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## Conservationists urge caution as Nepal to gift more rhinos to China

by **Abhaya Raj Joshi** on 30 September 2023

- *Nepal has committed to providing a pair of one-horned rhinos to China, as one gifted in 2018 died due to stomach ailments.*
- *Conservationists say orphaned rhino calves raised in human contact are best for this purpose.*
- *Separating rhino calves from their mothers should be the last option, conservationists say.*

KATHMANDU — As Nepal commits to gifting two more greater one-horned rhinos (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) to China, conservationists have called on authorities to exercise caution while selecting individual animals for the purpose.

The decision to gift the rhinos was made during Nepal Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's visit to Beijing this week.

"The Nepali side pledged to provide the Chinese side a pair of *Ek Singhe Gaida* (unicorn rhino) as a gift from the Government and people of Nepal to the Government and people of China, as a symbol for the long-lasting friendship between the two countries," said a joint statement.

In 2018, Nepal gifted two pairs of rhinos, named Mitinee and Solti and Bhadra and Rupasi, to China. While Mitinee and Solti found a new home at the Shanghai Wild Animal Park, Bhadra and Rupasi found theirs in Chimelong Safari Park, Guangzhou.

"Orphaned rhino calves that have grown in close contact with humans are the best candidates for gifting to zoos," said conservationist Bed Kumar Khadka. Such rhinos have a lower chance of attacking people and are already adapted to eating human food, he added.

All four rhinos were in their early stages of life when they were separated from their mothers in the jungle to be flown to China.

If a pair is to be selected from the wild, it presents a challenge of its own, said Khadka, who was involved in capturing the rhinos sent to China five years ago.

According to Nepal's 2021 rhino census, Chitwan National Park is home to 694 rhinos, Bardiya National Park in the west has 38, Shuklaphanta National Park, also in the west, has 17, and Parsa National Park, adjacent to Chitwan, has three.

"The zoos want calves that can grow at their facility. So we need to separate the newborns from their mothers," he added. "At times, I even cried and asked myself why I was doing that," he told Mongabay.

After Mitinee became lonely following Solti's death due to "stomach ailments" in 2020, the Chinese government requested that Nepal provide a single male rhino to replace Solti.

However, Prime Minister Dahal committed to providing a pair of rhinos, an official at the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation said.

Nepal has so far provided around two dozen one-horned rhino pairs to the U.S., India, Germany, Bangladesh, the U.K., Japan and Austria.

Rhinos from different species, including the greater one-horned rhinos, are still hunted for their horns, believed to have medical properties in traditional practices in some countries in Southeast Asia and beyond.

The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation said it has yet to figure out which rhino to send to China. In the past, it had formed an expert group to decide the sourcing of the rhinos.