

# India:

## The bumpy road to Bodoland

Manas National Park lies on an alluvial slope in the foothills of the Himalayas, ideal rhino habitat. But where are all the rhinos? On a recent visit to Assam, I had a chance to catch up on the progress of Indian Rhino Vision 2020.

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Established in 2005, the aim of IRV 2020 is to increase the Greater one-horned rhino population in Assam from 2,000 to 3,000 by 2020, and to distribute these rhinos over at least seven protected areas. 2,048 (2009 census) Greater one-horned rhinos currently reside in Kaziranga National Park, which is more than 85% of the total population!

The project has faced a few unpredictable challenges, but all those involved are as keen as ever to make it a success. As previously reported, one of the first two rhinos to be translocated strayed out of the Park, wandering 60km. It took US \$7,000 and two weeks to recover him. This delayed the progress of further translocations, as it was felt that the Southern boundary of the Park needed to be fenced in order to prevent further breaches. Unfortunately, the process of obtaining the immobilization drugs needed for the translocations has also been fraught with delays. Fingers

crossed, all is now set to receive the drugs before the Monsoon rains arrive in April, as there are plans to translocate up to 18 rhinos. Four rhinos at a time will go in convoy on the long journey to Manas, the very same route I took.

So in early February, I set off, incredibly excited. Although I enjoy my job and adore working with all the programmes by Skype and email, I was more than happy to swap my aging computer for the assault on all my senses in India. To add to the fun, I was joining our highly valued partners at International Rhino Foundation (IRF) and other IRV2020 donors; more long-distance relationships that were to get a lot closer with the help of He-Man 9000 beer and some interesting-tasting buffalo curd...

I was met in Guwahati by Bibhab Talukdar (IRF Asian Rhino Coordinator), Inov (IRF Indonesia Liaison) and Clare Campbell (Vice Chairperson of the Asian Rhino Project). Having met up with Susie Ellis (IRF Executive Director), Ian Anderson (Taronga Conservation Society Australia) and Robert Liddell (Board of Directors, Woodland Park Zoo), we set off on the bumpy 4-hour journey to Manas. We were soon acquainted with the "skills" of Indian drivers. The key, I think, is not to watch the roller coaster of near-misses, mass-overtaking and incredulous use of the horn.

On our first full day in Manas, we were taken to the Eastern Bhuyanpara range, where we were met by Field Director Mr Swargowari and his Deputy Mr Bhobora. We discussed the history of Manas and the struggles that the Park has faced. It was invaded by militants of the local Bodo tribe seeking political redress. Its infrastructure suffered great damage from 1988 to 1993, and political instability between 1990 and 1996 led to the destruction of hundreds of trees and animals, including the local extinction of rhinos. Now, the situation is stable; the Bodos have been granted the Bodoland Territorial Council, an autonomous administrative body. Mr Swargowari spoke of his passion for Manas and his work to implement some of the management techniques that were used before the conflict in order to restore Manas to its former glory.

Rob and Susie enjoy some buffalo curd.

SECTION 09



LUCY BODDAM-WHETHAM

We would be one of the first audiences to see traditional Bihu dancing by boys and girls from local villages.

DEBA DUTTA



The group outside the WWF field office at Manas.

ROBERT LIDDELL



One of the guard posts in the Eastern Bhuyanpara range.



IMAGES: LUCY BODDAM-WHETHAM



Patrolling the recently constructed fence line on the Southern boundary of the Park.



Trying to track down one of the rhinos with the telemetry equipment.

Five local community-based NGOs also remember the greatness of the Park before the conflict and are working hard to restore Manas and preserve its wildlife. We visited the headquarters of one such NGO, the Manas Bhuyanpara Conservation and Eco-tourism Society, who kindly provided us with a delicious lunch and welcomed us all with a gift of traditional woven scarves. The NGOs have organised local community visits and education on the value of Manas and reintroduction of rhinos, helped clear and erect the electrified fence, provided volunteers to help patrol the Park and the border (volunteers receive a small stipend); and are building eco-tourism lodges to improve tourism capacity in the local area. Such commitment and passion from the local communities is imperative to the success of Manas and reintroduction of rhinos, and we were extremely impressed with their work and commitment.

