

## Unlocking horns

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



**Amish Raj Mulmi**

Published at : August 10, 2018

Updated at : August 10, 2018 14:49

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 ‘Bhunti’ 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.*

---



**Amish Raj Mulmi**

Mulmi is the author of ‘All Roads Lead North: Nepal’s Turn to China’.

<https://kathmandupost.com/opinion/2018/08/10/unlocking-horns>

Zoo/City	Country	Years in Captivity	Gender	Source	Notes
Calcutta	India	1834-[unknown]	M		First calf born in captivity sent to Calcutta; province unknown; Hodgson recorded its birth in 1824 in Kathmandu
Antwerp	Belgium	1907		1 of 4 bought by Carl Hagenbeck	Year of death unknown; province unknown
P.T. Barnum	US	1907		1 of 4 bought by Carl Hagenbeck	Reynolds suggests this was the 4th Hagenbeck rhino; however, Rookmaaker says no proof of its arrival at the circus had been found; usually such purchases were advertised
Manchester	UK	1907-1917		1 of 4 bought by Carl Hagenbeck	Died in 1917 after swallowing a tennis ball
New York Bronx Zoo	US	1907-1918		1 of 4 bought by Carl Hagenbeck	Named Mogul
Calcutta	India	1910-1912	M	Bought from Nepal	According to Rookmaaker, a pair was purchased from Nepal for Rs. 15,000 and then sent to London with Prince of Wales
Calcutta	India	1910-1930	M	Bought from Nepal	Rookmaaker suggests this animal was the second animal from the pair that was purchased previously; however, he also says this was the animal gifted to London Zoo by Prince of Wales along with several other animals 'presented to His Majesty by Nepal Durbar'. I haven't been able to confirm if this animal is the same as the one Chandra gifted to King George V at the 1911 shikar expedition.
London Zoo	UK	1912-1921	M	Caught in Nepal	Gifted by Edward VII to zoo [2]
London Zoo	UK	1922-1926	F	Gift from Nepal	Named Bessie; Gifted to Edward VIII by Chandra Shamsher at hunting camp with a group of other animals
Philadelphia	US	1923-1943	F	Bought by Frank Buck	Named Peggy; purchased for \$8000
New York Bronx Zoo	US	1923-1962	F	Bought by Frank Buck	Named Bessie
Cincinnati	US	1923-29	F	Bought from Nepal	Rookmaaker notes the animal was imported through Nepal via Hagenbeck for \$10000; however, Hagenbeck died in 1913. Therefore, one cannot ascertain the veracity of this specimen.
London Zoo	UK	1924-1941	M	Presented by Chandra Shamsher	Named Felix; became savage; died of tuberculosis; gifted to Edward VIII at hunting camp with a group of other animals
Hamburg	Germany	1929/30 [?]	F		As noted by Rookmaaker in his study, probably bought by Hagenbeck in Nepal for 2000 pounds; however, Hagenbeck died in 1913.
London Zoo	UK	1933-1938	F	Gift from Nepal	Named Hash; wounded by Hush and put down
London Zoo	UK	1933-1945	M	Gift from Nepal	Named Hush
Paris	France	1934-1960	M	Caught in Nepal	Brought by Jean Delacour
Missouri	US	1934-1961	M	Bought by Frank Buck [3]	Named Harry; Buck showed the capture in his film Wild Cargo in 1934
Yangon	Myanmar	1938-1942	M	Gift from Nepal	Presented by Juddha when Sir Harcourt-Butlar was governor of Burma; Named Rosie; Killed by Japanese in World War II after taking Rangoon
Beijing	China	1959-1978	M	Caught in Nepal [4]	Named Xiangka, died of chronic ulcer & gastritis
Yangon	Myanmar	1962-64	F	Caught in Nepal	Date of death not clear; named Khin Khin Way [Miss Affection]

