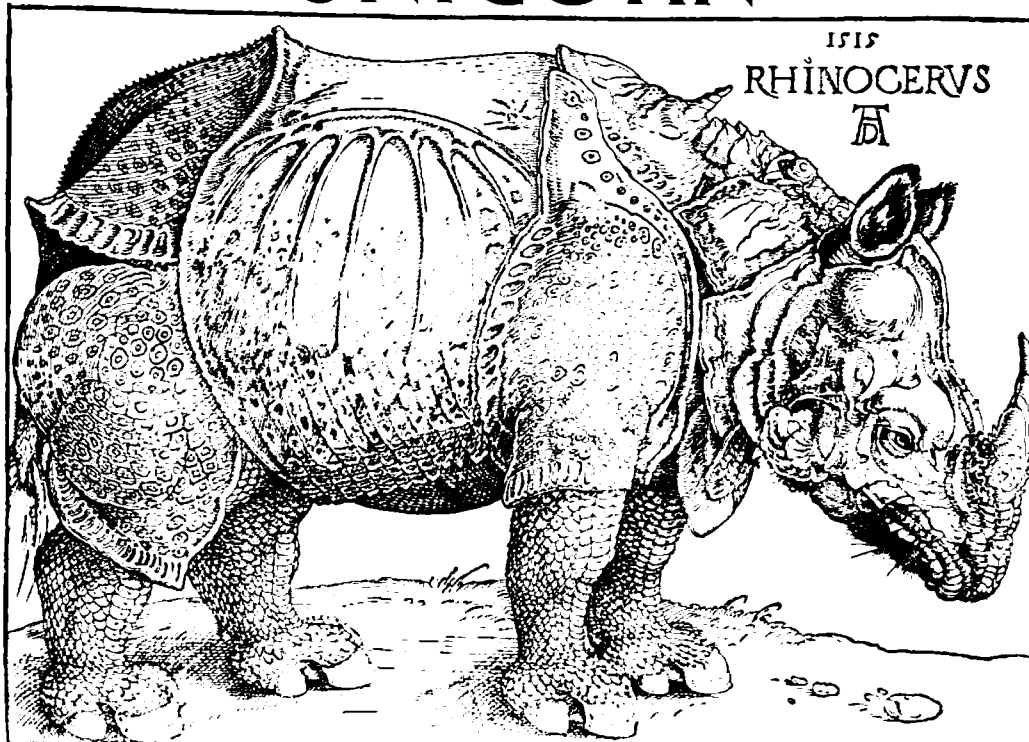


# IN SEARCH OF A UNICORN

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by Clive Walker

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It is four o'clock and the jungle has started to cool down after the heat of noon. The giant Sal Forest rises 30 metres above our heads and our "lanit", or elephant driver (the equivalent of a mahout in India) bangs his steel-hooked driver's tool onto the head of the female elephant on which we ride. With a grunt and a sudden change of pace we lurch forward through the three-metre tall grass. Shafts of golden sunlight stab down through the brilliant green canopy. A Scarlet Minamet flits through the tree-tops, uttering an attractive whistling call, its wings patches of red, yellow and black flashing against the dark foliage. A more captivating sight is difficult to imagine. Common langurs, the sacred monkeys of India, scale the lower branches, their long tails wonderfully adapted for life in the forest, providing the perfect balance needed for their high-flying existence.

We are in the Royal Chitwan National Park, the premier wildlife sanctuary of Nepal and home to the one-horned Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*). The Indian rhino was once widely distributed over the flood plains of the Indian sub-continent and throughout the ages it has been likened to the mythical unicorn. Now fewer than 1 500 remain of which 400 live in Chitwan; the others are distributed mainly in Kaziranga National Park in Assam, India.

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Hunted and harassed for decades, these living relics of a bygone age survive today under very strict protection. They are even closer to extinction than the two African rhino species – there are about 4 000 white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum*) in the wild and between six and eight thousand black rhino (*Diceros bicornis*). The demand for rhino horn is a real danger to all rhino popula-

tions, but an even greater threat is posed by a simple lack of space.

Attaining a height of over 183cm and a mass of over two tons, the huge one-horned rhino with its unique armour-plated folded skin presents a strangely prehistoric appearance. Yet with a little more space – which is so seriously lacking – they may yet be brought back from the brink of extinction. The increasing human population places ever greater pressure on land use and as the natural habitat of the rhino changes drastically, so their numbers diminish.

