

## Nepal's rhino translocations to continue amid concerns over effectiveness

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- *Nepal's government will continue the translocation of greater one-horned rhinos within Chitwan National Park to address overpopulation in the western sector, despite opposition from local tourism entrepreneurs citing potential economic impacts.*
- *The translocation aims to ensure a sustainable and evenly distributed rhino population, mitigate non-poaching-related deaths, and reduce risks from flooding and poaching in the western region, officials say.*
- *Tourism entrepreneurs in the western sector, however, argue that the relocation lacks adequate research, will harm local tourism-dependent economies, and say the western region remains the most suitable habitat for rhinos.*

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KATHMANDU — Authorities in Nepal say they'll continue a translocation program to even out the distribution of rhinos in the popular Chitwan National Park, despite protests from tourism operators and concerns from conservationists.

The greater one-horned rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) represents a conservation success story for Nepal — going from a low of around 100 in the 1960s to 752 as of the 2021 census, with 694 in Chitwan. But too many rhinos in the park's western sector, popular with tourists, may be contributing to a current increase in mortality rates, prompting the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) to launch a program in March to move some rhinos to the eastern sector.

An initial six rhinos have been translocated, and the plan is to move another four soon. But tourism operators in the western sector have protested the decision, saying it will hurt their business as tourists come to the area to see the animals.

“We are aware of some reservations from local tourism entrepreneurs. But the translocation program will continue,” said Hari Bhadra Acharya, senior ecologist and information officer at the DNPWC.

While not yet publishing the study that recommended carrying out translocations, the government has cited several reasons for doing so.

A [2022 study](#) looking at mortality cases found a significant decline in poaching deaths from 2008-2018, thanks to intensified community-based law enforcement measures. However, there was also a notable increment in non-poaching deaths during this period, including from individual rhinos fighting each other and from attacks by tigers, whose [population has also flourished](#) across Nepal.

Various theories have been proposed to [explain these deaths](#), but the most widely believed is that there are too many rhinos packed into the western region of Chitwan. Evening out the rhino distribution across the park is one of the reasons for translocation, Acharya said.





Dhaniram Chaudhary, a tourism entrepreneur in the Nawalpur area in the west of the park, told Mongabay that he's not convinced about this rationale. He said the translocations are being carried out without adequate research and called on authorities to reconsider and halt the program.

"Tourists come to see the rhinos and this contributes to the local economy. But if the government takes them away forcefully, it will hurt tourism," he added.

But officials say the translocation is important to ensure a sustainable and viable population of rhinos in the park. "We are also doing the translocation to address two major security threats to the animal in the western sector," Acharya told Mongabay. "The western sector of the park is located downstream of the Rapti River and is prone to flooding," he said, adding that there's not enough high ground in the area for the animals to ride out the flooding.

The other issue is related to poaching. In January last year, a 14-year-old female rhino and her 4-year-old calf were ambushed using a cable hooked up to a temple's power supply line on the western fringes of the park. "The incident prompted us to take action to prevent similar incidents in the future as rhinos were entering people's crop fields at night, making them easy prey for poachers," Acharya said.



Authorities plan to radio-collar the translocated rhinos to track their movements and observe if they return to the western sector on their own. “This will give us an indication of how suitable the habitat is in the eastern sector,” Acharya said.

Although officials say the density of rhinos in the western sector increased as the animals were pushed downstream by floods, conservationists dispute this. They say that changes in the Rapti River, vital to the national park, brought about by increased human settlement in its headwaters, have led to land degradation and increased silt in the water.

“This could have reshaped the riverbed, buried waterholes previously used by rhinos and created dry conditions,” said Bed Bahadur Khadka, former conservation officer at the national park. Additionally, the construction of dikes along the park’s eastern part has altered the river’s flow, making the eastern sector less favorable for rhinos, he said.

The presence of some human settlements, relocated in the early 1990s, and upscale hotels, shut down in 2012, in the eastern side of the park also played an important role in maintaining the rhino habitat in the area, Khadka said. He said both the settlement residents and hotel staff had constructed makeshift canals and ponds in areas frequented by rhinos. The residents did so for their rice fields; the hotel staff to attract wildlife for tourists. But with the settlements and the hotels gone, park authorities haven’t continued the efforts, Khadka said.

Chaudhary, the tourism entrepreneur, said the translocated rhinos likely to return to the western sector as it has the most suitable habitat for rhinos, particularly for breeding and raising calves.

“The resources used in translocation could have been put into better use elsewhere,” he said.

***Banner Image:*** A one-horned rhino in the wild. Image courtesy of USAID.

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#### **Citation:**

Bhandari, S., Adhikari, B., Baral, K., & Subedi, S. C. (2022). Greater one-horned rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) mortality patterns in Nepal. *Global Ecology and Conservation*, 38. doi:[10.1016/j.gecco.2022.e02189](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gecco.2022.e02189)

