

# Rhinos Poisoned in Nepal

THE RHINOS of Nepal have a royal supporter—King Birendra—and that is a major reason the country's rhino conservation efforts have been so successful while so many other Asian and African nations have steadily been losing their rhinos to poaching and habitat destruction. In Chitwan National Park, where 700 guards of the Nepalese army are stationed, the greater one-horned rhino population grew from about 70 in 1962 to some 400 at last count, in 1990.

Political unrest in Nepal in early 1990, however, led to a partial breakdown in law and order and a reduction in the king's power, and poaching increased. At least seven rhinos were killed, four by a new and worryingly simple form of poaching: the use of poison. The first two victims were animals in Central Zoo, near Kathmandu. They perished during the night after eating food laced with a zinc-phosphide rat poison, presumably taking several painful hours to die.

Two wild rhinos were poisoned when they wandered out of Chitwan to graze on the crops of neighboring farmers—as the park's rhinos commonly do. They ate maize cobs or pumpkins that had purposefully been filled with pesticide. The other three rhinos poached in mid-1990 succumbed to wounds from more-traditional weapons—guns and spears.



Will Nepal's Chitwan National Park remain a haven for rhinos?

The horns taken from these dead rhinos were no doubt sold for up to \$4,500 per pound to middlemen, who probably smuggled them via India to the Far East. In Taiwan, traders will buy Indian rhino horn for about \$9,000 a pound, the highest price in the world. Its enormous value gives poachers and traders great incentive to continue operating, especially because they are rarely caught and, even if they are, fines and jail sentences are inadequate. A poverty-stricken Nepalese can make quick and easy money by killing a rhino for its horn.

Park authorities fear that poaching, particularly poisonings, will increase, especially during the monsoons, when rhinos leave the park more frequently to seek food on croplands. Then Chitwan would no longer be among the few havens remaining for the rhinos.

Chitwan's guards used to be successful at keeping rhinos safe largely because they used an intelligence-gathering network, paying local people

small sums for information that led them to poachers. This intelligence system has collapsed because there are no funds available to support it. To pay informers for the next three years, \$3,000 is desperately needed.

Nepal's rare rhinos are a very valuable commodity. The Nepalese government received \$250,000 for a pair it sold to the Singapore Zoo two years ago. In Chitwan National Park, rhinos are the main tourist attraction; they drew 36,000 foreign visitors in 1990 alone. To ensure the long-term protection of Chitwan and its rhinos, the local farmers must benefit from the income generated by these tourists. At the very least, the farmers should receive adequate compensation when rhinos destroy their crops. If, through such economic inducements, they could be convinced to support rhino conservation, poaching in Chitwan could become a thing of the past.

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