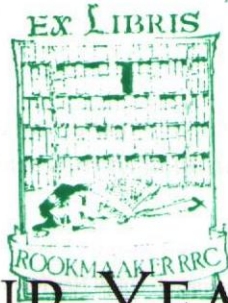


AN EXPERIENCE OF ANTI-POACHING OPERATIONS

FOUR YEARS
for the RHINO



Kamal Jung Kunwar



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KAMAL JUNG KUNWAR



Save the Rhino Foundation Nepal

Contents

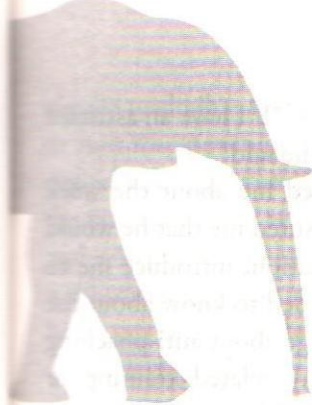
THE STRUGGLE FOR CONSERVATION	1
» First Operation	4
» News of Abduction on Radio	8
» Soldiers without Guns	11
» Betrayed by a Woman	14
» Zero Results	15
» Waiting for Poachers in the Wetlands	16
» Big Cash Haul	18
» Chained Ghost	21
» Notice to Flee	25
» Shot While Running	28
» Gold for the Informer	32
» Poacher of 17 Rhinos	34
» Prisoner Makes Good his Escape	38
» <i>Jeri</i> , Horn and Tiger Skin	41
» Escape in the Midst of Bullets	45
» Rhino Electrocuted	47
» Red Chilli Powder in Case...	49
» Tortoise in the Well	53
» Like Taliban's Tora Bora	54
» The Search for a Life Partner	57

» Poacher Escapes	58
» Father-in-law Gets Son-in-law Arrested	59
» Arrested while Selling Land	62
» Operation in Wedding Hall	63
» Smuggler Who Counted the Rosary	65
» A Line of Smugglers	67
» In Kathmandu Looking for Smugglers	68
» Rhino Poacher of a Different Kind	77
» Ecosystem	81
» Sad Death of a Colleague	89
» Horn in a Pot	90
» Notorious Poacher	92
» Bihari in a Net	99
» A Photo Helps	107
» Colonel's Eccentricity	109
» Disclosure of Bribery	112
» Poachers to Arrest Smugglers	116
» Friend Buried Alive	120
» Three Generations of Rhino Poachers	123
» \$26,000 for a Horn	125
» Keeping Watch of the Restaurant	127
» Abraham Conservation Award	129
» Not a Tiger, but a Jackal	130
» Grand House	136
» Axe under the Pillow	140
» It's a Woman!	143
» Sweet Music before an Operation	145
» <i>Laddu</i> in Both Hands	147
» Poacher against Poacher	149

» In Hetauda Looking for Smugglers	152
» Poacher Flees	157
» Of Tiger Skins and Bones in Langtang	160
» Suicide to Save a Smuggler	164
» Tiger Skin Hidden in a Rickshaw	167
» Trouble with Lieutenant Colonel	169
» The CDO's Plan	173
» The Wrong Call	174
» Bag of Tensions	179
» Rhino Carcass	183
» Fight with Poachers	185
» Coming Quietly, Unknowingly	188
» Dead Rhino on a Website	190
» For a Stronger Case	198
» Secret Path	200
» Partnership in Jail	202
» Pricing a Tiger Skin	204
» Commando of the Park	206
» Dramatic Fight	210
JAILED FOR NO REASON	214
» Threats from Jail	216
» Looking for Smugglers in India	218
» Bad Luck	223
» Conspiracy All Around	225
» Revolt against Injustice	234
» Murder Case	237
» Astonishing Verdict	240

JAIL DIARY	244
» Thursday, July 27	245
» Friday, July 28	246
» Saturday, July 29	247
» Sunday, July 30	248
» Monday, July 31	249
» Tuesday, August 1	249
» Wednesday, August 2	251
» Friday, August 18	251
» Monday, August 21	252
» Friday, September 15	253
» Friday, September 22	254
» Saturday, September 23	254
» Monday, September 25	255
» Friday, September 29	255
» Monday, October 2	255
» Friday, October 13	256
» Thursday, October 19	257
» Friday, October 20	258
» Wednesday, October 25	258
» Tuesday, October 31	258
» Wednesday, November 22	259
» Saturday, November 25	262
» Monday, November 27	262
» Thursday, December 14	266
» Tuesday, December 26	267
» Tuesday, February 27, 2007	268
» After being Released from Jail	272

