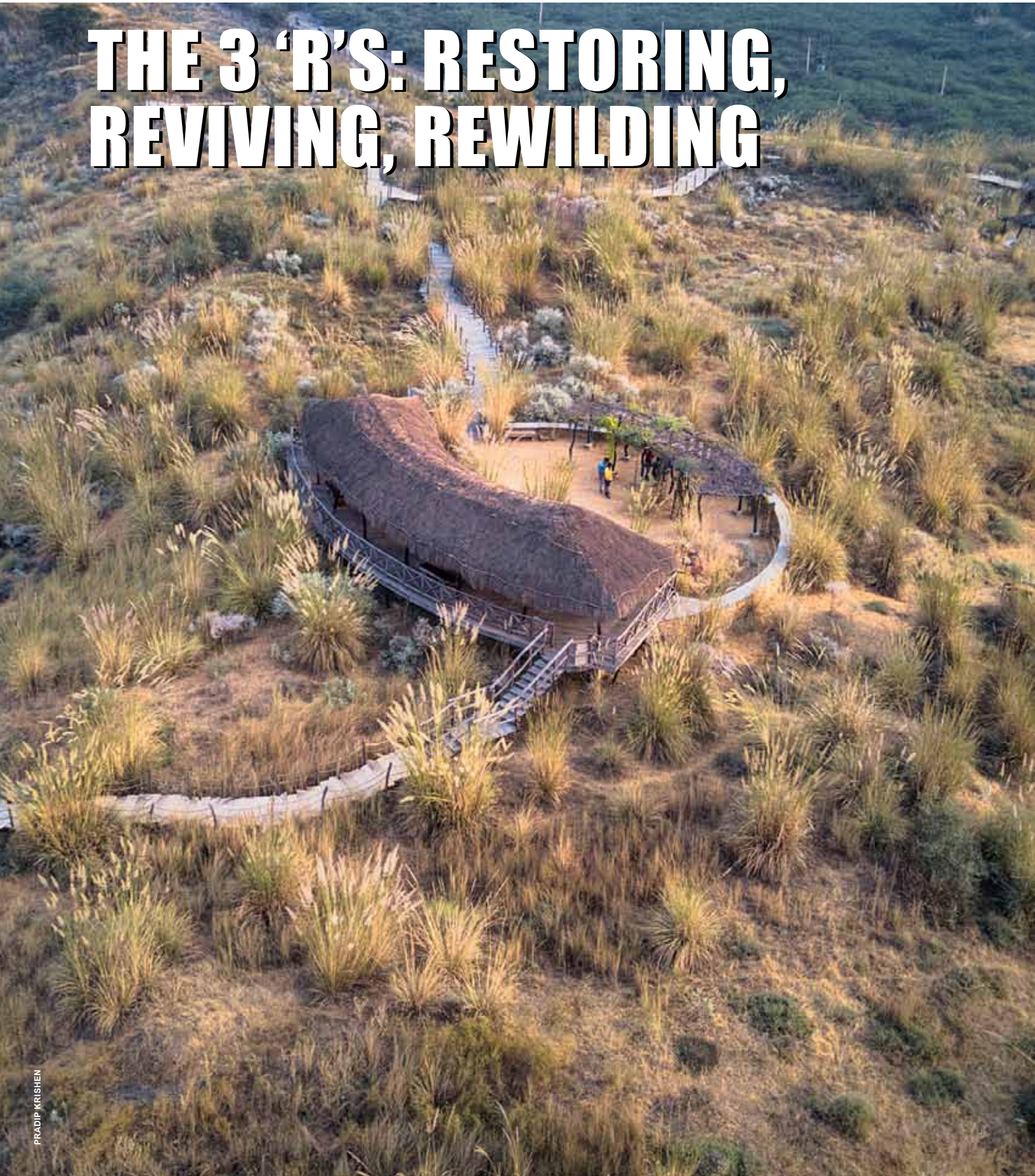


THE 3 'R'S: RESTORING, REVIVING, REWILDING



PRADIP KRISHEN



Rewilding is a fairly nascent phenomenon in India. The earliest known attempt at rewilding a species or habitat dates back to the 1930s, when Maharawal Lakshman Singh attempted to reintroduce tigers to Durgapur in Bengal. Another reintroduction of a large carnivore was attempted in 1958 when three Asiatic lions (a male and two females) were relocated from Gujarat to the Chandra Prabha Wildlife Sanctuary in Uttar Pradesh. In each of these cases, the big cats reproduced and the populations began to increase until, eventually, a lack of protection and monitoring, led to reduced protection, imbalanced predator-prey ratios and human-animal conflict.

