05 · PARK & PEOPLE · NO. 1 IN THE SERIES

Manas, *twenty-six years on*

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MEMBER, ASRSG · INTERVIEWED FOR ASIAN RHINOS

Number 3 of this bulletin (March 2000) carried the memorial for Sanjoy Deb Roy, Manas's first Field Director. We return to his park with rhinos back on the ground — through a Director who has run both Kaziranga and Manas.



Manas's famous melanistic leopard crossing
PHOTOGRAPH: NAYAN JYOTI DAS

Q· *Manas lost its entire rhino population in the insurgency years, then rebuilt it through translocations. What does that journey look like from inside the park today?*

Manas has lived through one of conservation's most difficult journeys. During the insurgency years, its entire rhino population was lost to poaching, and the park was placed on UNESCO's List of World Heritage in Danger in 1992. Yet what followed is equally important: through sustained translocations, community participation, improved protection, and long-term political and administrative commitment, Manas began to recover. Rhino reintroduction began in 2006 under the Indian Rhino Vision 2020 programme, and UNESCO removed the "in Danger" listing in 2011. For me, Manas is proof that science-backed conservation works — but only when it is matched by political will, patient institutions, and the willingness to accept setbacks without abandoning the long-term goal.

Q· *Where does the population stand, and how is it monitored and secured day to day?*

The rhino population is currently pitched at around 50 individuals. We are now trying to return to the intensive monitoring strategy used during the early reintroduction phase, when every animal was individually tracked and followed. Day to day, this means combining direct observation, intelligence-led patrolling, habitat monitoring, and coordination between frontline staff, local communities, and partner organizations. The objective is simple: know each animal, understand its movement and condition, and ensure that protection is proactive rather than reactive.

Q· *You have directed both Kaziranga and Manas. What did Kaziranga teach you — and what simply doesn't transfer?*

Both Kaziranga and Manas are World Heritage Sites, and rightly so. Both teach the same fundamental lesson: large, connected landscapes must remain inviolate if wildlife is to thrive and recover. But the similarity ends there. Kaziranga taught me the value

of strong, centralized protection — what is often described as "fortress conservation." That model has worked well in its context. Manas, however, taught me that there cannot be one blanket solution for every landscape. In a post-conflict setting, collaborative governance has been far more effective. Manas has shown me that foresters must respect and acknowledge multiple governance models, especially where communities are not merely stakeholders but partners in conservation.

Q· *How has the relationship with the fringe villages changed, and what role do former poachers play?*

Collaborative governance helped Manas recover much faster than would normally be expected in a post-conflict landscape. The Bhutan side also acted as a natural buffer during the conflict years, allowing many wildlife populations to survive and later spring back. Former poachers, local communities, and especially women who had few alternatives during the decade-long conflict joined hands with the government to support conservation. That shift is perhaps Manas's greatest achievement: conservation is no longer seen only as a government instruction, but as a shared future.

Q· *What of Sanjoy Deb Roy's legacy do you still feel in how the park runs?*

Sanjoy Deb Roy's spirit and soul will reside in Manas forever. His surveillance systems remain part of the park's protection architecture, but his influence goes beyond technology. His experiments with pygmy hog recovery and grassland management continue to shape how we think about habitat restoration in Manas. His legacy reminds us that good conservation is both rigorous and imaginative.



Frontline staff of Manas National Park
— PHOTOGRAPH: PHOTO MUSINGS LAB

Q· *What would success look like ten years from now?*

The complete restoration of Manas's habitats and animal populations to their pre-1992 status. That does not only mean more rhinos. It means secure grasslands, healthy riverine ecosystems, viable populations of flagship and lesser-known species, and a landscape where local communities see themselves as custodians of that recovery.

Q· *What could AsRSG members actually do for Manas?*

Support technical knowledge exchange, share global best practices, help strengthen monitoring and veterinary capacity, and contribute positive international visibility. Most importantly, help garner global support — including funding — for Manas's long-term conservation programme.

Q· *What do people outside Assam most misunderstand about Manas?*

People often assume that Manas is still deeply affected by insurgency — unsafe, lawless, its animals routinely hunted. That image is outdated. Manas today is a recovering, actively managed landscape with committed frontline staff, engaged communities, and growing wildlife populations. The challenge now is not lawlessness; it is sustaining recovery in a complex landscape.

Q· *A moment you are proudest of?*

The journey from 2007, when the UNESCO monitoring mission reviewed Manas as a site in danger and I was a bright-eyed DFO supporting the review mission, to 2011, when the site came off the Danger List — and now to receiving recognition from UNESCO for Manas's revival. Being part of that journey has been deeply humbling.

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Ujung Kulon, *the last of the last*

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Pak Ardi Andono — © Ujung Kulon National Park (UKNP)



Marine patrol, Ujung Kulon

© UJUNG KULON NATIONAL PARK (UKNP)



Patrol on the ground

© UJUNG KULON NATIONAL PARK (UKNP)

Q· *Ujung Kulon is the only place on Earth where the Javan rhino survives in the wild. What does that responsibility feel like, day to day?*

It is both a great honour and a serious challenge. I am fully aware that the survival of one of the world's rarest mammals depends on the protection we provide in this park. This is not only Indonesia's responsibility, but a global conservation responsibility. For me, protecting the Javan rhino is more than an administrative duty — it is a moral responsibility to ensure that future generations can still see this magnificent animal living in the wild, rather than only reading about it in history books. We should never be satisfied simply because the Javan rhino is still alive today.

Q· *Where does the population stand, and how do you monitor it?*

Since 2024 we have been developing a population monitoring approach called spatial count. Our survey design is organised into 35 clusters, with four camera traps in each — 140 cameras providing systematic coverage across the park. We identify individuals from physical features, and combine identification, camera locations and detection times into a spatial database. Importantly, we do not simply count the rhinos photographed: in a dense tropical forest some animals may never pass a camera, so we use statistical approaches that account for imperfect detection. Monitoring is not just about knowing how many Javan rhinos remain