

Indian Rhino Vision (IRV) 2020 – Training cum Translocation of Rhinos within Assam, the first Phase - (TRAINING BUT NOT A TRAINING BUT PERFECT TRANSLOCATION)

Bishan Singh Bonal¹, Bibhab Kumar Talukdar² and Amit Sharma³

Introduction

The conservation of the Great Indian One horned Rhino (*rhinoceros unicornis*) is being regarded as the epitome of conservation movement in the country and Assam in particular. Assam is also regarded as the last stronghold of the Indian Rhino with more than 2000 rhinos in the wild. Planned initiative in terms of rhino conservation in Assam by the Department of Forest with the help and support of many agencies including local populace made it possible to build up the population of rhinos to 1855 in Kaziranga National Park, 68 in Orang National Park and 81 in Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary (Rhino census- 2006). While the successes in conservation of rhino was achieved in the above mentioned three protected areas, loss and subsequent extermination of rhino by poachers were witnessed in the other rhino bearing areas like Laokhowa-Burachapori Wildlife Sanctuary during the social unrest in early 1980's and in Manas National Park during the social unrest in 1990's.

For developing a vision and roadmap for long term conservation of the globally famous one horned rhinoceros in the state, the Government of Assam constituted the "Task Force for Translocation of Rhinos within Assam" commonly called "Rhino Task Force" in June 2005 vide notification No. FRW.24 / 2005 / 15 dated 30th June, 2005 incorporating conservationist from diverse background, from the government as well as non-governmental sector. The task force received immediate support from the two international organizations World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) and International Rhino Foundation (IRF) to undertake activities for the conservation of rhinos in Assam and also to create new populations in Assam through translocation.



Photo 1 – Task Force meeting in progress

The task force met in Guwahati for the first time in November 2005 to discuss the preliminary plan of action and also to set a vision. The vision set was to have a rhino population of 3000 in the wild in Assam in seven of its protected area by the year 2020 from the present population of more than 2000 in three of its protected areas. The goal set was to populate the potential rhino habitat areas identified viz. Manas NP, Dibru Saikhowa WLS, Laokhowa - Bura Chapori WLS with a viable population of rhino through translocations from Kaziranga NP and Pobitora WLS. With the mentioned vision and goal a joint program was developed between the Forest Department, Government of Assam, WWF and IRF by the Task Force and was named as the "Indian Rhino Vision (IRV) 2020" program. This program was welcomed by many in the global as well as the local level and soon US Fish and Wildlife Services (USFWS) and Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) extended their full support and co-operation for the success of the program.

The task force decided to set-up two expert groups, one the **Security Assessment Group (SAG)** to assess current state of the security and support needed to strengthen the security scenario viz.- infrastructure ,roads, anti poaching camps, rifle, wireless network and other logistics including position of frontline staffs etc of the identified potential PA The Security expert group was headed by Dr Bibhab Talukdar with four other members, Mr. Ritesh Bhattacharyya, Mr. Amit Sharma, Dr Rathin Barman and one member from the Assam Police and the second the **Habitat Assessment Group (HAG)** to assess the condition and feasibility and the current state of the habitat in Manas NP, Dibru Saikhowa WLS, Laokhowa WLS and Bura Chapori WLS and evaluate the sites in regards suitability for rhinos. The Habitat Assessment Group was headed by Mr. K.C.Patar with Dr. Padmeswar Gogoi, Mr. A.C.Das and Dr. Pranab J. Bora as members.

Both the groups visited the sites to study every detail and thereafter presented and submitted the findings before the task force. After deliberation and discussions it was decided that Manas NP should be the first target for the translocation of rhinos under the IRV2020 program. For this the Park has to be provided with necessary support to enhance the infrastructure and manpower scenario to improve the security status, some suggestions were also made by the HAG for habitat management activities. The political will and all out support extended by the BTC with supportive attitude of the local populace was the deciding factor to consider the Manas National Park as the first Receiving PA. It was also felt that reviving Manas will help to get back its recognition as a full fledged World Heritage Site which is currently tagged as World Heritage Site “*in Danger*”.

