

A Rough Road for Rhinos

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In February 2010, I was invited by the Asian Rhino Project to travel with a group of people to Assam India to visit Manas National Park and witness the work being carried out there by IRV 2020. The aim of the IRV 2020 is to increase the population of Greater one horned rhino to 3000 individuals across seven protected areas. Currently 2000 rhinos reside in Kaziranga which is more than 85% of the current population; this exposes the population to stochastic events such as flood or disease.

The Taronga Conservation Society, Australia, allocated field grants to the ARP in 2008 and 2009 for projects in Manas and Kaziranga National Parks. The ARP and Aaranyak used these grants to assist Anti- poaching patrols in Kaziranga and to assist translocations of GOHR to Manas National Park.

I met up with members of our team in Guwahati. The team members were Susie Ellis (IRF Executive Director), Bibhab Talukdar (IRF Asian Rhino Coordinator), Inov (IRF Indonesian Liaison), Clare Campbell (ARP Vice President), Lucy Boddam- Whetham (Fundraising Manager, Save the Rhino) and Rob Liddell (Board of Directors, Woodland Park Zoo). We travelled to Manas National Park by vehicle. It's - a 4 hour trip which tests your physical and mental well being.

You have to let go of your fears and watch it unfold in front of you, you are constantly air- bourn, mostly on the wrong side of the road, near misses are frequent and the cacophony of car horns is ever present. When you arrive at your destination and check that all your parts are intact, "you know you have had an experience".

Manas National park has faced many challenges; from the late 1980's through to 1996 the park has been seriously impacted by social, racial unrest and political instability in the region that saw the destruction of most of the park's infrastructure and the loss of much of its wildlife including the local extinction of GOHR. The situation is now stable and all stakeholders are working hard to return the park to its former glory.

Manas National Park was granted World heritage status in 1985, it is an Elephant Reserve, a Biosphere Reserve and a "Project Tiger Reserve", and is geographically linked to Royal Manas National Park in Bhutan.



Much of our time at Manas was used to inspect the infrastructure being constructed or repaired within the park. We visited many of the guard posts throughout the park; the guard posts are at the centre of operations for the guards that protect the park. We travelled to the southern boundary of the park to see a recently constructed electric fence. The fence has helped by preventing rhinos from straying out of the park and has reduced the crop raiding of elephants in the area. Local villages have been able to improve their crop yields and are keen to see the fence extended. Much of the fence construction was carried out by local villagers.

During our visit, the field staff were able to take us to the areas where the radio collared rhino are known to be, but despite everyone's best efforts we were unable to see them due to the very high elephant grasses. We were able to track them via radio telemetry. There were 5 resident GOHR in Manas at the time of our visit from 2 previous translocations.

As a Zoo keeper I am often a participant of fundraisers for conservation projects and as a part member of an organisation such as the Taronga Conservation Society, Australia, I use terms like "in situ" and "conservation value" and many other wonderful words and catch phrases to capture peoples' attention, it was not until I experienced all those things that I gained a real understanding of what they mean and how important the work is.



I was pleasantly surprised by what I saw at Manas N.P. To see the level of cooperation between so many organisations working on projects within the park and on its fringes was great. Organisations such as WWF India, Project Tiger, Aaranyak, Department of Forests and many others are stakeholders in Manas N.P. The organisations working at Manas have fostered partnerships with the local people and there is a high level of involvement by many local NGOs.

On our last evening at Manas we were invited by the Manas Ever Welfare society to their recently constructed Eco- Lodge for some local entertainment. Funding from IRV 2020 allowed boys and girls from local villagers to be trained in traditional dance and song. This troupe will regularly perform for the guests at the Lodge. Members of our team were encouraged to join in the dancing; a lot of fun was had by all.

Our next destination was Kaziranga National Park, this involved another exciting road trip to Guwahati and then onto Kaziranga National Park. At Kaziranga we attended the biennial Asian Rhino Specialist Group workshop. Over 50 delegates from India, Nepal, Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and various

overseas NGOs and zoos attended.

The aim of the meeting was to establish a new strategic plan for all Asian rhino species. A large part of the workshop was to carry out a threat analysis for each species and their habitat. The common thread through the analysis was the problem of increased poaching and habitat loss. Other problems included inbreeding depression for Javan and Sumatran species, natural disasters, climate change and invasive species. Information from this meeting will assist members in the formulation of policy and gaining government support to protect rhinos and their habitats.

During the meeting a number of scientific papers were presented by field biologists and scientists covering a diverse range of subjects such as translocation, animal diets and habitat protection and restoration.

After the meeting concluded we were able to visit the park. The last census put Kaziranga's GOHR population at 2,048. As soon as we entered the park we were able to see rhino. I was amazed at how many rhino, elephant, deer, water buffalo and boar I saw. Members of our group saw tigers on two occasions and got the have photos to prove it. Kaziranga is a marvellous place for wildlife and needs our help.

Anyone who is even remotely interested in rhinos knows that the road ahead is going to be rough. The upside is that there are a lot of very dedicated people out there doing a great job to protect and conserve the rhinos in Asia.

I came away from this trip knowing that the work being supported by ARP and the Taronga foundation have a solid conservation value and are worthy of our support.

