

Wildlife Times

Dark days for RHINOS

If Nepal is known for something else, apart from Mt Everest and Lumbini, it must be rhinos. This small country is a proud habitat of around 400 rhinos, despite all the threats the mammals are facing nowadays. This must be the reason that the government as well as non-government institutions in Nepal have been showing special interest for conservation of this one-horned mammals, at least in past several decades.

Rhino conservation efforts

Nepal used to possess over 800 rhinos in 1950s. The number was halved in seven years – there were only 400 rhinos in 1957. The number turned mere 100 by the year 1966. Then it grew in exemplary rate, thanks to joint efforts of the government and the international conservation institutions. Conservation became a glorious issue when the government decided to make Chitwan a national park in 1973. By the year 2000, it became 612. This was the time when the government came up with creative ideas like translocation of rhinos. A total of 87 rhinos were translocated from Chitwan National Park (CNP) to Bardia National Park (BNP) and Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve (SWR) from 1986 to 2003. It was an endeavour to expand rhino populations and their habitat in other protected areas as well.

The Rhino Count -1994 recorded a population size of 466, which later increased to 544 individuals in Rhino Count-2000 in CNP alone. This indeed was an award for Nepal's successful conservation campaign.

The decline

However, new millennium brought dark days for rhinos. Along with the encroachment in rhino habitats and rampant poaching, the population of rhinos came under a constraint threat. The number of 612 rhinos of 2000 reduced to 446 in 2005.

Whenever the conservationists talk about rhino population, they are hardly univocal. Some institutions try



Knut Erik Helle/2003

to make it an issue by bringing hidden information forward, while the government, as usual, does its best to hide the most apparent issues. Thus, the rhino statistics cannot avoid going through controversies. At present, it is estimated that CNP owns as many as 372 rhinos while it is all uncertain to say anything about the rhino population in BNP as some has doubted whether there are any rhino left, while the government is still claiming there are as many as 86.

Market

The poaching of rhino is on because there is market. Nepal has been quoted among international seminars as a safe haven to international trade of rhino horns. It is informed that top-level politicians make pressure to the security to have the convicted poachers released. Though the shooters and killers get nominal price for their crime, one kg of rhino horn costs Rs 3.5 million in international illegal trade market.

Everybody knows that Nepal is famous for its rich collection of flora and fauna, out of which, many belong to the world's endangered species. Many conservation organisations have been doing exemplary projects to conserve the species but still, their efforts have not been able to stop poaching and illegal trade of the wild animals.

In this connection, this is a small attempt of some conservation workers to publish a newsmagazine so that the issue of wildlife, their illegal trade and conservation could be specially focused. Our mission is to sensitize the issues and to deliver the in-depth information about all conservation related events to the government, policy-makers and to conservation activists. In this sense, we will be playing the role of real wildlife watchdog. By doing this, we intend to encourage positive efforts, point out the lapses and also to raise our fingers when we find some thing necessary is not being done by the stakeholders.

In this issue, we are focusing on the rhino poaching. As we all are aware that the endangered species are being poached rampantly and as the conservationists have already warned, the species may be totally extinct in one decade or two if this rate of poaching continues. We believe, an independent rhino census is the need of time. We will be raising similarly wildlife issues on monthly basis.

We are looking forward to your kind suggestions, support and genuine criticism.

editorial

Cabinet releases top rhino-horn poachers

While conservationists were making big hue and cry on the rampant poaching of one-horned rhinos in Nepal, it was found in late December that one single cabinet meeting of August 28 decided to release 13 of noted poachers. It was not enough for the government: Another cabinet meeting, of September 18 released two more poachers. It was learned that the releases were made as per the recommendations made by some top-level government officials.

