

Nepal's rhinos on road to recovery with cross-country move

April 10 2017, by Annabel Symington



A rhino charges a Nepalese forestry and technical team after being released as part of a relocation project in Shuklaphanta National Park

All hell broke loose as the one-horned rhino stepped out of the crate, the powerful male charging elephant-mounted mahouts relocating him to a new home in Nepal's far west in the hope of shoring up the vulnerable species.

The cantankerous male—whose single horn keeps him in the crosshairs of wildlife poachers—is the first to be relocated to Shuklaphanta National Park but will be joined by four females of breeding age.

Finding suitable rhinos for the ambitious relocation program is a marathon effort for the 100-strong team.

Atop elephants they set off at dawn in Chitwan National Park, communicating in brief shouts and hand signals as they fan out across the plain and into the dense jungle.

Thousands of one-horned rhinos once roamed the southern plains of Nepal but rampant poaching and pressures of human encroachment reduced their numbers to around 100 in the later part of last century.

A successful anti-poaching and conservation initiative has seen the population steadily climb over the past decade to around 645.

But new blood was needed in Shuklaphanta National Park, currently home to about eight rhinos, to protect the country's population against threats, said Dr Kanchan Thapa, a biologist from conservation group WWF.

A young female is the first rhino spotted—a prime candidate—but as she emerges from the dense bush, a young calf of about nine months follows her out.

Nepal rhino

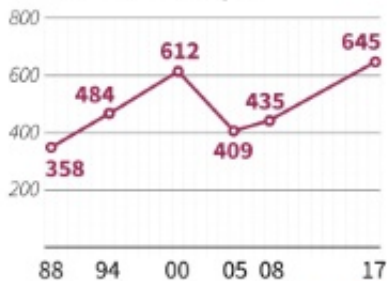


Greater one-horned rhinoceros
Rhinoceros unicornis

Conservation status:
Vulnerable

Total population:
Around 2,000 in India and Nepal

Conservation in Nepal



Source: WWF Nepal



Just 2,000 one-horned rhinos remain in India and Nepal

Her calf—which will stay with its mother until it is around two years old—counts her out of the move. The search continues.

Painstaking process

More than three hours later, an excited whisper goes around as another rhino is spotted: a huge male.

The elephants encircle it, slowly encouraging him towards a marksman waiting perched in a tree with a tranquilizer dart gun.

It is a painstaking process: one wrong move could startle the 2-tonne male into charging the elephants or slipping back into the forest.



Conservationists are trying to increase the number of vulnerable one-horned rhinos, which are prized by wildlife poachers

He moves slowly towards the open plain where the marksman waits, almost veering out of range before coming to a stop within striking distance.

The dart hits the rhino in its flank. It breaks into a run but his lumbering strides gradually slow until he falls to his knees about 100 metres away.

The vets attach a satellite collar around his neck and take blood samples before a dozen men roll him onto a sledge. A tractor is needed to shift him into a crate before the convoy begins a 15-hour overnight journey to his new home.

It is midmorning by the time the truck reaches Shuklaphanta National Park in the far southwestern corner of Nepal.

Anticipation builds as the crate is opened, revealing the vast backside of a sleeping rhino. Despite the long journey, he initially appears reluctant to budge.



A Nepalese veterinary and technical team collar and collect samples from a darted rhino in Chitwan National Park, south of Kathmandu

But lumbering out of the crate, he suddenly springs to life and charges the truck, butting it a few times with his horn before turning his attention to three elephants standing nearby.

Ploughing headlong into the trio, the rhino leaves a deep gash on the backside of one elephant, panicking the beasts as the mahouts on top try to regain calm.

The rhino stormed into the forest and out of sight, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake.

'Like my father'

The arduous—and often unpredictable—task of relocating these rare animals will be replicated at least 30 times over the next few years, as the government repopulates Shuklaphanta and another reserve in Bardia with new rhinos.



A sedated rhino is loaded up for relocation in a program that will see five of the animals released in a national park in Nepal's far west

The growing population of greater one-horned rhinos—found only in Nepal and India—prompted the International Union for Conservation of Nature to remove the species from its endangered list in 2008.

But the illegal trade of [rhino horns](#), which are prized in China and Southeast Asia for their supposed medicinal properties, remains a real threat.

Only three [rhinos](#) have been killed by poachers in Nepal in the last four years — the most recent on Saturday.

But poachers would quickly return if vigilance dropped, said 72-year-old Gam Bahdhur Tamang, a retired member of Nepal's first rhino protection patrol set up by the then-king in 1959.

He spent 31 years patrolling the plains of Chitwan and says he caught around 25 poachers himself. Still today, he prays everyday for the safety of his flock.

"When a rhino dies I feel it like it was my father."



A rhino is released in Shuklaphanta National Park, part of a group scientists hope will become a new breeding group

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Citation: Nepal's rhinos on road to recovery with cross-country move (2017, April 10) retrieved 16 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-04-nepal-rhinos-road-recovery-cross-country.html>

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