

Crisis to Biological Management

Rhinoceros, grasslands and public engagement Nepal

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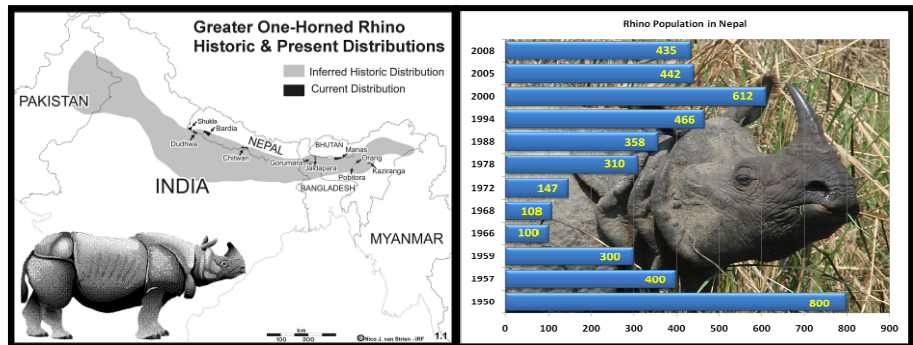
Wildlife Trade:

- Is the primary threat to rhinos worldwide
- Thrives in insecure environments
- Can only be stopped by a combination of effective law enforcement and community support.



Conservation in Nepal – country in crisis

Nepal is emerging from over a decade of conflict and virtual civil war. The ceasefire in 2006 provided a window of opportunity during which ZSL, through the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) and with funding support from the Darwin Initiative, started work in the lowland Terai on rhino and their habitat. At the beginning road blocks, barbed wire and military encampments were everywhere and large parts of the country were effectively controlled by Maoist rebels. The National Parks were no-go areas. The army, mandated to protect wildlife, had withdrawn leaving a vacuum; poaching was rampant and habitat degradation severe, with alien invasive plants. Both rhino and tiger declined rapidly. Initial priorities were halting rhino decline and beginning to address habitat issues and engage with the public, harnessing their help in resolving the crisis.



Local extinction looms for a large number of vertebrates as pressures on habitats and poaching increase, a direct result of human population growth. The greater one horned rhino is a good example. Its fate seemed sealed decades ago but intensive efforts by conservationists in Nepal and India over decades brought it back from the brink. So successful was the work predicted that this rhino was down-listed in the Endangered species tables in 2008. But this was premature, and evidence for rapid decline of the rhino in Nepal since 2000 has come to light through the project. The extinction threat

A challenging task

Global experience shows that rhinoceros species can be recovered through a combination of actions. Securing the habitat, intensive standardised and institutionalized monitoring, scientific GPS-based distribution records and establishment of an accessible database for analysis, reporting and decision making are the first actions for recovery. The monitoring provides essential information on habitat, population trends, animal home ranges and behavior, enabling instigation of step two; effective protection measures and biological management. This can only be sustained if the resources are available and capacity developed and, most importantly, only if the communities around the protected areas are integrated into protection and management and are accepting of rhino in the landscape. To achieve this given the social and political circumstances was a challenge.

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Achievements to date

The project is now in its third year and has made significant progress despite the turmoil, notably;

- A newly standardized National rhino census has been completed and regular scientific monitoring established in Bardia and Chitwan National Parks
- Rhino poaching has been halted in BNP. A new system of anti-poaching is being established, and if effective will become the model for the country.
- Much of the success has been due to increased engagement with the buffer communities through livelihood support, addressing human wildlife conflict, and education and awareness raising.
- Considerable influence on future policy has resulted from the lessons learned in the areas of anti-poaching and protection methods, alien invasive species control and grassland management and on rhino meta-population management, considering different management models including a sanctuary approach.

Where next for Nepal's rhinos

Our work has so far had the desired impact, but the question of sustainability given the ongoing political uncertainties in Nepal remains. External involvement is going to be needed for some years to come to ensure the survival of the few remaining Terai grasslands and their endangered wildlife. ZSL will continue its support, and our key initiative for the future will bring human and animal survival under one roof. The One Health Nepal project, building on the success of animal health clinics around Chitwan in the 1990s, will deal with environmental, wildlife, domestic animal and human health issues in an integrated system. Activities will include tackling alien plant species invasion into prime habitat and combination of human and veterinary health-care systems in buffer zones. Rhino, like tiger, are a flagship species for their habitats, requiring large ranges for viable populations and able to attract conservation funding. ZSL's focus on the rhino will help to ensure that many other animals—and humans—will also benefit.



More Information

For more information on this project please contact
Dr Richard Kock (Richard.kock@zsl.org or Dr Rajan Amin (rajan.amin@zsl.org)
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भारतीय वन्यजीव संस्थान
Wildlife Institute of India



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