According to the Department of Jail Management, the cabinet decision ordered the jails to release Palta Mahato, Buddhiram Mahato, Ramsharn BK, Harilal Chaudhari, Kujawa mahato, Buddhi B Praja, Rana B Kumal, Lok B Rai, Haridas Dharai, Sunsen B Kumal, Bhadai Mahato, Krishna B Puja, Buddhiman Lama, Krishna B Bote and Riphai Rai, who were convicted of killing rhinos and trading rhino-horns.

Parliament and rhino poaching

For the first time in Nepal's parliamentary history, rhino poaching drew attention of parliamentarians. The Environment Conservation Committee of House of Representatives, organised a special meeting on January 7 to discuss on rhino-poaching.



Speaker Nembang

Including the state minister for forest and soil conservation Dilendra Prasad Badu and lawmakers, around two dozen conservationists, representing NGOs and INGOs participated in the meeting.

Speaker Subas Nembang sought words from the minister that no more poachers would be released under any circumstances. Several lawmakers, including Prakash Jwala, Sabitri Bogati, Ananda Prasad Dhungana and Jagannath Khatiwada raised question on the government's commitment on conservation of rhinos.

"The government is committed to stop the poaching spree and also to get hold of the traders," said minister Badu.

A call for action from IUCN members

IUCN Commission members and experts from a range of six disciplines (including the Species Survival Commission) held a meeting on January 9 that come up with suggestions for better conservation efforts, specially on rhino conservation. A total of 25 experts and core conservationists participated in the interaction programme.

"The meeting discussed several issues to collectively draft ways to stop rhino poaching and identified immediate, short-term and long-term measures to cope with this national problem," Ukesh Bhuju, the chairman of Nepal National Committee of IUCN Members said.

He also said that the members stressed on one strong action plan with contributions from all conservation activists.

On the basis of the meeting the conservationists presented recommendations to the meeting of the Parliamentary Environment Conservation Committee, on the next day.

Following recommendations were made:

- Formation and mobilisation of special rhino protection squad
- Formation of high-level committee (parliamentary members, journalists, government representatives, experts, representatives of I/ NGOs etc) to assess the ground reality.
- Formation of central multi stakeholder taskforce
- A detailed post conflict assessment of protected areas
- Reinstatement of army and forest posts
- Strengthening of community anti-poaching groups
- Mobilisation of local youths in anti-poaching activities.
- Generating massive awareness and advocacy programmes
- Creating a Compensation Fund.
- Implementation of Rhino Action Plan and CITES Bill
- Assessment of rhino population through recounting in Chitwan, Bardia National Parks and Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve

IUCN support for DNPWC

In a bid to contain rhino poaching, IUCN Nepal handed over field gears to the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) required for the mobilization of their protection staffers on January 8.

A total of 10 tents, 30 sleeping bags and 30 mattresses amounting to Rs. 300,000 (rupees three hundred thousands only) were handed over for immediate action in Chitwan National Park. IUCN Nepal also plans to hand over such field gears for rhino protection and monitoring in Bardia National Park and Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve as well.

In addition to conserving rhinos, IUCN Nepal also aims to conserve biologically important landscapes that harbour precious rhino habitats. IUCN is ready to support the policy, community and trans-boundary communication and dialogue initiatives through its considerable neutral and convening power, a press release states.

Rhino poachers in jail

The Chitwan District Forest Office (DFO) sent four persons, who were arrested for their involvement in rhino poaching, to Bharatpur jail for investigation on January 5.

Forest guards had arrested the four poachers – Dil Bahadur Praja of Siddhi VDC-3, Saipang; Dil Bahadur Praja of Shaktikhor VDC-3, Drabyatar; Chandra Bahadur Yonjan of Dahakhani VDC-9, Bhalumare and Suk Bahadur Bote of Padampur VDC- on different dates.

On January 2, two of the nine poachers released from jail on September 19 by the cabinet decision were nabbed by security forces at Chitwan National Park a few days ago, along with poaching equipment and guns.

