready to take care of herself.*

KATHMANDU — Two rhino calves captured from the wild after being separated from their mothers in recent years have been released back into nature by Nepali officials.

The greater one-horned rhinos (*Rhinoceros unicornis*), both females that conservation officials named Pushpa and Anjali, were released into the Kasara area of Chitwan National Park, home to most of the country's rhinos, on May 14.

The rhinos had been [raised by the National Trust for Nature Conservation](#), a nonprofit organization that works with the government to conserve wildlife and natural resources, at its facility in the Sauraha area on the outskirts of the national park. "The duo was transported by truck to a wetland area near Kasara, where the park's headquarters is located, and released without using any tranquilizer," Maheshwar Dhakal, director-general of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, told Mongabay.

Pushpa was rescued in 2020 and Anjali in 2021. They were around two months old when they were found injured and abandoned by their mothers. "We have reasons to believe that Pushpa and Anjali were firstborns that didn't receive adequate care," Dr. Amir Sadoula, a veterinarian with the NTNC, told Mongabay earlier this year.

“The decision to release the rhinos into the wild was made by the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation after a committee of experts recommended us to do so,” Dhakal said.

Ganesh Pant, an ecologist at the department who was on the committee, said the team considered several options for the rhinos’ future, including keeping them in an enclosure within Chitwan National Park, moving them to other national parks with smaller rhino populations, or gifting them to foreign countries as part of Nepal’s “rhino diplomacy.” While some foreign countries informally requested the rhinos, none came up with a concrete proposal, according to the department.

Each option had its drawbacks, such as limiting the rhinos’ natural behavior, exposing them to predators or poachers, or depriving them of their native habitat. The committee ultimately decided that releasing them into Chitwan National Park was the best option, as it would give them a chance to adapt to their natural environment and join other rhinos in the park.

“Following the decision, we released the rhinos into the wild as they were growing fast and posed a danger to public safety,” Dhakal said. “The whole exercise was low-key and low-cost. We wanted to send a message that rewilding doesn’t have to be expensive to be successful.”

Chitwan National Park has 694 greater one-horned rhinos, according to a census conducted earlier this year. The park has been successful in conserving and increasing the rhino population over the years, despite threats from disease, natural disasters and poaching.

“We are constantly monitoring [Pushpa and Anjali’s] activities as they are close to the park headquarters and the security posts,” said Ganesh Tiwari, a spokesperson for Chitwan National Park.



The two rhinos likely face an uphill struggle to survive, as rhino translocations have a checkered record in Nepal. A total of 87 rhinos were moved from Chitwan to Bardiya National Park between 1986 and 2003, and another eight between March 2016 and April 2017. Those efforts were 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.

Authorities say they hope the latest release of rhinos, back into the same park from where they were born, will have a higher chance of success.

Following the translocation of Pushpa and Anjali, the NTNC still has one more female calf, Pooja, under its care at the Sauraha facility. Pooja was taken in in October last year after becoming separated from her mother during an attack by a tiger. Authorities say Pooja will also eventually be returned to the wild, just

like Pushpa and Anjali, if their release proves to be successful and after she becomes old enough to look after herself.