IRV2020's awareness programme has included 12 schools within Basbari and Bhuyapara ranges, reaching 5,000 students from about 20 villages, with an additional 23 villages visited. The programme has also extended its community welfare activities to include a livestock vaccination programme.

Inside Manas we visited various guard posts, the better to understand the reconstruction of the Park's infrastructure. Each post is normally manned by two permanent forest guards, two home guards provided with temporary funding and two guards from the local NGOs. The Eastern range seemed to be the most degraded of the three ranges; though the habitat is slowly growing back which will be followed by more and more wildlife.

Manas has an extremely high conservation value: it is a UNESCO Natural World Heritage site, a Project Tiger Reserve, an Elephant Reserve and a Biosphere Reserve, contiguous with the Royal Manas National Park in Bhutan. The Park is known for its rare and endangered endemic wildlife such as the Assam roofed turtle, hispid hare,



golden langur and pygmy hog, with 55 species of mammals, 380 birds, 50 reptiles, and 3 amphibians. The wildlife finds refuge in the mixed habitats: light alluvial semi-evergreen forests, mixed moist and dry deciduous forests, low alluvial savanna woodland, and Assam valley semi-evergreen alluvial grasslands, which cover almost 50% of the Park.

We also saw the recently constructed 8km-long electrified fence from Kasimdaha to Katajhar Bathan on the Southern boundary, construction of which was paid for in part by grants from Chester Zoo, Stuttgart Zoo and SRI. 150 villagers from eight fringe villages volunteered to help build it, and they are keen to see it extended to the east. The fence's purpose is to prevent rhinos straying out of the Park, as well as reducing the amount of human encroachment. The communities described how the fence has helped to mitigate elephant crop raiding (although the problem has been displaced to the unfenced east side of the Park) and they are now also able to use more of the land near the fence for agriculture.

Next day, we set out to find one of the five, free-ranging, radio-collared rhinos. Deba Dutta from the Manas Rhino Monitoring Team explained to us the preparations for the imminent rhino translocations and capacity building, most importantly, improving rhino monitoring capability and security. 150 additional guards have been trained as well as 100 local youths / volunteers and 60 students. Guards are on patrol 24 hours a day; units alternate patrols in three-hour blocks. They patrol all areas of the Park: on foot, elephant, by bicycle, motorbike, car and boat as necessary. The new arrivals will be monitored by a team of biologists initially, to make sure they are settling in at the new location, and then by the others in the long-term, with behaviour of the rhinos and their use of the habitat monitored carefully. Each rhino will be monitored on a daily basis and will include the collection of GIS data. Such practices will provide critical data for improving

management practices and information for further translocations. All the activities are conducted under the supervision of the Translocation Core Committee (TCC). After a couple of hours in one of the guard towers, we heard the telltale "pip pips" on the telemetry receiver and were excited at the prospect of seeing our first Manas rhino. Unfortunately, he was feeling rather shy and stayed hidden in the tall grass.

That evening provided one of my highlights of the trip. Hosted by another NGO, the Manas Ever Welfare Society, which has recently built a charming eco-lodge, we were told that we would be one of the first audiences to see traditional Bihu dancing by boys and girls from local villages (IRV2020 has helped to teach them dancing skills to build the potential for eco-tourism). We quickly found that we were to participate. Once we'd stopped worrying about ruining their performance, we were less coordinated but just as enthusiastic, and our hosts were delighted by our joining in.

I left Manas with fond memories and high hopes for its future, and armed with the information to help me continue to fundraise for its rhinos. The road to restoring Manas and its rhino population will be a bumpy one, but I look forward to making the return journey to witness its glorious revival.

## Thanks

I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to BACC for providing a complimentary return flight to India, which not just enabled an important project visit but also helped to keep our costs down so more funds can go to the field programmes. A huge thank you also goes out to Susie for inviting me along, to Bibhab for organising an amazing trip, to all our hosts at Manas and the staff at WWF, and to my other lovely travelling companions - thanks for the memories! Thank you also to our funding partners, Chester Zoo and Stuttgart Zoo, for your wonderful grants.