

OPINION

Unlocking horns

Rhino diplomacy isn't a new phenomenon; it began as early as 1834



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Before Bhadra and Rupasi (and Solti and Mitini), there were Arun and Aarti. Almost 25 years before the four rhinos were gifted to China this year, Nepal gifted two rhino calves to the Fort Worth Zoo in Texas, United States, in 1991, as part of 'a package deal brokered by the World Wildlife Fund', according to conservationist Hemanta Mishra in his [memoir](#), *The Soul of the Rhino*. "In exchange for a pair of rhinos, [billionaire conservationist and philanthropist] Ed Bass would donate \$150,000 to the WWF on behalf of Fort Worth Zoological Society. The WWF would then manage the fund and use it as leverage to generate additional funds from other sources. These funds would be exclusively reserved for saving wild rhinos in Nepal," Mishra wrote.

For a country struggling to conserve its natural heritage because of lack of funds, it was an excellent initiative. But Mishra, like the naturalist he is, remained troubled. The two calves had literally been kidnapped from their mothers after being tranquilised, and to familiarise them with humans, the two animals lived in Mishra's camp near the Dhungre river in Chitwan for a while. "I often took the rhinos for a walk in the village..." Mishra wrote in his memoir. "The animals followed me like a pair of friendly dogs, often nudging my legs with their snouts." When the calves were finally packed into crates on a Lufthansa flight that would take them to Texas, Mishra said fate had forced him to "snatch the baby rhinos from their mothers, only to nurture and love them before finally putting them aboard a German aircraft on a journey of no return..."

The royal connection

Nepal's royalty had an intimate connection with the animal. Mishra recorded King Birendra performing the now-obsolete ritual of 'tarpan' in 1981, where an old rhino male was shot and killed, and its entrails emptied for the king to propitiate his dead ancestors from inside the carcass. Its hide has long been used in *shraddhas*, and in [1938](#), a Rana had 'a spice container, a flower pot, picture frames, two table lamps, a chandelier, a bowl and a jewel box' made out of rhino hide. Esmond Bradley Martin, an American conservationist, recorded the sale of a rhino's umbilical cord in Kathmandu in 1982, to be tied around the waist 'as a remedy for gastric upsets'. Rhino urine was routinely collected as a relief from asthma attacks. The horn's supposed magical and aphrodisiacal properties were widely known.

Perhaps it was for these reasons, and for reasons of curious fascination, that the Kathmandu royal menagerie held a pair of rhinos in 1824. British resident Brian Hodgson recorded the birth of a calf that year, the first record of a rhino birth in captivity. Ten years later, the same calf became the first instance of Nepali rhino diplomacy: in [1834](#), the animal was sent to Calcutta. We don't know its whereabouts thereafter, but this was not the only instance. In 1911, Rana prime minister Chandra Shamsher, after a shikar expedition with King George V, presented the newly crowned king with 'a valuable Christmas gift'. Perceval Landon in his two volume [history](#) records the gift of 'a considerable number of animals characteristic of all parts of Nepal', including a 'rhinoceros calf, a baby elephant, and a tiger cub.' The animals were sent to the London Zoo, 'destined to fill needed gaps in the collection. Ten years later, when Edward VIII, who was then Prince of Wales, came to Chitwan for a hunting expedition in [1921](#), Chandra Shamsher gifted him another set of animals, including a female calf endearingly named 'Bessie'. There's a record of another male calf named 'Felix' being gifted to the London Zoo in 1924, but it's unclear whether it was part of the same collection of animals that Chandra Shamsher had gifted the Prince of Wales. Then in the 1930s, a pair of rhinos was gifted to King George V under the premiership of Juddha Shamsher.

An invaluable diplomatic tool

For Nepal's royals, the pristine forests of the Terai were an invaluable diplomatic [tool](#). The many shikar expeditions served a purpose of impressing foreign dignitaries with Rana hospitality, and allowed diplomacy to be conducted on an informal yet important scale. "In a letter to the Maharaja... [the Prince of Wales] expressed his thanks for the infinite forethought and care...more than anything else he valued the opportunity thus given of paying a personal visit to the kingdom of Nepal," Landon [wrote](#). The gifts of live specimens, such as the rhinos, helped affirm this friendship.

