

Supporting rhinos in Bardia National Park, Nepal

Supporters of Save the Rhino International will know that we have not previously supported any rhino conservation project in Nepal.

Cathy Dean
Director

This is due to a number of reasons; restricted funds and commitment to existing projects; priority given to black rhino projects; insufficient knowledge about local NGOs; and the troubled political situation in the country, which did not give us the necessary confidence to invest there. However, we are delighted to announce that, through the EAZA Rhino Campaign, we have just awarded our first grant to a Nepalese NGO.

The road to Nepal

Nepalese rhinos first wandered across our horizon back in June 2005, when I got together with other members of the EAZA Core Group and representatives of the African and Asian Rhino Specialist Groups to review the 54 applications we'd

received from potential beneficiary field projects. There were three from Nepal, but against the background of the Maoist insurgency and consequent removal of the army from the National Parks to deal with urban political unrest, any organisation's ability to deal with the upswing in poaching seemed limited. Other organisations have continued to fund conservation activities in Nepal, but the EAZA Rhino Campaign was about raising funds from zoo visitors, and the Core Group felt it was essential that the grants we gave had a high chance of success, so as not to deter the individual donors.

Since then, we have kept track of the NGOs working in Nepal, reading their field reports and updates, and following news stories. A few of our supporters have visited Nepal and they take care to send us short debriefs and pictures. The dreadful helicopter crash in late 2006, which killed key WWF-Nepal and Dept of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation staff, further added to the gloom.

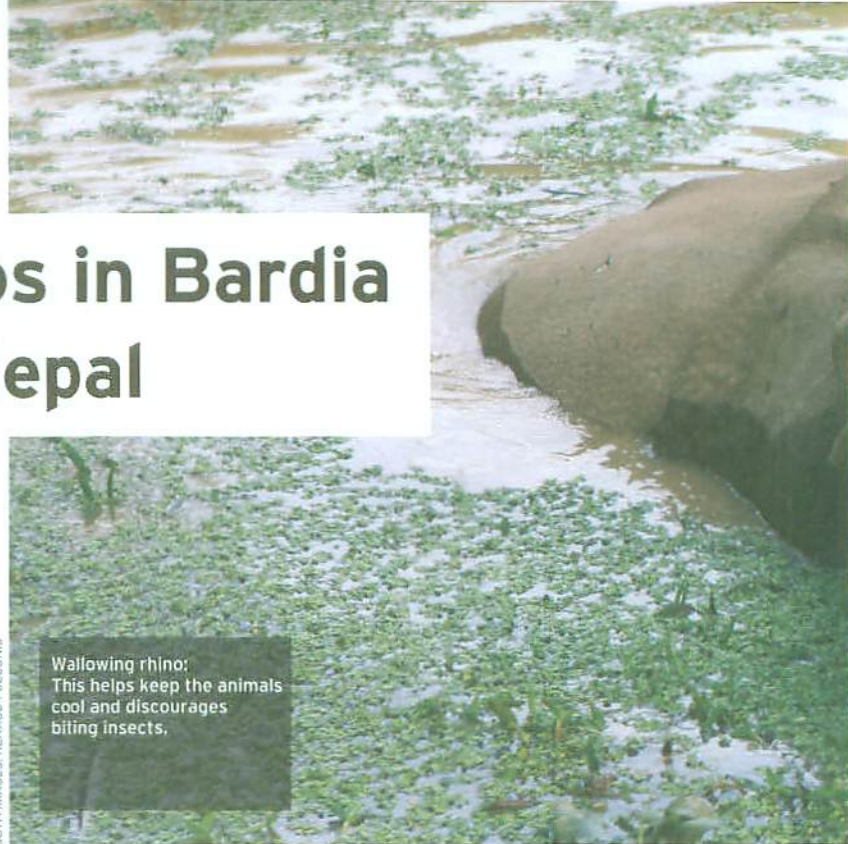
Nepalese rhinos raised their heads again in autumn 2007, when we had given out all the grants to the 13 original field projects, and to the eight projects we'd put on the waiting list. We'd still got over 100,000 euros left to allocate. A quick analysis of the grants given out showed that we'd given two-thirds of the money to African rhino projects. We wanted to redress the balance, and Nepal was the country that had obviously missed out.

In the intervening period, colleagues Raj Amin and Richard Kock at the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) had developed close working relationships with Shant Raj Jnawali at the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) in Nepal, formerly known as the King Mahendra Trust.

Rhinos in Nepal

Greater one-horned rhinoceros are restricted to small protected areas primarily in north-eastern India and Nepal (Chitwan National Park-CNP, Bardia National Park-BNP and Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve-SWR). These rhinos are highly vulnerable due to intensification of agriculture and habitat loss, a burgeoning human population and poaching. Furthermore, Nepal has been facing dramatic socio-economic and political challenges over the last decade that negatively impacted the recovery of rhino; which had previously shown considerable progress.