Zoo/City	Country	Years in Captivity	Gender	Source	Notes
Omaha	US	1966-1975	M	Caught in Nepal	Named Tiny; caught in Nepal in 1962 after mother had been killed by poachers; exhibited prior in Portland
Berlin	Germany	1966-67	F	Caught in Nepal	Bought by dealer George Munro; named Kanchi; died of enteritis
Berlin	Germany	1967-	F	Caught in Nepal	Bought by dealer George Munro; named Kumari; provenience unknown
Miami	US	1970-	M	Caught in Nepal	Caught by Ralph S. Scott; named Mohan
Miami	US	1970-	F	Caught in Nepal	Caught by Ralph S. Scott; named Shanti
Beijing	China	1980-	F	Caught in Nepal	Named Bhunti, alive in 1994 as reported in Rookmaaker
Beijing	China	1980-1981	M	Caught in Nepal	Named Kumat; died of parasitical malnutrition
Yangon	Myanmar	1980-1993	M	Caught in Nepal	Named Bhunte; photographed with people collecting urine; died of equine viral encephalitis
Yangon	Myanmar	1980-1993	F	Caught in Nepal	Named Loorie; died of same cause as Bhunte
Dudhwa NP	India	1985-		Gift from Nepal	4 animals gifted according to Nepal Government report
Chiang Mai	Thailand	Apr 1986-	F	Imported from Nepal [5]	8 years old on arrival; alive in 1994 as reported in Rookmaaker
Chiang Mai	Thailand	Apr 1986-Jul 1986	M	Imported from Nepal [6]	8 months old; died of kidney failure
San Francisco	US	1987-	F	Gift from Nepal	Pair gifted by King Birendra; handed over by Prince Gyanendra on 22 June 1987; named Shanti; alive in 1994
Washington DC	US	1987-	F	Gift from Nepal	Gift to President Reagan and people of US; named Mechi [7]
Washington DC	US	1987-	F	Gift from Nepal	Gift to President Reagan and people of US; named Kali
San Francisco	US	1987-1996	M	Gift from Nepal	Pair gifted by King Birendra; handed over by Prince Gyanendra on 22 June 1987; named Chhetra [8]
Berlin	Germany	1988-	F	Gift from Nepal [9]	Named Narayani; Donated by King Birendra; alive in 1994 as reported in Rookmaaker
Munich	Germany	1990-	F	Imported from Nepal	Named Rapti; status unknown
Singapore	Singapore	1990-	M	Gift from Nepal	Rookmaaker writes of 2 rhinos in Singapore; the male was called Karnak, and was about 7 months old on arrival. GoN report mentions 2 rhinos being gifted to Singapore in 1990; I have assumed the two animals are the same.
Singapore	Singapore	1990-91	F	Gift from Nepal	Named Kanchi; died of impacted gut. See above note on Singapore male named Karnak
Fort Worth; Texas	US	1991-	M	Gift from Nepal	Named Arun; caught under Hemanta Mishra as recorded in his book
Fort Worth; Texas	US	1991-	F	Gift from Nepal	Named Aarti; caught under Hemanta Mishra as recorded in his book
Dhaka	Bangladesh	1993-	?	Gift from Nepal	2 animals gifted accd to government report; sex unclear
Stuttgart	Germany	1993-	F	Gift from Nepal	1 female calf gifted to Stuttgart zoo according GoN report
London	UK	1998-	F	Gift from Nepal	Part of 2 females gifted accd to GoN report
London	UK	1998-	F	Gift from Nepal	Part of 2 females gifted accd to GoN report

Zoo/City	Country	Years in Captivity	Gender	Source	Notes
Tama Zoo	Japan	2002-	M	Gift from Nepal	Part of a pair gifted to Japan accd to GoN report
Tama Zoo	Japan	2002-	F	Gift from Nepal	Part of a pair gifted to Japan accd to GoN report
Vienna Zoo	Austria	2006-	M	Gift from Nepal	Handed over by then Crown Prince Paras
Vienna Zoo	Austria	2006-	F	Gift from Nepal	Handed over by then Crown Prince Paras
Guangzhou	China	2018-	M	Gift from Nepal	Named Bhadra
Guangzhou	China	2018-	F	Gift from Nepal	Named Rupsi
TBC	China	2018-	M	Gift from Nepal	Part of a second pair to be gifted to China; Named Solti
TBC	China	2018-	F	Gift from Nepal	Part of a second pair to be gifted to China; Named Mitini
<b>Disclaimers</b>					
Since the tabulated data is based on the above sources, there may be inaccuracies if the collected data has been faulty [re: Cincinnati Zoo rhino].					
I am not a historian, or a naturalist; my conclusions are based on these sources. Any error in tabulation is solely mine.					
For these reasons, the data above should not be considered as conclusive.					
I am grateful to Anup Ojha of Kathmandu Post for acquiring the annual report from GoN					
<b>Data sources</b>					
<a href="#">R.J. Reynolds, Asian Rhinos in Captivity, International Zoo Yearbook Vol. 2, 1961</a>					
<a href="#">Rookmaaker, L.C.; Jones, M.L.; Kloes, H.G.; Reynolds, R.J., The Rhinoceros in Captivity, SPB Academic Publishing, Hague, 1998</a>					
<a href="#">Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, Annual Report, 2074 BS (2017-18)</a>					
<a href="http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/printedition/news/2018-07-11/gifted-rhino-pair-set-out-for-china-from-chitwan.html">http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/printedition/news/2018-07-11/gifted-rhino-pair-set-out-for-china-from-chitwan.html</a>					
Hemanta Mishra & Jim Ottoway Jr., The Soul of the Rhino, Penguin: Delhi, 2012					
Perceval Landon, Nepal, Volumes 1 & 2, Constable: London, 1928					
Further reading available at:					
<a href="http://www.rhinosourcecenter.com/">http://www.rhinosourcecenter.com/</a>					

[1] Hagenbeck was a noted wildlife collector in the early part of the 20th century. More details here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl\\_Hagenbeck](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Hagenbeck)

[2] Reynolds says Edward VII gifted the animal to the zoo; however, Edward VII died in 1910; Landon records the gift being made to King George V in 1911. Also, see the previous entry on the Calcutta zoo rhino.

[3] Frank Buck was another wildlife collector and filmmaker. More details here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank\\_Buck\\_\(animal\\_collector\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Buck_(animal_collector))

[4] Unclear whether 'Caught in Nepal' means whether it was an official gift or an animal trapped in the wild by collectors. Noted as it is in Rookmaaker et al.

[5] As reported in Rookmaaker; unclear whether official diplomatic gift or purchased via collectors

[6] See above

[7] Nepal Government report says on 22 May 1987, 4 rhinos were given to Washington Zoo & National Zoological Park US, which are the same. However, Hemanta Mishra in his book says 2 pairs of rhinos were gifted in 1987 to Washington and San Francisco Zoo.

[8] See note against gift to  
Washington DC Zoo

[9] All official gifts are noted as 'Gift from Nepal' wherever one can corroborate it was a gift, and not caught/bought by animal dealers