THE WEB OF RHINO HORN SMUGGLING	275
» Why Rhino Horn Smuggling?	275
» Aaptari Incident	277
» Horn Smugglers and Maoists	280
» Leaders in Horn Smuggling	283
» Smuggling Rings	286
» Horns and the Royal Palace	287
RHINOS IN NEPAL AND ATTEMPTS TO CONSERVE THEM	288
» Concept of National Parks	288
» Protected Areas in Nepal	291
» Asian One-horned Rhino	292
» Challenge to Rhino Conservation	296
» Efforts at Conservation	298
» Biodiversity and Eco-tourism	301
GLOSSARY	302
ACRONYMS	307



The Struggle for Conservation

HAVING COMPLETED my tenure as officiating chief warden of the Sagarmatha National Park, I returned to Kathmandu in January 2003. The director-general of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation called me over and told me: "I am sending you to a good place. The rhinos in Chitwan are getting killed everyday, I am deputing you there, do a good job."

I answered in the positive. But I could not understand why the director-general called Chitwan a 'good' place.

My deputation papers were soon ready, and I was ready to start work as an assistant warden of the Chitwan National Park. I was to work as coordinator of the Anti-poaching Operation Unit there. My well-wishers were worried and told me about the high rate of rhino deaths in Chitwan and advised me to be careful since it was a risky job. I, however, had already made my resolve to carry out my duties to the best of my ability. I was glad to have had the opportunity to carry out the challenging and important task of conserving such a rare and endangered animal. I took my papers and left Kathmandu in the second week of February. Surya Bahadur Pandey, an officer from the Department of National Parks, a clerk and I left Kathmandu together in an office vehicle.

When we reached the park headquarters, it was already evening. We went to meet Chief Warden Puranbhakta Shrestha

who was very pleased at having me there. "If I have an assistant like you, we can surely save the rhinos," he said.

The chief warden and Pandey briefed me about the work involved in anti-poaching. The chief assured me that he would soon give me all the necessary information, introduce me to the informers and tell me all that I needed to know about the work. At that point, I had no knowledge about anti-poaching activities. I had never undergone any related training or participated in any workshop. I just had with me my experience of working in the different protected areas and their buffer zones and ways of achieving active people's participation in managing the protected areas.

Pandey took me to see places like Sauraha and Khagendramalli of the park. The people, the places and even the job were all new to me, and yet the staff all seemed hopeful in having me. "Now that you are here, maybe there will be some progress," they said. I too told myself: one day I will control the poaching activities and not allow any rhino to die an unnatural death.

I was not familiar with the places and roads of Chitwan. Yet, I was motivated to accomplish this challenging task. The times were not good. The activities of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) in the district were alarming, and everyday we got to hear of their growing influence. However, that made no difference to my resolution. I had no worries on that count, I was just worried about how I would save the rhinos.

When I first came to Chitwan, poaching was at its peak. My simple desire or my gentle requests would not be enough to stop the activity. Everyday I would just hope that no rhino would be killed that day or not have to hear of their deaths. But contrary to my hopes, the rhinos continued to be killed. I was discouraged. When a state of emergency was declared in the country in 2001, the 33 army posts in the park were merged for reasons of security and reduced to seven. Army patrolling was

almost negligible. In the office, I found no network to control or monitor poaching activities. Neither was the surveillance network strong or adequate. We never understood from where the poachers came, who they were, how they killed the rhinos and where they went. We just got to hear terrible news of a rhino being killed, a horn or a hoof gone missing, the tail being cut off, a bleeding rhino on the run or of a gunshot in broad daylight. But we were unable to locate the dead body of the rhino even after hours of search.

At normal times, the army battalion in Chitwan has 850 soldiers. Besides, 300 civil servants are posted at the park itself, of whom 140 look after the elephants while the remaining 160 make up park technicians and administrative staff.