Numbers in CNP increased from 100 animals in the early 1980s to 544 in 2000 allowing establishment of founder groups in BNP and SWR (83 and 4 rhinos were translocated between 1986 and 2003 to BNP and SWR respectively). However, there has been a significant decline since then to 408 today in CNP and fewer than 30 in BNP, with only SWR sustaining growth to 7 individuals. CNP still holds the second highest population in the world and for this and its other endangered species, such as the Bengal tiger (also in



BOTH IMAGES: RENAUD FULCONIS

Wallowing rhino:
This helps keep the animals cool and discourages biting insects.



Greater one-horned rhinos graze in long grass, sometimes accompanied by parasite-eating birds



decline) and Asian wild elephant, has been designated a World Heritage Site. As such, CNP has tended to receive the majority of the attention and of international funding support. It is now imperative that Bardia National Park receives funding to support its anti-poaching and monitoring work.

All the usual problems...

Poaching (both opportunistic and organised), during the period of transition from political autocracy to the return of a representative government, is considered the main cause of the recent decline. Mortality and movements are poorly understood due to a relatively inadequate monitoring system and infrequent census; this raises serious concerns. Underlying causes for the decline include weakening anti-poaching and law enforcement, marginalised communities as well as poor integration and coordination of stakeholders. There is an urgent need to address these problems and this is now possible as the national security situation has eased and stakeholders are willing to participate in a project of this sort. Given the potential for a concerted effort from multiple stakeholders, without the corruption and centrally dominated policies that previously hindered staff on the ground, much progress could be made with relatively small investment. In addition, sanctuary approaches (or intensively managed rhino conservation areas), proven so successful in Africa, may be the only way of conserving the species in the short term, given the continuing demand for rhino horn in neighbouring East Asia.

The road to recovery?

Richard and Raj therefore worked with Shant to put together a proposal for the EAZA Rhino Campaign's Core Group to consider: a request for funds to increase the anti-poaching and monitoring programme in BNP and SWR. We were delighted when the Group approved a total grant of £30,755.

The first transfer of £10,575 paid for the equipment that could be easily bought in Nepal (motorbikes, bicycles, torches, sleeping bags, mattresses, tents, rucksacks, cooking devices and water bottles).



And again, wallowing away

A second instalment of £9,179 paid for 20 pairs of binoculars and three inflatable rafts, which are now being shipped to Nepal. Bardia only has one main camp, meaning that it's difficult to patrol the far side of the Park, and rangers need to be able to respond quickly to any emergency situations. These rafts will greatly improve access, while the binoculars will support the monitoring of the rhino population in Bardia. The remaining £11,001 will be used to buy motors for the rafts, GPSs, digital cameras, battery chargers and memory cards. We really hope this equipment will have an immediate impact on staff morale and patrol effectiveness.

Bigger ambitions

Saving Nepal's rhinos isn't just about stopping the poachers; we also need to address all the other problems. So, working with ZSL, NTNC and their colleagues across the border in the Wildlife Institute of India, we've started to flesh out a larger project, that will tackle four main pillars:

- **Ecosystem health:** Develop habitat and species management plans for the Terai Protected Areas and buffer zones (including grasslands, Sal and riverine forest, and fresh water systems). Implement actions plans. Develop and implement invasive plant species control (including long-term planning and awareness-raising on economic impact and mitigation). Schedule and promote regular meetings and joint cross-border capacity and cooperation within the Terai ecosystem.
- **Public engagement:** Establish public engagement programme, building infrastructure and resources. Organise meetings for all levels of stakeholder participation. Launch Red Caps programme to mitigate human-wildlife conflict through practical solutions for local communities.
- **Poverty reduction:** Set up sustainable human health and vet clinics in the buffer zones. Establish livestock breeding and management programme. Develop pilot projects for community-based natural resource management and income-generation. Launch microfinance scheme to offer loans to women for sustainable livelihood projects. Assess scope for community-led eco-tourism venture.
- **Project management:** Form project Steering Group, organise and implement six-monthly meeting schedule. Set up monitoring systems for individual activities, evaluate them and report to stakeholders. Identify training needs and implement skills development.

Each of these activities requires a detailed work plan and budget, and we'll be developing these over the next few months, while also looking for donors to help us achieve this ambitious project. I very much hope to be able to report on the progress we've made in the next issue of *The Horn*.

Thanks

With thanks to Raj Amin and Richard Kock of ZSL, and Shant Raj Jnawali of NTNC for their input into this article.

Grant

Thanks to the EAZA members who made the grant of £30,755 possible.