Rhino Conservation Strategy 2063

A rhino conservation strategy has recently been published. The strategy has stressed on need to develop Chitwan National Park as a model for dissemination of information on the endangered species, skill and

experiences to international level. It has also planned to spend as much as 35-40 percent of the total income the buffer zones get from the government in conservation activities.

NPC Rhino report

Member of National Planning Commission Bhim Prasad Neupane has recently presented a report on the present situation of the national parks, concerning rampant rhino poaching.

The report was made on 9 January, after his four-day visit to Chitwan National Park from 5 Jan to 8 January. The report has come up with major problems and challenges as well as long-term strategy for the conservation of rhinos.

“A transparent park management model should be developed, and the revenue from tourism should be increased to invest more on the park, which is going to be a major resource,” the report stated.

It also said that a central level anti-poaching mechanism should be developed and a cross-boarder team, which will include experts, security, forest technicians, donors, CITES institutions and others.

According to the report, the conservation capacity of the involved institution is falling and it has become late to revitalize the whole mechanism, which had been active in the past, to save the remaining numbers of the rhinos.

DNPWC seeks budget for anti-poaching

DNPWC has recently sought a sum of around Rs. 20 million to work on anti-poaching with special programme on January 7.

“We are thinking of doing something special as the poaching rate grew at alarming rate last year. Our programme will obviously focus on protecting rhinos from poaching,” said Shyam Bajimaya, the director general of DNPWC.

The department had made a sketch of action plan with a budget of Rs 19.996,000.

Parliamentary meeting

Another meeting was held in the Environment Conservation Committee of House of Representative on January 10.

Ukesh Bhujju, the chairman of Nepal National Committee of IUCN Members presented a common strategy for conservation action plan, representing two dozen conservation experts and individuals. He also demanded the government to conduct new rhino count, to clear all confusions about the present rhino population.

Addressing the meeting, acting secretary at the Ministry for Forestry Udaya Raj Sharma said that today said that the ratio of killing of rhinos was not extraordinary, quoting the government data of death of rhinos per year.

According to the data provided by him, only 19 rhinos died in the fiscal year 2063/64. Out of which 13 were killed in Chitwan National Park, four died in Bardiya National Park and two died in Shukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve Area. The same report states that as many as 55 rhinos died in the fiscal year 2058/59.

Tourism expert Karhan Shakya urged the government to come up with straight and prominent action plan to stop the poaching trend.

“It has been so rampant that it seems there will be no more rhinos in Nepal in five years if the present trend continues,” he said, asking the government to take immediate steps.

He is of view that the trend of the poachers should be countered by making the locals and policy-makers emotionally and psychologically aware.

Rhinoceros

Mortality in 2006

The year of 2006 was specially in the headlines due to rampant killing of rhinos in and around national parks. We have tried to access the death on monthly basis. Though incomplete, this data shed light on how the conserved animals became target of the poachers throughout the year.

January

A female adult rhino was found near Tiger Tops, some 100 m. east of Surung Khola, Dhadhighari on January 14. Its decomposed body was found by CNP officials. Its horn was missing and hooves were recovered.

On 16 January, an infant rhino was killed in an adult rhino attack at Ghaila Ghari BZCF, Jagatapur-1 of CNP. It was said to be 5/6-month old.

February

A female adult rhino was killed by poachers at Narkat Ghari of Jarneli area, 1 km. South of Laguna Tal on February 7. The reports said that the horn was missing and hooves were recovered. Another female adult rhino was killed by poachers on February 11, at Barandabhar 1 km. South of Khorsor EBC Kansghari. Its horn and hooves were recovered.

About 5/6-year old calf was found injured in Ranigauri Mahila BZCF 10 5 Baniyabhar-1, BNP on February 11. But it died during the treatment in Ramvapour Post.

A female adult rhino was killed by poachers at Gainda Wildlife Tented Camp area, east of RCNP on February 26. It had its horn missing while its hooves were recovered.

