

TOPIC: INDIAN RHINO CONSERVATION PROJECT

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CHAPTER 3

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Introduction

Assam celebrated 100 years of conservation of Indian Rhino species in the Kaziranga National Park in 2005. The state government and wildlife conservationist came up with a plan to change the status quo and promote conservation of rhinos. At that time the Kaziranga National Park had nearly 1,855 rhinos, Orang National Park had 68 and Pobitora wildlife sanctuary had around 81 Indian rhino.

Indian Rhino Vision 2020 (IRV 2020)

Wildlife experts believed that their numbers can be increased to 3000 in the next 15 years, and this idea gives birth to Indian rhino vision 2020 (IRV 2020).

Indian rhino vision 2020 is being implemented by the Department of Environment and Forest Assam, in partnership with Bodo Autonomous Council. It is supported by WWF India, WWF areas (Asian Rhino and Elephant action strategy) program, the international rhino foundation (IRF), US fish and wildlife

service, save the rhino s campaign of zoological institutions worldwide, and several NGOs and local conservation groups.

IRV 2020 aims to increase the total rhino population in Assam to 3000 by 2020. The population of rhinos are to be distributed in various rhino habit in at least 7 protected areas in order to provide a long-term sustainable population of one-horned Indian rhino species.



Rhinoceros unicornis, Kaziranga

Indian Rhino and its role on ecosystem and biodiversity

- The scientific name of Indian rhino is *Rhinoceros unicornis*, and they can weight over 2000 kilograms. They are large herbivorous animals, and they shape the landscape and environment, and hence they are known as keystone species.
- By eating only certain kinds of grass and trampling on the dense vegetation the rhinos affect the smaller herbivorous of their area creating a cascading effect which in turn affects the other species.

Why there is a need for translocation of Indian rhino species

- Today, around 80% of Indian rhino population is concentrated in the most important rhino habitat - the Kaziranga National Park. Concentrating large number Indian rhino species in a single protected area exposes them to risks of epidemics, floods, poaching and other threats.
- Also, the rhinos in the Pobitora National Park have exceeded their carrying capacity and their numbers have to be reduced in order to avoid rhino human conflicts.
- Translocation of rhinos to new rhino habitat is the backbone of Indian rhino vision 2020 programme. The new potential rhino habitat which is identified is Manas National Park, Dibru Saikhowa wildlife sanctuary, Laokhowa- Bura Chapori wildlife sanctuary and Orang national park.

Translocation of Indian rhinos to new rhino habitat

- Manas National Park was selected as the first new rhino habitat for the translation of Indian rhino species. Rhinos were once common in this park, but violent civil conflicts beginning in 1989 caused damage to the park infrastructure and the destruction of anti-poaching camps, roads and the villages. The last Rhino which was seen in Manas National Park was in 1996.
- Under IRV 2020 Rhinos have been released in the Manas National Park. The Rhinos have been radio-collared for their tracking and anti-poaching camps have been set up in the park. However, despite efforts poaching has been a threat for Rhinos in the Manas National Park. Due to this reason, the translocation of new Rhinos in the park has been put on a moratorium.
- Bura chapori wildlife sanctuary was another site where the rhinos have been translocated from the Kaziranga National Park on 29th of March 2016. However, the death of two rhinos, probably due to some disease has been a cause for concern.

Threats for Indian rhino species

- The habitat of Indian Rhino once included the regions of Pakistan, Northern India, modern day Nepal, Bangladesh,

Bhutan and Myanmar. However, loss of large tracts of rhino habitat and its large-scale poaching for its horn, which are believed to have medicinal properties has been responsible for its extinction in all other countries except in India and Nepal.

- By 1900 there were only 100 to 200 Indian rhinos in the world. However, with conservation efforts, the current Indian rhino population has reached 3500. However, threats against the rhinos have not vanished.
- For example, the Manas National Park where the rhinos were translocated have seen several instances of poaching. Due to this reason, the translocation of more rhinos has been on a moratorium.
- Diseases and natural disasters are other threats to the rhino population. The death of rhinos in the Bura Chapori wildlife sanctuary has been probably due to some disease which is a cause of concern for the rhino population.
- Man-animal conflict at the Pobitora national park and Kaziranga National Park can also become a major threat for the rhino population if it is not handled properly.

Problems with IRV 2020

- Trade of valuable parts along with the horn of Rhino in countries such as China and Vietnam is a major roadblock on

IRV 2020. Further, the lack of space in the national parks such as Kaziranga and Pobitora is emerging as a big problem. This can increase the problems of man-animal conflict.

- Also, the import of drug etorphine, the tranquillizing drug of choice has been a big challenge. It is essential for the translocation of rhino population to other places.
- However, Zoos from Australia and other countries have donated around half a million dollars for the conservation of Indian rhino species under the Indian rhino vision 2020.
