

Project Update: November 2008

The project has been started with extensive travel along the southern boundary road as well as visiting the fringe areas of the Manas national park to assess the present disturbance and awareness perspective on Indian Rhino. We met villagers, local conservation groups, teacher's students and forest guards. The present survey also helped us in finding out gap areas that need attention regarding rhino conservation. It had been noticed that although there was improvement of security scenario; disturbance in terms of grazing pressure from exiting cattle farms near the southern boundary of the park, collection of thatch grass and fuel wood, mainly in the riparian and western side has been continued to some extent. The survey also indicated that most of the local people including teachers and local tribal leaders even some ground forest staffs and conservation NGOs and volunteers were also unaware about the Indian Rhino Vision 2020. They simply knew about the exiting rhino translocated to Manas and heard that more might be coming to Manas.

Therefore, we started our conservation campaign through discussion with the local stakeholders mentioned above on rhino conservation in Manas national park. We distributed leaflets in local language that focusing status of rhino and detail of Indian Rhino Vision 2020. Next with support of local NGOs, small as well as big meetings were arranged as part of the campaign. Focus on the needs of Manas and its rhinos as well as other wildlife were discussed during the awareness meetings where large numbers of local villagers, teachers, students, and community leaders attended. These conservation meetings found to be unique in the sense that we gave more importance on community conservation activities to motivate poor forest dependents to take alternative livelihood methods instead of forest resources. During such a big meeting, we distributed school bags to the children of 60 families identified as forest dependents and ex-poachers cum conservation workers with support of two local NGOs of the area. The school children are from 23 fringe villages of the park. As part of the community conservation activities, training programmes on agricultural and veterinary resources were conducted with support of local NGOs. After the training, Citrus saplings were distributed to the 15 Self Help Groups and pig lets to three Self Help Groups. All these activities are mainly confined in fringe areas of eastern range as this was identified as prime rhino habitat and past stray of rhinos were also reported in nearby villages. Even in present period also one translocated rhino strayed several times and a couple of persons got injured by the animal. The latest stray occurred on 31st August and the rhino crossed the park border through Betbari area of eastern range and moved to south than east and north direction. The forest department, local conservation groups, researchers and local administration provided protection and tried to drive the animal to the park. At last despite bed weather and unsuitable condition, the forest department succeeded to tranquilize the animal on 14th September on eastern buffer of Manas brought back to Bansbari range of the park. The rhino traveled about 97.5 km distance in this period. Conservation volunteers of about six local conservation groups continuously extended support to the forest department in the mission.

We are also helping our local partner NGO in their ecotourism and in 2009 foreign tourists and conservationist will visit Manas & Orang national park.

We mainly focus on conservation activities in Manas while our local partner and rhino researcher Dr. B. Hazarika was involved in conservation awareness programmes in Orang national park in Darrang district. He earlier helped us in preparation of rhino conservation material. There is also constant grazing pressure as well as resource collection like thatch grass, fish etc in Orang national park. The project activities in Orang were disturbed due to ethnic clashes between two different communities since August. Gradually normalcy returns and, in this winter, we will continue the programme after proper consultation with the administration and other stakeholders of the area.

