

Wild or not? Dilemma over two human-friendly rhinos in Nepal

by **Abhaya Raj Joshi** on 29 July 2023

- *Two female rhinos, raised in human care and later released in the wild, pose a threat to themselves and people, conservationists warn.*
- *The rhinos are vulnerable to poaching and human interference, as they are habituated to living with humans.*
- *Conservationists demand the removal of the rhinos to a safer place, while park officials hope they will adapt to the wilderness.*

KATHMANDU — Somlal Majhi, a resident of Patihani near Chitwan National Park in Nepal, has an unusual job. He is a herder of rhinos.

Majhi watches over two female greater one-horned rhinos (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) named Pushpa and Anjali. They were [released into the wild](#) by conservation authorities in May after years of human contact.

Although the rhinos attract tourists, who enjoy taking selfies with them, Majhi says they can damage crops if they aren't monitored.

But conservationists are alarmed by the presence of the rhinos in the area. They say they pose a risk to themselves and to people and urge officials to relocate them as soon as possible.

“Because they were used to humans, they started visiting nearby villages,” says Bed Khadka, a former park staffer and conservationist. “They need to be removed immediately,” he adds. “Their only shot at survival now is at a zoo in Nepal or abroad.”

The rhinos were rescued as calves in 2020 and 2021, when they were injured and abandoned by their mothers. They were [raised by the National Trust for Nature Conservation \(NTNC\)](#), a semigovernmental body, at its office in Sauraha, near the park. They were transported by truck to a wetland near the park's headquarters and released without tranquilizers.

“Poachers could easily bait and kill them for their horns,” Khadka adds.

Greater one-horned rhinos are classified as vulnerable by IUCN, the global conservation authority. Their horns are prized in traditional Chinese medicine, despite having no proven benefits. The illegal trade in their horns is their biggest threat. In January this year, a 14-year-old female rhino and her 4-year-old calf [were electrocuted](#) and the mother’s horn sawn off by poachers. Although the perpetrators were later arrested, poaching remains a constant threat.

The decision to release the rhinos was made by the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation after a committee recommended it over other options, such as keeping them in an enclosure, moving them to other parks or gifting them to foreign countries. The cost involved and the amount of stress the animals had to face were the deciding factors in the end.

But the release has attracted unwanted attention from tourists, who flock to take selfies with the rhinos without considering the risks. “They haven’t shown any aggression yet, but their animal instinct could kick in and hurt people,” says Shiv Raj Bhatta, former warden of Bardiya National Park.

Ganesh Tiwari, information officer at the park, says community members have set up fences to keep the rhinos away from the settlements. “They rarely come out of the jungle now. We hope they will adapt to living in the wild,” he says.

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

The NTNC still has one more female calf, Pooja, under its care at Sauraha. Pooja was separated from her mother during a tiger attack in October. Authorities say Pooja will also be returned to the wild when she is old enough. “She, too, can’t be rewilded now,” says Khadka.

Khadka recalls a rhino calf that had been raised in contact with humans was gifted to a zoo in Austria in 2006 after authorities concluded that it couldn’t be rewilded. “We need to do the same with Pushpa and Anjali and even Pooja,” he says.