

Changing the Guards

How a whole country rallied behind protection of Nepal's wildlife

by Sarah Wade

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WHEN RAMCHANDRA TRIPATHI* entered Bardia National Park on January 14, 2013, he came at noon, and didn't bother with stealth. An arrest warrant that had been issued in 2008 for Tripathi, a notorious rhino horn smuggler, was still in effect, but he assumed nobody would touch him. Tripathi had grown up in a nearby village, and he'd bribed and bullied his way past anyone who opposed the poaching jobs he was commissioning from cash-strapped locals. He'd even hired an assassin to hunt down the ranger who had filed the case against him.

He certainly didn't expect to find himself surrounded by more than 200 villagers eager to turn him in. But that was what happened after a community-run antipoaching squad spotted Tripathi strolling past park headquarters and quietly called for help. He's now serving a seven-year prison sentence.

Tripathi's capture is a striking indicator of how far Nepal has come in its fight against the poaching and trafficking of endangered species. The country has now celebrated two 12-month periods of zero poaching incidents—one in 2011 and another in 2014.

That's a tremendous departure from the past. The illegal wildlife trade is a global pandemic tainting almost every major transportation system and generating an estimated \$8-\$10 billion each year. Just 10 years ago, Nepal was one of the industry's messiest epicenters: an escalating civil conflict between the government and Maoist rebels had engrossed the country's leadership and forced many soldiers to abandon their stations in the national parks they normally patrolled.

Stripped of such protection, Nepal's forest parks—already difficult to monitor before the conflict—became an ideal place for men like Tripathi to do business with little fear of interference. So they did, and wreaked havoc.

"[In] 2002, 37 rhinos were poached [in Nepal]," says Diwakar Chapagain, WWF-Nepal's wildlife trade monitoring deputy director, recalling the worst year on record. "Almost every day...we heard news about rhino poaching."

By the time the conflict ended in 2006, the country's one-horned rhino population had been nearly halved, from an estimated 612 in 2000 to fewer than 375 in 2005. This led to a widespread sense of urgency about the species' plight and the need to tackle wildlife crime from a new angle—one with a heavier emphasis on trade.

"It is not just the poachers who kill [these animals]," says Anil Manandhar, WWF-Nepal's country representative. "Wildlife crime involves a wide network, from local villagers who are lured with money to kill rhinos and other endangered animals, to traders and middlemen both in Nepal and from outside the country. These traders give poor villagers \$1,000 to \$2,000 [to shoot a rhino]. That is a whole year's or two years' income."

Middlemen, Manandhar adds, are also the key link in the supply chain: they funnel the poachers' goods into the international markets through border smuggling or business in the nearest big city. To help target those activities, in 2006 WWF-Nepal established a Wildlife Trade Monitoring Unit that added wildlife trade experts to its ranks—including Chapagain, who had two decades of government experience.

Such changes, along with other collaborations and partnerships between WWF and the Nepalese government, translated into a bigger, more dynamic communication network than the kind Tripathi had been easily stepping around. The new system spanned top-tier intelligence agents, local government and conservation officers, and members of the more than 400 community-based antipoaching squads that WWF supports throughout the country. For those individuals, the network has meant more information, shared more quickly and more safely. For several hundred poachers and middlemen, including Tripathi, it's meant a jail sentence.

And for Nepal's rhinos, tigers and other valuable wildlife, it's meant forests where zero poaching is the new, blissful status quo. **W**

*Nepali authorities do not release the names of arrested parties. Ramchandra Tripathi is not the middleman's real name.

