

CONSERVATION

Nepal's Rhinos and Tigers are Poisoned by Poachers

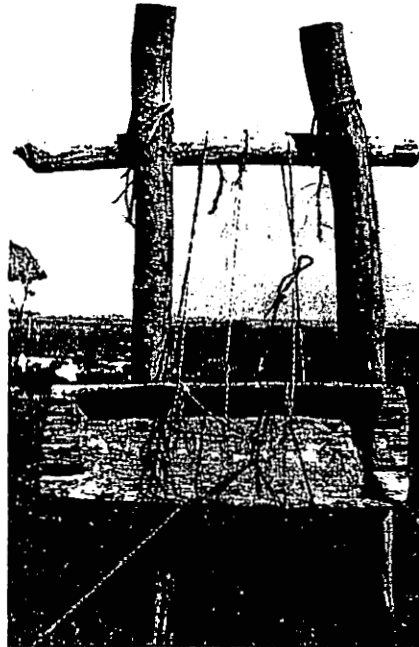
by Esmond Bradley Martin and Lucy Vigne

Nepal, despite being one of the poorest countries in Asia, has been one of the most successful at conserving its rhinos and tigers. Nearly all the 400 or so greater one-horned rhinos in Nepal inhabit the Royal Chitwan National Park. Chitwan and the surrounding area is home also to perhaps half Nepal's Bengal tiger population (about 170 animals). The King has a personal interest in conservation, particularly for the rhino, which is of religious importance in Hinduism. Thus, Chitwan was until recently heavily protected by the Forest Department's guards and by the army, a total of nearly 900 men.

During the late 1980s, there was growing political unrest, culminating in early 1990 in riots and a partial breakdown in law and order. The King's power diminished, and an interim government took over with less interest in conservation. As a result, the number of men patrolling Chitwan was reduced and new poachers took advantage of the situation. Two of Nepal's largest and most spectacular animals — the rhino and the tiger — came under threat.

In the past, tigers were occasionally poisoned when they became a nuisance to the local farmers by attacking cattle. A farmer would put poison in the carcase of a dead cow to kill the offending tiger. During 1988 and 1989, however, over 10% of Chitwan's tiger population was poisoned, but not because they were killing cattle. Poachers, for the first time, were taking the bones to sell for about \$130

per kilo to traders to send through Tibet to China, where they are consumed as a medicine to help rheumatism. In 1990, 25 carcasses were found in Chitwan of tigers and their cubs which had been poisoned.



Rhinos often come out of Chitwan National Park at night to eat the farmers' crops. The farmers erect 'noise-makers' to scare the animals away: the string is pulled, which claps the board. (Photo: Esmond Bradley Martin)

Rhino poaching has also increased during this politically unstable time in Nepal. In 1990, seven rhinos were killed, four by eating poisoned food, the first time this method of poaching has been used on the rhino. When rhinos wander out of Chitwan Park to graze on crops nearby, the local farmers put poison in a maize cob or

pumpkin which the rhino eats. The rhino can take five hours to die and may wander back into the Park where the body is discovered. Nearly all the horns from these killed animals were found by the poachers, who hacked them off to sell for about \$10,000 a kilo. They sell for about double this wholesale in Taiwan. Although other products from the rhino are valuable (the skin sells for over \$2,000 a kilo retail in Bangkok), poachers do not have the time to take anything else, for fear of being caught.

The Park officials are extremely worried about this acceleration in poaching. They feel under-manned and under-equipped to combat these criminals. Also, and perhaps most regrettably, their once very effective intelligence-gathering system has been dissolved, because the staff could not conform with the complicated official system of payment, and consequently were not spending the allocated money. It is generally agreed that an intelligence network is the most cost-effective and efficient way of catching and preventing poachers. For example, in 1973, when rhino poaching was last a threat in Chitwan, the Fauna and Flora Preservation Society of London donated several hundred pounds to pay to informers: 17 poachers were caught and the poaching problem was then resolved. The International Trust for Nature Conservation, in England, gave \$67 in January 1991 to pay four men to collect information on tiger poaching in local villages: this immediately led to several arrests, and has provided a deterrent to would-be poachers during this critical period.

However, \$3,000 is now needed to fund a full intelligence network and to pay informers for the next three years. This is a small sum when one considers that if a pair of greater one-horned rhinos were to be sold from Chitwan to a zoo (as recently

occurred to Singapore Zoo), they would be worth about \$250,000. From the economics argument alone, \$3,000 to protect the 400 rhinos in Chitwan is minuscule. A donor is urgently sought by the Park staff to enable a network to be re-established which can save rhinos' and tigers' lives at this precarious time. This assistance would be very well deserved when one considers Nepal's excellent track record in protecting these animals.

Apart from the 1,500 or so greater one-horned rhinos in Assam, India, these animals in Chitwan are the only sizable population left of this species in the world, and they need all the help they can get.

[Postscript: On 10th May 1991, the Royal Nepali Army arrested 24 poachers equipped with 22 muzzle-loaders inside the Royal Chitwan National Park; they were hunting sambar, chital, wild boar and sloth bear, mainly for meat, but would not have avoided a tiger that came out in the beat.]

I.Z.N. Back Numbers

Most back numbers of International Zoo News from No. 119 (March 1974 — Vol. 21, No. 2) onwards are still available. We are now offering these for sale at £0.75 (\$1.50) each post free. A list of past feature articles has been prepared, which will be sent to readers on request.

(The following issues are now out of print: 120, 121, 124, 125, 133, 138, 142, 147, 148, 153, 175, 189, 199, 210.)

N.B. This offer does not apply to Vols. 37 and 38 (1990 and 1991), to which the full subscription rates still apply.

Send your order with payment to I.Z.N., Flint Cottage, Roundstone Lane, Angmering, West Sussex BN16 4AP, U.K.