But it was not just diplomacy through which Nepali rhinos travelled the world. In an era before conservation laws and the ban on hunting, animal collectors like [Carl Hagenbeck](#) travelled the world looking for animals to trap and buy for collections around the world. Hagenbeck was a German merchant who supplied to many zoos in the early part of the 20th century. He is said to have bought four rhinos from Nepal, and

three were sold to Antwerp, Manchester and New York Bronx zoos. There is doubt whether Hagenbeck sold the fourth to the American travelling showman P.T. Barnum, known for his 'freakshows' displaying physically deformed humans and hoaxes that purported to be mermaids. There was also [Frank Buck](#), a hunter and collector, who bought three rhinos in Nepal in the 1920s-30s and sold them to zoos in the US and the UK. He showed the capture of a male rhino calf called 'Harry' that was sold to Missouri zoo in his 1934 film *Wild Cargo*; another female calf called 'Peggy' was bought for \$8000. And in 1966, before Nepali wildlife laws were stricter, animal collector George Munro exported two to the Berlin zoo.

A 1994 study of captive rhinos by L.C Rookmaaker et al. [summarised](#) that at least 260 Asian one-horned rhinos had been taken from the wild through history, and while the origins of 97 animals were unknown, 48 of them could be traced back to Nepal. "Almost all specimens imported into Europe and America between 1905 and 1939 were said to have come from Nepal," Rookmaaker wrote.

An enigmatic beast

Local news reports say the Nepal government has gifted 22 rhinos to various countries. However, the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) has kept records only since [1985](#), when four rhinos were gifted to Dudhwa National Park in India. The 1994 study, on other hand, records several other rhinos, such as two in Yangon zoo named 'Bhunte' and 'Loorie' that arrived in 1980 and a pair that arrived at the Miami Zoo in 1970. There's also a confusing entry in government records against the 1987 gift of two pairs to the US. While a pair named 'Mechi' and 'Kali' was gifted by King Birendra to the Washington D.C. Zoo in 1987, Mishra says a second pair was gifted to San Francisco Zoo the same year, which the study confirms. Government records, however, show the second pair being gifted to National Zoological Park in US, the same as the DC zoo. Government records also do not include a female rhino named 'Narayani' that was gifted by King Birendra to the Berlin Zoo in 1988.

According to the Rookmaaker study, Bhadra and Rupasi aren't the first rhinos to travel to China—a rhino named Xianka was recorded in Beijing zoo in 1959, while in 1980, a pair named 'Kumat' and 'Bhanti' were gifted to the same zoo. (A list of rhinos exported from Nepal and compiled from various sources is available [here](#).)

Some of the countries Nepal has gifted rhinos to are obvious: the US, the UK, Japan and Germany. Others, like Austria, not so much. The 2006 gift of a pair to the Vienna Zoo was not without its share of controversies—the gift came at a time when Austria was chairing the European Union, and some [saw](#) it as the royal regime's attempt to reach out to Europe when it was under fire for autocracy and human rights violations.

In the 16th century, German printmaker Albrecht Durer made a woodcut of a rhino without seeing the animal. The result, an enigmatic beast with armored plates and spikes, was not an accurate representation, but the print, as some have argued, could [be](#) 'the most influential animal picture ever'. Our human fascination with rhinos has allowed Nepal to mould part of its diplomacy around these animals. We can only

hope that such diplomacy is supplemented by increased conservation efforts, and the grasslands of the Terai continue to be home to a beast said to be created when the Hindu god Vishwakarma was stoned, according to a Tharu folk tale recounted by Mishra. “He picked the best parts of many animals on earth and stitched them together,” Mishra writes. “The result was beyond his expectation, a masterpiece of the art of imperfection.”

Anup Ojha contributed to researching for this piece.



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