March

A new-born rhino infant was found dead at Ghaila Ghari BZCF, CNP on March 3. The infant was reported as about five days-old. An old rhino with injury marks on the body was found dead some 3 km. north of Bhimle Entrance near Bhanga Ghat at the bank of Rapti Khola, Kansghari area on March 11. The death was caused due to the attack of another rhino. Horn and hooves were recovered.

On March 25, the CNP officials found a female rhino dead some 200 m. west of Bhawanipur Post near Nandan Tal. It was killed by poachers. Its horn was missing and hooves were recovered.

April

A female rhino was killed by poachers in Jogi Ghat area on April 30. According to CNP, it was a mother rhino who had just delivered her calf some days ago. Its horn was taken out by the poachers.

May

An orphan rhino infant which was found injured in Ban Devi Barandabhar BZCF on May 31 died during the course of treatment. The CNP officials found it at Bandevi Barandabhar BZCF.

June

A dead body of about 10-year old rhino was found in a marshy land of Sukhibhar, Sera Tal on June 12. The CNP report stated that its horn and hooves were recovered.

July

A female adult rhino was killed by poachers on July 21 at Chaturmukhi CF, at the bank of Khageri Khola Shishau Ghari of CNP. Horn and hooves were recovered.

On the same week, a male child rhino was killed at Rajhar VDC, Nawalparasi district on July 26. CNP says that it was killed by poachers but its horn and hooves were recovered. Again, on 29 July, another rhino was killed by poachers at Deuta Tandi, Chitrasen BZCF. The 14/15 years old female was pregnant. Its horn was missing and hooves were recovered.

August

A 20-year female rhino was found dead on August 4 in Suklaphanta east of Darkarghat Suryaphanta, Suklaphanta. The officials said its horn and hooves were intact though it was also found decomposed.

Again, on August 5, a female adult rhino was found dead at Lalpani Area of Suklaphanta. According to officials of SWR, the dead body was found in decomposed condition. Still, horn and hooves were intact.

A male adult rhino was found badly injured by bullets at Barandabhar jungle, CNP on August 15. It was 7/8-year old. It was undergoing regular monitoring by park staffers but died later. Its horn and hooves were recovered.

On August 30, a female adult rhino was found dead by officials of BNP at the bank of Babai river. Death was caused due to flood waters, according to the report. An infant rhino's dead body was also found with its mother at the bank of Babai River, which death was also reportedly caused by flood waters.

On the same day, another two male rhinos were found in Indian territory. The report states that it was swept away by the flood waters of Karnali river and found dead nearby the village in India/Nepal border.

September

A carcass of a rhino was found 2 km. south of Bhawanipur Post, Nandan Tal area of CNP on September 16. Its horn was missing and hooves were recovered.

October

A 12-year-old male rhino was killed by poachers around 1 km South of Bhimpur Post, Sallaghari of CNP on October 17. Horn was missing and hooves were recovered. On the same day, an infant was also found dead at Chitrasen BZCF of CNP. The death was said to be caused by flood waters.

On October 26, a 12-year-old male rhino was found dead in a paddy field at Dibyanagar VDC-3 Siswar of CNP/BZ. It was killed by poachers using electrocution but its horn and hooves were recovered.

Again, on October 29, a 15-year old male rhino was killed at Jagatpur VDC-2 of CNP/BZ. Its horn was missing and hooves were recovered.

November

A 12-year rhino was found dead at Barandabhar area Jaldevi CF KaliKhola, Padampur on November 1. It was killed by poachers and the rhino's horn was missing, while hooves were recovered.

On November 28, a male rhino of 12 to 14 years was found killed at Mardi Ghol of CNP area. Officials of CNP said it was killed by poachers using firearms. Its horn was missing and hooves were recovered.

December

On December 8, a male rhino was found badly injured by the bullets at Bhimbali CF, Kamani Ghat of CNP. It was under regular monitoring by the park staff but died later.