The park's technical staff comprise the chief warden, assistant wardens, rangers, senior game scouts, game scouts, veterinary doctors and compounders.

The locals are employed by the park as informers when necessary. Some of them are eager to help in the conservation efforts and work for the park voluntarily without payment. Many of the informers themselves must have previously been involved in some way in buying and selling rhino horns and tiger skins and bones. Some of them change their course after being penalised for smuggling and realise the wrong they have done. They begin to understand that conservation is the right approach and work as informers for a salary. However, some tend to be cunning. They work for the smugglers and the park at the same time, and the park has no way of suspecting them. The informers enjoy negligible facilities. Yet they must work all month long even though they might not receive a monthly salary. The park, however, pays for their food, lodging and telephone calls while at work, provided they are successful. If they are unsuccessful, the informers might, however, have to pay for these services out of their own pocket.

Since the informers receive minimum wages and facilities from the park, sometimes they could be tempted to act as double agents if the smugglers pay them more. Traditionally, they have always been employed as and when needed instead of on a permanent basis or on a contract basis. While they are given no training and there are no programmes to build their capacities, sometimes they are fired if the park officials do not like them and may not be paid for months. But they could be given bonuses if they worked well.

The informers are mostly managed by the assistant warden, rangers and other park officials. They are mostly answerable to the Anti-poaching Unit. Many a time, they come up to say what they have unearthed, while at other times, the park asks them to find out about individuals who have been named by the arrested poachers. The informers' responsibilities are assigned according to their location, situation, capacity and previous knowledge.

FIRST OPERATION

ON FEBRUARY 16, 2003, the chief warden opened his secret diary and asked me to note down the names of the people he wanted me to arrest. The list included 24 poachers and a few smugglers and brokers. I had all the names now, but I was worried as to how and where I would arrest them.

Shriranga Kandel, a *mukhiya* of our team, was very skilled in anti-poaching operations. He possessed deep knowledge besides long years of experience working on this job. He was also very diligent, brave and dedicated. "I have just asked a few informers to go after three persons," he said. "If you give me some money, I will meet the informers right now and make the arrangements."

I gave him Nepali rupees worth \$21, and he sped towards Narayangadh on his bike.

At around 5 in the evening, we received a message: "The target

is at home, we go at night to arrest him."

From Kasara, a team comprising army personnel and park officials left in two vehicles for the Laukhani post. Rangers Madhav Khadka and Rupak Maharjan, *mukhiya* Shriranga and a few others also joined our team. Also with us was poacher Nara Bahadur B.K. to show us where his friends lived. On February 5, Nara Bahadur had been arrested after five rhinos were killed in just three months in the community forest where he served as a forest guard.

Also in our team was the chief warden. The National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1973 empowers the chief warden with discretionary powers to decide on lawsuits and cases within the park. In such circumstances, whether or not it was right for the chief warden himself to be part of the mission to arrest criminals is debatable. However, it was certainly not unethical for him to accompany us as the chief warden and not as a judge.

For the first time in my life, I was part of a mission to arrest a rhino poacher. At 9 p.m., we moved east from Laukhani towards Daldale. After proceeding a little further north from Daldale, we spotted a house on the left side of the road. My colleagues confirmed that this was the very house. They got off from the jeep and surrounded the house. They were obviously experienced in such operations. We all took our positions. Madhav and Rupak opened the door of the house. I, too, entered the house with them. There was no one on the ground floor. We climbed to the first floor where we found a boy of about 11, a woman and a small girl sleeping.

After waking up the woman, I asked her, "Where is your husband?"

"He has been in India since the past six months," she said.

"He was here in the afternoon, how can he be in India now?"

"Really he has gone to India," she said.

"Isn't this Mahato's house?" I asked her.

The boy answered, "No, this is our house, and I am not a Mahato by caste."

"Which is Mahato's house then?" I asked.

"It is that wooden house up there."

We got out in a hurry. In a flash, the rangers were on the first floor of the wooden house and had arrested a man - Buddhi Bahadur Mahato. His wife and children started crying.

