

Rhino conservation in Nepal creates a burden for communities, infrastructure and other species, study warns

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Meghauli. Credit: Michelle Szydlowski

Efforts to conserve rhinos in Nepal have put a burden on communities, infrastructure and other wildlife in Nepal, a new study warns.

Successful anti-poaching and conservation campaigns in the country have resulted in increases in tourist numbers and rhino populations, but also increased incidences of human and animal casualties.

Locals from the area reported being proud to share spaces with [rhinos](#), and wanting to live together with them, but were aware of the dangers. People who faced crop loss or fatality were overwhelmingly negative about living with rhinos; however, they still "strongly" supported conservation legislation. They reported widescale dissatisfaction with the official compensation scheme for losses suffered.

The study, by Michelle Szydlowski, from the University of Exeter, is published in the *Journal of Ecotourism* and is the result of observations in Sauraha, Nepal. It describes the "disconnect" of people, especially tourists, wanting to "save" [wild animals](#) but also having a lack of consideration of their behavior. The same people fail to consider the cost to other species who have to adapt to live with the rhinos.

Dr. Szydlowski, who has worked in rhino conservation and elephant health and welfare in Nepal for the past decade, said, "Hand-reared individuals bring in tourists, and while tourism may provide much-needed community income, it also creates a burden on existing infrastructure and may further commodify wildlife or encourage the conversion of wild habitats into tourist housing, restaurants, and shops.

"Nepal's success in protecting native rhinos has led to increases in human-

rhino conflict and changing perspectives on who has the greatest claim to anthropocentric spaces. As rhino and [human populations](#) continue to grow, there is a need to reconsider the impacts of tourism.

"The rhinos have moved beyond their physical and species boundaries to exist alongside humans in shared landscapes. Perhaps it is time to reexamine this parallel existence and find new ways to truly coexist within such communities."

Dr. Szydlowski interviewed members of the local community near Chitwan National Park, nature guides, tourists, National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) staff, and government employees. She also collected information about the animals and how they had been cared for and kept in touch with interviewees for a year afterwards.

The presence of human infrastructure has not deterred rhinos—whether human-reared or wild—from using the farms, gardens, or streets of town as quick passageways. Locals post videos of passing rhinos on social media, hoping to encourage tourists to visit their shops and hotels.

Mostly wild rhinos pay little attention to shop or hotel guests as they pass through town, and most are not considered dangerous. Locals said males made a noise when they didn't want to interact, but wild females, particularly with young, were more unpredictable.

Injuries and fatalities from wild rhino occur when humans enter the rhinos' [habitat](#), not the other way around. Since 1998, rhinos have been responsible for 55 human fatalities and 180 injuries in the area.

Indigenous human populations that once lived within the area now were forcibly relocated when governmental focus shifted toward [wildlife conservation](#). These populations now face the greatest number of fatalities from negative encounters with wildlife.

Dr. Szydlowski said, "Zones have been set aside for local use; they rarely produce enough to support the number of people living there, nor are local people involved in decision making or land-use planning. People living there reported feeling that they were 'less important' than [local wildlife](#), and experience increasing competition with wildlife for land, forest products, and funding.

"While entering the [national park](#) itself for survival provisioning (fodder, firewood, gravel, etc.) is now illegal, many families have little choice but to continue. While attacks by wildlife which take place outside the park are compensated via governmental relief schemes, human injuries and deaths which take place within the park are not covered, increasing the burden on marginalized populations."

More information: Michelle Szydlowski, Renegotiating citizenship: stories of young rhinos in Nepal, *Journal of Ecotourism* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/14724049.2022.2139833](#)

Provided by University of Exeter

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