

Dreaming Rhino Dreams: Dave Johnson, Denver Zoo



The forest guide studied the sun-dappled floor, surveying the myriad tracks and trails at our feet. An hour passed as he searched for sign of the elusive animal we had trekked across the globe to see. We were atop the great gray back of an elephant in Chitwan National Park, the jewel of the Nepalese park system. My childhood dreams had become reality on that October morning in 2010. I had waited my whole life for this adventure. My giddiness elevated more with each sway from our pachyderm porter's methodical stride. Then ahead, in the shaded periphery of a jungle glade, was a mother Greater one-horned rhino and her two-month old calf. Our mahout grinned with pride as the cacophony of camera clicks echoed our good fortune. I felt a certain spiritual awakening seeing my first glimpse of a wild rhino in Nepal, and it filled me with professional pride for this career that I am so blessed to have.

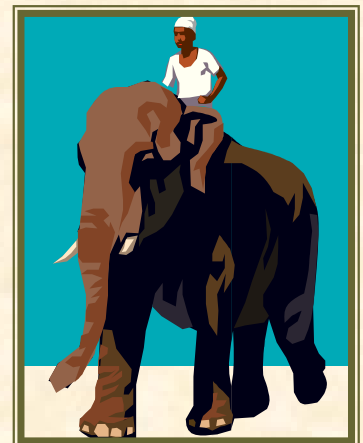
I am a pachyderm keeper at the Denver Zoo. I have been working with animals since the age of fifteen, and the last thirteen years have been happily spent in Colorado. Although my work here is challenging and stimulating, the longer you work at one institution, the more time you have for self-reflection. I recently began to want to step outside of my comfort zone here at the zoo. Doing the husbandry work, talking to the public, creating demonstrations are all interesting parts of my job, but I wanted more. I wanted to challenge myself and try and make a difference, to make a positive impact in the lives of the animals, and the people that share their world. That is when I devised a game plan for a conservation strategy, and "Team Nepalorado" was born.

The word "Nepalorado" is a combination of my home state, and the beckoning country I had always wanted to explore, Nepal. This would be a fusion of cultures, in the name of conservation. The idea intrigued me. Could I make this work? Could I start something from scratch in a country that no one seemed interested in? I checked with our conservation biology team, and nobody had any ties to Nepal. It was an open arena for me to step into. The country also sheltered both the species of elephant and rhino that we would soon be housing here in Denver together. Asian Tropics is set to open next spring. This plan made sense to me. I had to find a way to get my foot in the Nepalese door. I got to work immediately making contacts, and started training. I had to endure five strenuous months of running to prepare myself for the first phase. I lost 25 pounds. I ran my first marathon in May of 2010. I took sponsorships and made a t-shirt design highlighted by our oldest female elephant here in Denver. It was called the "Mimi Marathon". This was the beginning of my fund-raising efforts. I got the incredible support of my zoo and the entire community. Word spread, and our AAZK Comedy Night matched my sponsors dollar for dollar. By the time October had rolled around I had met my goal of raising ten thousand dollars for this new project. We partnered with World Wildlife Fund, and Dr. Shubash Lohani. The plan was to purchase motorbikes for the anti-poaching units of Chitwan National Park. These would help them patrol the park, and lessen the poaching presence felt there. Chitwan loses an average of eleven rhino annually to poaching, and here is where we could make that difference.



The population of Greater one-horned rhinos is now listed at 2850 animals according to the latest WWF numbers. They are found in the southern parts of Nepal and northern India. They are still being hunted for their single horn that demands a heavy price in the Asian black market. Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, is actually a hot spot for illegal animal trade. We would be traveling into the heart of the problem for

many species that are critically endangered in southern Asia. Chitwan provides a home for over 400 rhino, is a stronghold for the Bengal tiger, and has numerous elephant families wandering the protected hills and riverine forests. This seemed like a great place to start our cultural fusion.





Team Nepalorado 2010 was comprised of four Denver Zoo veterans. I brought one of our pachyderm keeper assistants, one long-time volunteer and elephant enthusiast, and her bird-loving husband. We traveled to Bardia and Chitwan National Parks and got to meet the park and World Wildlife Fund staff. We rode on an elephant-back anti-poaching sweep with their military patrols, getting to meet the very same individuals who would be using our motorbikes soon. They introduced us to two orphaned rhino calves who had lost their mothers in the monsoons. We sat down and spoke with the Chief Warden of Chitwan and watched his power point presentation on rhino population. Eleven rhinos were spotted in our two weeks, including seven at the fabulous resort of Tiger Tops. We ran from wild elephants twice, got leeches, rafted with gharials, danced with the local Tharu people, and watched in awe as a sunrise first kissed the tips of the Himalayas. Thirty wild elephant crossed a river right before our eyes, and an early morning

mountain flight let us see Mt. Everest in all of its' glory. Nepal gave me more than I had ever expected, and she continues to call to me, my Asian siren beckoning my return.

In the fall of 2011 we will make a return trip to Nepal and help with the construction of a solar-powered electric fence. This will greatly reduce the serious human/animal conflict around Chitwan. The one up in Barida is already showing great results. Elephant, rhino, and tiger continually clash with the local villagers over the dwindling natural resources. There were four elephant-related human fatalities during our trip, and one caused by a rhino. Team Nepalorado looks to be twelve people strong this year, and will strengthen the cultural fusion between our two communities. In 2012, Asian Tropics opens here in Denver, and we will be displaying this awesome rhino

for the very first time. Nepaloradoans will now be equipped to secure a better world for animals through human understanding.



HAVE YOU REGISTERED FOR THE
WORKSHOP?

DEADLINE IS MARCH 28TH!!

WE WILL SEE YOU IN TEXAS !!!