The Park authorities in Manas National Park took all necessary steps as suggested by the Task Force to improve the security scenario. Support was extended by BTC, WWF, IRF and USFWS to improve the infrastructure and manpower scenario as suggested in the security group report. A second assessment was made by the security team to evaluate the improved condition of the park and a status report on the same was submitted to the task force. Based on the report of an improved security status in Manas the decision was taken to go ahead and carry out translocation of rhinos to Manas NP. In the first phase which was termed as the training cum translocation, decision was taken to translocate four rhinos from Pobitora WLS to Manas NP.

To execute the translocation operations and to control all activities related to translocation the task force constituted a “**Translocation Core Committee (TCC)**” on 23rd November 2007, headed by Mr. B.S.Bonal as the Chief Operations Officer(COO) and Mr. Amit Sharma (WWF) as the Deputy COO . The other members in the committee are Dr. Bibhab Talukdar (Aaranyak), FDTP Manas, Director Kaziranga NP and DFO Guwahati WL Division. The responsibility or the terms of reference (TOR) for TCC to work on were -

- a. The TCC will be planning, executing and monitoring the capturing, transporting and releasing of the rhinos to be translocated from source PA to the target PA.
- b. TCC will constitute the different teams that may be required for executing different activities in PA’s i.e.- Kaziranga NP, Pobitora WLS and the target PA.
- c. TCC will also assign the works to the concerned teams accordingly.

The Translocation Operation

The process and activities involved with a translocation can be divided into three distinct stages –

1. preparatory / planning stage
2. implementation (capture-transport-release)
3. post release

A. PREPARATORY STAGE: The first step in any process involves the planning at the most detailed covering the minutest of things for a successful implementation. The TCC met for the first time in Guwahati on 4th December 2007 and shortlisted all necessary that needs to be in place for a successful translocation process. For utilizing the benefits of all resources and manpower the following were listed for consideration for the final event.

1. A list of the officers of Forest Department, Assam (including retired) who had prior experience of participating in the translocation operations in Nepal.
2. A list of the officers of Forest Department, Assam (including retired) having experience in working in the PA's specially in rhino bearing areas.
3. A list of the veterinary doctors of Assam (including retired) who had prior experience of participating in the translocation operations in Nepal as well as doctors experienced in handling wildlife.
4. A list of NGO's in Assam having experience of working in wildlife specially rhinos.
5. A list of reputed individuals having experience of working in wildlife in Assam specially rhinos.
6. A list of reputed individuals in India and abroad having relevant experience of working in wildlife and involved in translocations.
7. A list of Institutions of relevance.
8. A list of NGO's in India and abroad having relevant experience of working in wildlife and involved in translocations.
9. A comprehensive list of trained elephants available with Forest Department of Assam as well as trained private elephants having experience of working in rhino bearing areas.

After detailed discussions and keeping in view the various activities the teams that were identified to be necessary are –

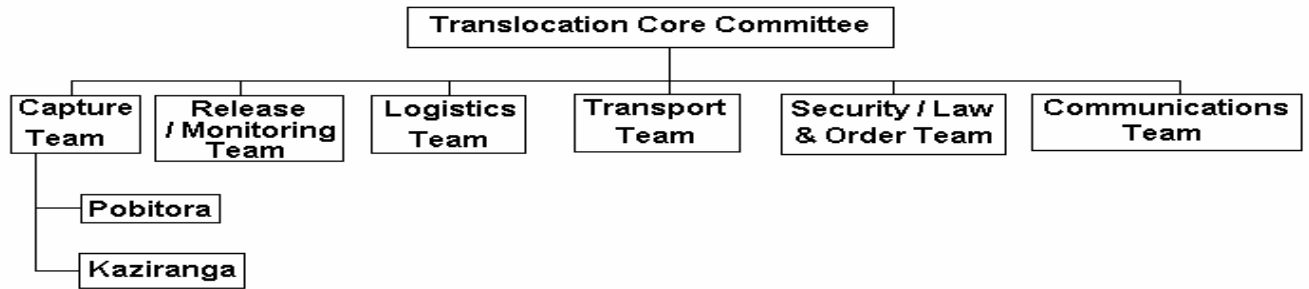


Chart1 – TCC and sub-teams

CAPTURE TEAM:

Pobitora WLS and Kaziranga NP are the two source protected areas for rhinos in Assam as such two capture teams were formed one for each PA. The DFO Guwahati Wildlife Division, Mr. Surajit Dutta is the leader of the team with Range Officer Pobitora, Mr. Mukul Tamuly as deputy. Mr. S. Buragohain Director Kaziranga NP is the leader of the Kaziranga team and DFO EAWL Division is his deputy. The two teams have a number of support members to assist and carry out the necessary activities.

The capture team also had a dedicated darting team headed by Dr. Kushal Sarma from College of Veterinary Sciences (CVSc), Khanapara and he was supported by Dr. Bijoy Dutta (CVSc), Dr. Bijoy K. Gogoi (Assam State Zoo), Dr. Garga M. Das (WWF-India) and Dr. Bhaskar Choudhury (WTI).

RELEASE AND MONITORING TEAM:

For the present phase, Manas NP is the recipient PA as such a Release and Monitoring team is formed with FDTP Manas TR, Mr. A. Swargiary as the leader and Deputy FDTP Manas TR, Mr. C.R.Bhobora as deputy. The release team is responsible for undertaking all the activities related to the release of the rhinos in Manas and the monitoring team is responsible for the long term monitoring of the rhinos in its new habitat in the park. Both the release and monitoring units has a number of team members to offer all necessary support.



Photo 2 – Crates & Sledges under preparation

LOGISTIC TEAM:

The logistics team is responsible for making all the arrangements involved in the whole translocation process at the sites of capture, release and during transport. This team works in close co-ordination with all the other teams and is led by Mr. Narayan Mahanta, DFO Assam State Zoo and Dr Pranab J. Bora, WWF-India as deputy along with a number of support members.

TRANSPORT TEAM:

This team is led by CF-Wildlife. Mr. A. Rava and the deputy is Mr. A.S.Laskar DFO – Enforcement, Guwahati and is responsible for making all the arrangements for transporting

the rhinos from the site of capture to the release site guiding the logistic team in close co-ordination with the Security team.

SECURITY AND LAW & ORDER TEAM:

The Security and Law & Order team is constituted to ensure the safety and security from the crowd of neighboring village during the operations as well as during transport and will also control traffic in the route that will be used for transportation of captured rhinos. Mr. R.M. Singh, IGP-Border, Assam is the team leader and SP's of all the concerned districts are the members of the team.

COMMUNICATION TEAM:

Mr. M.C.Malakar, PCCF-Wildlife Assam is the leader of the Communication team and Mr. Tariq Aziz from WWF-India is the deputy and this team is supported by the COO of the TCC Mr. B.S.Bonal. This team formulates communication strategies and interacts with the media, public and VIP's. This team also provides press release, arranges press coverage of the event along with filming of the whole process. The team also takes care of the awareness and public support campaigns with the help of the other teams.

B. IMPLEMENTATION STAGE: This stage includes locating the rhinos, capturing, transporting and then releasing the rhinos in the destination. Monitoring of rhinos has been going on in WLS for the last one year taken up jointly by the Assam Forest Department and WWF-India. The release site has been made ready by the Park authorities with the support of the IRV partners WWF, IRF, USFWS and BTC under the supervision of the TCC. A basic training on monitoring and radio telemetry was also organized for the staff of Manas NP at Basbari.