Here in Chitwan, with its 400 rhino, the situation is optimistic. The rhinos have reached the stage where their numbers are now greater than the park can comfortably sustain and they wander beyond the park boundaries where they come into contact with the farming community. According to K.K. Gurung, Manager of Tiger Tops Jungle

Lodge, they sometimes become a positive menace.

The success of the rhino in Chitwan is attributable to the excellent conservation work carried out by the Nepalese authorities since the establishment of the National Park in 1973, the first in Nepal. However, as with similar situations here in South Africa and elsewhere, parks can become overcrowded by certain species and it becomes necessary to cull in some cases or preferably, to translocate animals. Land acquisition for parks is invariably very difficult owing to the needs of the ever-expanding human population.

The most immediate danger for the one-horned rhino lies in the fact that the limited areas in which they are located are really very small. For this reason, the Asian Rhino Specialist Group of the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources), met in Bangkok in August 1979 to assess the situation. The meeting was urged "to identify new areas suitable to harbour population units and to establish such units by translocating rhino from over-populated areas".

Kaziranga National Park in Assam was considered to be over-populated and in 1984 five rhino were translocated to Dudhwa National Park near the western border of India and Nepal. Unfortunately a female died before reaching Dudhwa, but the rest settled in very well.

In Chitwan there may well be another danger – an unknown disease wiping out or severely reducing the present population and I believe moves are underway to translocate rhino from this park. This problem has of course received the attention of the authorities both in Nepal and India and, providing suitable habitat is available, the translocation of one-horned rhino seems desirable.

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Thrusting through the tall grass, we are joined by another elephant, a bull with splendid tusks and very tall by Indian standards. The name of the newcomer is Shamshahar and an amusing tale is told of his lack of courage. The use of Land Rovers is out of the question owing to the nature of the jungle terrain and on one occasion K.K. Gurung had to use Shamshahar and four other elephants from the herd at Tiger Tops Jungle Lodge to recover the body of a villager who had been killed by a



Photograph: C. Walker

tiger. Effecting such a task on the back of an elephant in the jungle of Chitwan is no doubt preferable to going on foot. They found the tiger before they found the poor villager and it immediately came at the advancing elephants with a roar. Under the command of their phanits, the four females stood their ground trembling. Not so Shamshahar. He about-turned and tore through the jungle with some very anxious passengers trying desperately to remain in the "howdah".

Meeting Shamshahar now, he appears not to have suffered from the incident. Or perhaps he knows from the routine that this time we are looking for a rhino and not a tiger!

The phanits drive the elephants through the jungle grass seeking a rhino. They do this regularly twice a day and the elephants show no fear of the rhino which back off and usually trot or run away ahead of the elephants. Upon sighting a rhino the Nepalese phanit whistles up his colleagues who immediately turn their elephants towards his call and very gently, the rhino is cornered. Care is exercised for the rhino have been known to charge, but this is a rare occurrence.

In some areas the elephant grass has been cut down in lines about 50m wide and here one is able to observe the rhino with even greater ease. To the purist this may seem artificial but given the nature of the terrain and the number of people who visit Chitwan, it is a practical convenience. The large number of visitors and the presence of tigers and sloth bears make game viewing

on foot impractical in Chitwan. It is not like walking in the African bush where visibility is invariably good – although facing an African black rhino on foot is certainly more dangerous than facing a one-horned Indian rhino!

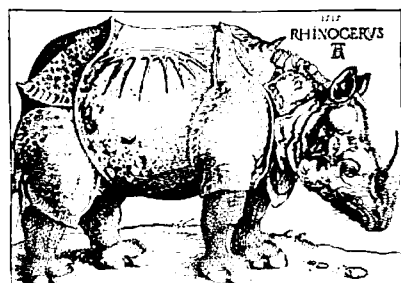
However, my son and I did have the opportunity to do some jungle trekking with Dan Bahada, an expert tiger tracker. We came across a large rhino bull alongside a densely wooded stream, feeding on bamboo. Completely undetected, we were able to observe him for nearly thirty minutes. He was very noisy going about his feeding and we were therefore able to get up fairly close. The experience was very similar to stalking a white rhino. He continually appeared then disappeared into the thick jungle undergrowth, oblivious of our presence. Apart from the danger of a tiger taking their young, they fear nothing, except perhaps man. Because they have been known to kill people, we were obviously very cautious.

They are certainly interesting creatures and it was a real thrill tracking one in the wild. Much of the fascination of the legendary unicorn remains in these huge armoured giants.

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UNICORN

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CONDORS & CRANES

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