We returned to Narayangadh at around 11 at night with Buddhi Bahadur. Our vehicle turned towards Kshetrapur area to arrest another smuggler there. When the house was ascertained, we surrounded it from all sides. We had information that the man we wanted lived on the first floor of the three-storied building. But its channel gate was locked. So we roused the person sleeping in a room next to the gate and asked him for the key. He handed over the key without any objection, probably because he was scared to see so many of us. In our team of over 20 people, many were soldiers. The rangers too were of heavy build and had loud, fearsome voices.

We opened the lock and went upstairs. We searched all rooms. The door of a room facing east was closed. Before opening the door, we tried to see if a person might be able to escape from there. After that, we forced it open. Inside was the man we had been looking for.

We addressed him by his name: "Are you Prem B.K.?" On hearing our query, he suddenly got up in a furious manner.

Startled, his wife started crying, "Why, what has happened?"

Prem consoled her while he wore his pants. "Don't cry, leave me alone, let me die, I will go, let whatever must happen, happen." He understood why we had come for him in the middle of the night. His kids too woke up and started wailing, wanting to know what was happening. One son, however, stood quietly

without any reaction. Probably he was aware of his father's illegal activities. We searched the whole room, including the cabinet and bed, but found nothing.

We took Prem along in the vehicle and went to Kasara.

"Our operation was 100 per cent successful," said Madhav.

I too was overjoyed to think that the first mission of which I was a part had been successful.

After we had crossed the Bharatpur Cancer Hospital and were heading towards Kasara, Madhav started questioning Prem.

"Yes, I sold a horn," he opened up.

"You sold five of them."

He denied it, and Madhav delivered a tight slap.

"Yes, I sold three of them," he admitted.

Madhav was not satisfied. "No, you are still lying about the other two horns."

He refused to admit it for quite some time, but after more questioning and threats, he confessed to having sold all five of them.

At that moment, I felt very proud at having nabbed such a dangerous criminal in my very first attempt with the help of *mukhiya* Shriranga. Actually Prem B.K. was nabbed on the basis of information provided by Nara Bahadur B.K. Nara Bahadur had accused Prem of taking away the horns of all the five rhinos that had been killed while he was the forest guard of the buffer zone community forest.

At Kasara, we again started questioning Prem. He revealed that the owner of Atma Glass Centre in Narayangadh had introduced him to a man from Manang, Gyamjo. His testimony revealed that Gyamjo, who used to stay at the Rhino Hotel in Narayangadh, was the one who used to smuggle the rhino horns.

However, Prem informed us that Gyamjo had died of a heart attack six months ago and that his brother came periodically

to collect the horns. He even gave us the person's description, address and phone number. Prem had previously lived in his flat in Kathmandu upon learning that we were keeping track of him. He had returned from Kathmandu on February 15 when Gyamjo's brother had assured him there would be no one to bother him.

Prem claimed that this brother of Gyamjo was the one who spearheaded the business, and we would know everything if we arrested him. As he apprised us of the dangers of the situation by informing us that Gyamjo's brother knew a lot of bigwigs, he seemed very scared. He pleaded for his life as Gyamjo's brother had threatened to kill him if he ever mentioned his name to the authorities.

We decided to send two rangers to Kathmandu to find out about this smuggler. They had with them his personal details, address and phone number. But after a few days, they returned empty-handed.

Prem Bahadur had mentioned that he had given a horn to Chandrakanta Pandey from Dhading, Chhatre-Deurali, who owned a vegetable shop at Kalimati, Kathmandu. Chandrakanta frequently came to Kawasoti to buy vegetables. So an informer obtained Chandrakanta's address from a vegetable dealer at Kawasoti and went to Kathmandu with a friend. There, he met Chandrakanta on some silly pretext, arrested him and brought him to Chitwan in a reserved microbus. An informer who takes such initiatives must be rewarded. However, whether an informer should be given such authority is something one should decide for oneself.

NEWS OF ABDUCTION ON RADIO

ON MARCH 12, we received news that the owner of Atma Glass Centre, the broker who did business with Gyamjo's brother, was in his shop. At 6 in the morning, I, *mukhiya* Shiranga and

a few army personnel set off for Narayangadh. We parked our jeep near Shahid Chowk, and we decided that I, the *mukhiya* and an army man would go to see if the man was in the shop. The market was quite busy. When it was ascertained that the man was there, we signalled to the other colleagues to come closer. I went inside and asked the man, "Are you the owner of this shop?"