12th and 13th February was the dates fixed for capture and translocation but for the want of drugs in time had to be postponed. The Task Force on 9th April at a very short notice rescheduled the date on 11th and 12th April 2008 for capture and release in Manas NP. On the same day a training of radio collar fitting and operation was organized at Assam State Zoo using domestic cattle as demo where could understand lots of minor but important aspect of the collaring viz.- face to insert first, opening and screw of nuts, removal of magnet to start charging and functioning of radio transmitter, etc. On 10th April 2008 all arrangements were



Photo 3 – Planning the capture moves



made ready in all the sites by all the teams for the operation and a training cum orientation was organized for all members to be participating in the operations and briefed by Mr. B.S.Bonal COO , Mr. A.Sharma Dy. COO and others at Tuplung camp in Pobitora. For the operations four sets of crates and sledges were prepared. Five trucks, one crane and one backhoe loader were arranged in addition to other accessories, tranquilizing equipments and drugs / medicines.

On the day of actual capture i.e.- 11th April at Pobitora WLS, the area was cordoned off and full

security cover was provided by the personnel's of the Assam Police department as well as by Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) organized by Security Team. The operation started off at about 4.30 AM with the locators as the first unit moving out of elephant backs to locate the pre-identified rhinos. Thereafter on being located the rhinos, the other units viz. veterinarians / darters, radio collars and cordoning teams set off on elephant backs to the identified area. Having approached too close to the identified rhinos by other member on elephant back where only the darting teams should have been, the rhinos got alarmed by the presence of more elephants in the close vicinity of operation hence rhinos escaped away from cordoned site. A strategy was thought to be implemented through a brief field discussing among Mr. M.C. Malakar, Chief Wildlife Warden Assam with B.S.Bonal COO TCC, Dy. COO TCC and Capture Team Leader. It was decided that only two elephants with the darting team should move near to the rhinos and other elephants to be at a safe distance. This strategy was successful and the first rhino, a male aged about 10 years was successfully darted in between Tuplung and Pagladova camp at about 8.30AM and was put on to the crate after toeing the tranquilized rhino, placed on the sledge, from the site of tranquilization to site of loading. Before crating, all necessary screening and medical care was provided by the veterinary team along with recording necessary details as per format and fitting radio collar in the neck of the rhino. The temperature was rising, and the tired team members after having a break for water



and food, the crate with rhino was loaded onto the truck using the crane and backhoe loader (dodger). The rhino was quite aggressive in nature and made all possible attempts to break free from the crate even after sedation. As this was a training cum translocation being attempted for the very first time, it took a little more effort and time. By the time the first rhino was successfully placed in the truck and parked in shade it was almost 11AM. Success of the first attempt made the confidence of the whole team grow and all were now very eager

to go for the second one. After taking rest for about half an hour the team swung in to action to capture the next rhino which was located in the area between Pagladova and Nekerahabi camp. The second rhino which was also a male about seven years old was darted at about 12.20PM. Following all necessary procedures this rhino was loaded on to the truck by about 1.30PM. The experience of the first capture increased the efficiency of the team manifold with more systematic approach as the driver of dodger, crane and truck did the job in a synchronized way. An attempt was also made to locate and capture a third

rhino, a female, but as it was not successful and in view of the increasing temperature the capture operations was called off for the day by COO, TCC at 2.00PM. The trucks loaded with the sedated rhinos were parked in shaded areas and the rhinos were watered at regular intervals to keep the rhinos cool and to protect them from the scorching temperature.

The movement of the rhinos in convoy started from Pobitora WLS at about 6.00PM in the evening to Manas NP. It was a touchy and emotional movement when the convoy on leaving the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary, was greeted by a huge number of local people at *Mayang*, who had gathered to catch a glimpse of "their" rhinos about to bid adieu to a new home. The people cheered as the vehicle passed by and also requested to convey a message to the people of Manas to take proper care of the rhinos.

