

India National Parks Visit and AsRSG Meeting February 2010

In February 2010, I was invited to attend the AsRSG Meeting at Kazaringa National Park, Assam, India. Prior to the meeting I had the opportunity to visit some of the projects that ARP support in Manas National park and Kaziranga National Park.

Accompanying me on the trip were: Susie Ellis (IRF), Lucy Boddam-Wetham (Save the Rhino), Bibhab Kumar Talukdar (IRF), Sectionov (IRF Indonesia), Rob Liddell (Woodland Park Zoo Board) and Ian Anderson (Western Plains Zoo).

Manas National Park



The crew at Manas National Park.

The visit to Manas National Park began with a ceremony with some of the members of the local forest guards, park staff, local NGO staff and volunteers as well as the Manas NP Field Director and Assistant Director. We were given tea and lunch (finished nicely with some betel nut!) and welcomed with a traditional ceremony in which brightly coloured woven scarves were placed around each of our necks.



Welcoming ceremony.

We were then taken on a tour of the park and inspected many of the forest guard stations. There are approximately 40 of these stations throughout the

park with 13 guard towers constructed so far. With approximately 200 armed guards working within the park, there certainly appeared to be adequate protection for the five rhino that currently inhabit the park.



Two examples of forest guard towers.

Whilst poaching does not appear to be a problem in Manas at this stage, with the planned translocations of many more rhino, it certainly has the potential to become an issue. The security level currently in place should certainly help to ensure poaching does not become a concern for this area.

One of the most positive aspects of activities in Manas was the evidence of genuine involvement from local NGOs. They were assisting with park activities, education and awareness programs and trying hard to establish viable ecotourism facilities. We were treated to a cultural evening where some of the youth from a local village performed traditional dancing. They had recently received training for these activities in preparation for increased tourism.



Lucy and I (back) with the traditional dancers.

On the second day of our visit to Manas we visited the area where the rhino can be found. We were able to track one to within a few hundred meters, however he was sleeping in the grass and unfortunately not really visible.



Tracking the rhino in Manas National Park.

Manas National Park historically had a reasonable population of rhino. The entire population was virtually wiped out during the political conflict that occurred within the last 10 years. The park is approximately 500sq km which is smaller than Kaziranga at 800sq km. The carrying capacity is estimated at about 500 although this may also be too high given the relative dryness of the area compared to Kaziranga. Development of dams in China and changing weather patterns pose a significant threat to both areas, reliant on their river systems for a balanced ecosystem.

The first rhinos were translocated into the park on 13 April 2008. One of these rhino strayed from the park, travelled a considerable distance and was returned to the park on 15 September.

Electric fence construction is well underway in the southern boundary of the park. So far 8km has been constructed which seems to be effective in ensuring rhino do not enter the villages.

Local NGOs are also assisting with an awareness program in which 12 schools have been covered so



Electric fence on southern boundary of Manas National Park.

far. 5000 students from 20 villages have participated in the program.

Other community welfare activities have been initiated such as vaccination programs for cattle. These kinds of activities have assisted in generating community support for the overall protection of Manas and the return of rhino to the area.

We were fortunate to be able to visit the border of Manas National Park between Bhutan and Assam. This idyllic location certainly presented a diversity of wildlife that we had not seen in other areas of the park.

I spent a week in Bhutan after the trip and it was truly a remarkable place. From an environmental perspective it was incredible to see a country where people instinctively protect their wildlife and habitats for future generations. Unfortunately much of Bhutan is simply too mountainous for rhinos!



Top: A Capped Langur. Above: Clare at the Bhutanese border.

Kaziranga National Park

Kaziranga National Park was quite a different experience to Manas. Catering for large numbers of tourists, the park is bordered by bustling villages and

any road travel involved a death defying experience. Upon entering the park on our jeep safari it certainly created the illusion of an open range zoo, with rhino, other ungulates and diverse birdlife in abundance. The day after I left, our group even managed to sight a tiger.



Indian Rhino in Kaziranga National Park. Photo: Rob Liddell

We also experienced the wildlife of Kaziranga on the back of an elephant which enabled much closer encounters with the rhino. Although it was only a one-hour trek, we managed to find about six different rhino and watch them graze within metres.



Touring by elephant. Photo: Rob Liddell

Overall the situation in Kaziranga seems quite good. The rapid translocations of rhinos to other key areas in India should result in the successful repopulation of these important parks. Significant protection measures need to be in place before this occurs though and this currently only exists in Manas NP. With a successful model in place however, it should be relatively simple and cost effective to expand these strategies into the

other identified protected areas.



Indian Rhino in Kaziranga National Park. Photo: Rob Liddell

AsRSG Meeting

The meeting was attended by many delegates from India, Nepal, Indonesia and Malaysia as well as representatives from Australia, USA, UK, Europe and Vietnam.

In summary, updates were provided from all regions and working groups had in depth discussions about threats facing each of the species. It is hoped that these analyses will form the basis of Conservation Action Strategies for all Asian rhino species.

Overall the trip was very beneficial and was an excellent opportunity to see first hand the projects that ARP supports in India. It was also an excellent opportunity to meet some of the key players in rhino conservation efforts for all Asian species.

There are certainly some successful projects underway in India and Nepal, and it was heartening to see such genuine involvement from local NGO's and communities.

IUCN SSC Asian Rhino Specialist Group



I would like to thank ARP for the opportunity to travel to India. It was an incredible experience and I feel significantly motivated to assist further with ARP development and operations.

Clare Campbell