"Yes, why do you ask?" he replied.

"I want to buy some corrugated sheets," I answered.

"How many?"

"Four or five bundles."

"Sure, I will give them to you at a good price."

"By the way what is your name?" I asked him at this point.

"Why do you ask?" he queried.

"My friend knows you, and he told me that you would give me at a reasonable price."

I conjectured this to be the person Prem B.K. had indicated. But still, I was making small talk to make sure he was the person. Should we apprehend an innocent man by mistake, the criminal might elude arrest forever. So it was very important that we were sure we were arresting the right person.

"Come with us for a while," I requested.

"Why?"

"Just come," I insisted.

I had instructed the driver to have the vehicle near the shop once I entered and its engine running, as I would be there only to get the man.

The shopkeeper was resisting our efforts to take him. So I told him frankly, "We have come to take you. Don't resist if you do not want to lose face in society." And so he came quietly with us.

It was not good for us to hang around the place for long. I was a stranger to Narayangadh and did not know the sentiments

of the locals. So we left immediately. On the way, we started questioning him. The man denied everything at first. "I am sick, please don't harm me," he kept repeating.

Immediately upon leaving, FM radios began blaring news that a shopkeeper had been kidnapped in such and such a vehicle. There was even an investigation from the administration office. We later found out that a motorcycle had tailed us from Narayangadh to Prembasti village and had given our vehicle number to a FM station.

The rhino horn broker's name turned out to be Nagendra Shrestha. After we had handed him over to the park office, the park officials started getting phone calls saying that he was a sick man. The chief warden too received such phone calls. As a result, he instructed us not to be very strict with him. I myself was busy with my work and could not interrogate him.

I later learnt that *subba* Uttam Prasad Kharel had changed Nagendra's statement to the court (park office) more than three times, which is illegal. According to the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1973, there is provision for a semi-judicial authority in the Park Offices and District Forest Offices. My legal knowledge was limited to the 30 credit hours of a law course that I had undergone at the Institute of Forestry, Pokhara at the intermediate level. We learnt about the legal investigation and other court procedures through experience.

A lot of noise was made over the arrest of Nagendra. Many people were happy that finally a dangerous criminal had been apprehended. Several people were of the opinion that he was the ringleader of the horn business in Narayangadh and that must have been how he had been able to earn a lot of money and build such a big house.

Different people said different things, but in his statement, Nagendra only owned up to receiving \$413. I, too, had felt that we had nabbed an important criminal, but we couldn't get

much information out of him. I was new, had no knowledge of the methods to make criminals confess and, besides, could not interview him properly as he was not well.

One fine morning, an uncle of mine visited me. After chatting for a while, he said, "Sita *didi* has asked to see you."

The next day I went to Narayangadh to pay her a visit. Her son, my nephew, had just opened the Munch Time Café. In the cafe, my sister introduced me to Nagendra's brother-in-law. There was no need to object, and we chatted over coffee.

"I have heard that you decide everything in the office, and your word is all that is needed for a decision. People did offer to resolve the problem for \$13,774, but I wasn't convinced and decided to meet you instead," said Nagendra's brother-in-law.

I got the idea - he was trying to send me two messages: first, that he was willing to spend any amount of money to free his brother-in-law, and second, he was expecting me to do the job. I, however, would never accept a bribe and let a rhino horn smuggler go free.

I warned him against mentioning anything like a bribe to me so casually and told him, "I cannot do this. Do not try to meet me from now on. Your brother-in-law must suffer his fate as per the law."

He did not try to meet me after that. However, that one meeting clearly revealed how conspirators bribed officials into freeing smugglers. Also, why would someone be willing to spend \$13,774 to free a person who had just "once received \$413?" That just went to show how deeply Nagendra was involved in the rhino horn smuggling business.

SOLDIERS WITHOUT GUNS

MARCH 18 HAPPENED to be *Fagu Purnima*, or *Holi*, the Festival of Colours. Our informer from Makwanpur district informed us that the man wanted by us was in his house that