However, there was more success in Manas, in Northeast India. Here, in 2008, the first rhino was reintroduced from the Kaziranga National Park. The battle to restore Manas was not easy. Alternative non-forest livelihoods were created, and poachers were encouraged and assisted to turn into protectors. Ensuring the well-being of the rhinos meant going beyond the animals themselves; it meant ensuring a healthy grassland, which in turn would provide good habitat for endangered species such as the pygmy hog and Bengal Florican. A decade and a half since the first rhino was reintroduced to Manas (see page 15), the success of the programme acts as a blueprint for other restoration and reintroduction projects, serving as a reminder of the importance of community involvement in any conservation effort. Today, local communities are proud and protective of 'their' rhinos – no doubt a leading cause of the success of the programme.

A lack of clear boundaries between Protected Areas and human-dominated landscapes in India and a propensity for mindless tree-planting, makes rewilding a complex uphill battle, requiring vision and nuanced policy making. Depicted here is a photographic compilation of some successful (and not-so-successful) attempts at rewilding landscapes and species in India.

Call of the (Re)Wild: Rewilding is eponymous with the name Pradip Krishen in India. His seminal work of 12 years is the stunning ecological restoration of the Rao Jodha Desert Rock Park in Jodhpur, Rajasthan. Pictured here is Kishan Bagh, another restoration project led by him in Jaipur since 2016. The restored *roee* landscape is a shrubland habitat native to the Thar desert. An elevated 800 m.-long wooden boardwalk gives an insight into the sand dune ecology, which includes various xerophytic plants, and desert animals, birds and insects.



A Desert Showcase: The same landscape, now restored (previous page), bears scant resemblance to its original, degraded (above) *avatar* eight years ago. Kishan Bagh is a sprawling sand dune-covered area nestled at the base of the Nahargarh hill, which likely acted as a barrier and allowed the sands to accumulate. Once a barren wasteland with nearly all shrubs and herbs grazed or trodden by livestock and wild animals, with a little care and much effort, the ravine-like landscape has metamorphosed into a showcase of the unique endemic desert ecosystem, in the heart of the city. An open-air museum, the restored site now educates locals and tourists on the importance of native desert species, their natural history and of our ability to work with nature to restore our biodiversity.



PRATIK BANERJEE/SANCTUARY PHOTO LIBRARY

Phoenix from the Ashes: What does it take to bring back a unicorn? Caught in the crossfire of human strife, the last one-horned rhino *Rhinoceros unicornis* disappeared from the Manas Tiger Reserve in 1996. Since then, with protection and community support, the magnificent Manas landscape, its biodiversity and the rhino have risen like the proverbial phoenix from the ashes. This miraculous recovery did not happen overnight – it took years of consistent effort, local community participation and involvement. The translocation of adult rhinos from other areas to Manas was only possible after its habitat was rewilded in the manner that emulated the strategies laid down by [Project Tiger](#).



SHRADDHA GOGOI

Going the Whole Hog: A tiny suid trundles through the dense grass, a symbol of international collaboration to preserve a species. The critically endangered [pygmy hog](#) *Porcula salvania* is the smallest and rarest species of pig in the world, endemic to the Indian subcontinent. Once feared extinct after going unreported for nearly two decades, it was 'rediscovered' in 1971 in two separate locations in Assam, including Manas National Park. However, left unprotected and with accelerated habitat, the species was extirpated from most of its range. A captive breeding programme was launched in 1995 in Manas, with six individual hogs. Over the ensuing decades, dozens of pygmy hogs have been reintroduced to the Sonai-Rupai and Barnadi Wildlife Sanctuaries, Orang National Park, and Manas – all natural habitats that were rewilded, or protected effectively. Today the population numbers around 250 mature individuals.



This *Bos* Needs Protection: The largest extant bovid species in the world, the gaur *Bos gaurus* inhabits evergreen, semi-evergreen and moist deciduous forests in India. Despite its large range, this, the largest wild ox in the world, is vulnerable to extinction. In fact, local extinctions took place in three Protected Areas in India – Thattekad Wildlife Sanctuary, Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve and Kanger Valley National Park – over the last two decades, indicating the urgent need to protect the species across its range. Gaur reintroduction projects have been taken up, including in the Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve in 2011. Megaherbivores such as gaur are important ecosystem engineers, playing several roles including the removal of invasive species.