A Police escort vehicle with flashing lights led the convoy with the rhinos, and the traffic of cities and towns was regulated throughout the journey by the police to make way for the convoy to pass by. The transportation route was followed the same as selected by the TCC via Chandrapur-Narang-VIP road-Khanapara and NH-37. At Khanapara weighing of the trucks with the empty crates as well as the crates with rhinos was done in order to get the weight of the respective rhinos. One of the rhinos weighed 1570 kgs. and second one weighed 1540 kgs. The distance of 240 kms from Pobitora WLS to Manas NP was covered in about twelve hours due to slow movement of vehicles in the interest of comfort and safety of the rhinos. The veterinary team kept monitoring the rhinos at regular intervals and water was poured over them periodically to keep them cool. The vehicles in the convoy kept in contact with each other through walkie-talkies. The convoy of vehicles carrying the two male rhinos stopped at Rangia for food and rest and ultimately reached Basbari, Manas NP at about 5.30 AM.



Photo 6 – Rhino released in Manas NP

rhino took almost thirty minutes to come out of the crate to make its first step in his new home. It ultimately came out at 6.50AM and charged on a truck with staffs and observers parked nearby and then moved southwards in to the grasslands. The second rhino did not take much time. Once the door of the crate was opened, it also charged the first truck and moved south-west towards the grassland. It fed on the grasses with eager. Initially it moved towards west and then to the north. By 7.30AM both the rhinos were released into the wilderness of Manas National Park to roam freely in its vast grasslands. Both the released rhinos are radio collared and are regularly being monitored using the telemetry equipments.



Photo 7 – Celebrating a successful translocation

C. Post-Release Stage : This is a stage mainly to carry out regular monitoring, patrolling and protection of the released rhinos in Manas NP. Regular monitoring of the rhinos is on in Manas as a continued process under the supervision of FDTP Manas and Deputy FDTP. The monitoring team at present comprises of three units of two frontline staff assisted by home guards and volunteers, the units will be increased with the release of more rhinos. A well-equipped monitoring centre is being set at Basbari with the help of WWF-India to facilitate round the clock monitoring and also to maintain all necessary records.

The patrolling activity is strengthened and is effective round the clock through the efforts of the frontline staffs with the supporting strength of the Assam Forest Protection Force, Home Guards and Conservation Volunteers.



Photo 8 – Monitoring in progress in Manas

The rhinos are presently seen to be exploring the areas under Basbari range. The first rhino named as Rhino1

moved towards the south and is using the areas along the southern boundary near Kasimdoha and Kureebeel. The second rhino named as Rhino2 moved towards the north and is mainly using the area near Charpoli camp. The lacerated wounds observed in the rhinos at the time of release are at present completely healed and both the rhinos are behaving normally adapting well in the new environment.

The TCC will be regularly visiting the sites to overall supervise, assess, analyze and make improvement that is considered to be required and also to utilize these experiences in the next phase of translocation to follow.

Conclusion

The success achieved in the first phase of the training cum translocation has strengthened the moral of all the people associated with the process directly or indirectly. The first batch of two male rhinos translocated to Manas NP from Pobitora WLS is just a stepping stone to the success of the IRV 2020 Program and also to bring back the lost glory of Manas NP. By March 2009, the plan is to translocate another eighteen rhinos into Manas NP from both Pobitora WLS and Kaziranga NP to make it a self viable population in years to come. Hopefully, Manas is showing the way for other potential rhino habitat sites like Dibru Saikhowa, Laokhowa and Burachapori to be prepared for future rhino translocation.

The Translocation Core Committee headed by Mr. B.S.Bonal as Chief Operation Officer takes the opportunity to thank and acknowledge the help offered by all directly or indirectly contributing to the success of the first phase of the IRV 2020 Program.

Author details :

1 Chief Operation Officer, Translocation Core Committee (CCF-Wildlife, Assam); email - bonalbishan@gmail.com

2 Member, Translocation Core Committee (Aaranyak); email - bibhab@aaranyak.org

3 Deputy Chief Operation Officer, Translocation Core Committee (WWF- INDIA); email – amitsharma_ghy@sify.com