

HISTORY

Fragments on the history of the rhinoceros in Nepal

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Abstract

The rhinoceros of Nepal was first mentioned in European literature by B.H. Hodgson in the 1830s. The animal was occasionally seen or hunted in the terai region between the Indian border and the Himalayas. Between 1846 and 1950, rhinos could be hunted only by permit and a few hunts of the late 19th century are quoted. The rhino was part of shoots organized for the British royal family in 1906, 1911 and 1921. Most Indian rhinos that were shown in Europe and America between 1905 and 1939 originated from Nepal.

Résumé

Le rhinocéros du Népal a été pour la première fois mentionné dans la littérature européenne dans les années 1830, par B.H. Hodgson. L'animal était occasionnellement vu ou chassé dans le Terai, entre la frontière indienne et l'Himalaya. Entre 1846 et 1950, il fallait un permis pour avoir le droit de les chasser, et on rapporte quelques chasses à la fin du 19ème siècle. Le rhino était inscrit au programme des chasses organisées pour la famille royale britannique en 1906, 1911, et 1921. La plupart des rhinos indiens qui ont été montrés en Europe et en Amérique entre 1905 et 1939 venaient du Népal.

Introduction

Western literature on the biology and conservation of the Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) in Nepal generally suggests that there are few early sources concerning its historical distribution and status (Laurie 1978; Dinerstein 2003). In his classic survey in 1959 of the rhinoceros areas of Nepal, Gee (1959) mentions no literature referring to the history of the region inhabited by rhinos prior to the books by E. Arthur Smythies (1942) and his wife, Olive Smythies (1953). While the literary record is certainly inadequate, I have endeavoured to bring together some of the relevant material to help our understanding of the rhino in Nepal. As many of these sources may not be easily accessible, I have quoted from their

texts to help those interested in their contents. I have not been able to include possible references to the rhino in literature written in Nepalese languages or in reports kept in local archives, which could well contribute many more interesting facts if they were retrieved and recorded.

The rhino of the terai

Most authors agree that before 1950, due to the prevalence of malaria, there was very little human settlement in the areas at the foot of the Himalayas except for a few scattered villages of the indigenous Tharus tribes (Seidensticker 1976). Oliphant (1852:37) travelled from India to Kathmandu and described his impressions in these terms:

‘A small stream divides the Company’s from the Nepaulese dominions, and on crossing it the change of government is at once obvious. The villages looked more wretched, the people more dirty, the country was almost totally uncultivated, and nearly all traces of roads disappeared as we traversed the green sward of the Terai of Nepaul, scattered over which were large herds of cattle, grazing on the short grass, which extended in all directions over the vast expanse of flat country.’

The rhinoceros was found only in the terai region of Nepal, a narrow strip less than 40 km wide situated between the Himalaya Mountains in the north and the Siwalik Hills of India in the south. The ‘historical distribution’ of the rhinoceros, according to Gee (1959: map 1) and subsequent authors, once stretched from the far eastern border throughout the length of Nepal to the far western border (fig. 1). This runs parallel to the occurrence of the rhinoceros in the Ganges Valley, where the animal was recorded eastwards to the districts of Champaran and Purneah in northern Bihar, in the west at Kotdwara near Haridwar in 1789, and in the Pilibhit District until the 1870s (Rookmaaker 1984, 1999a,b,c, 2002). The rhinoceros was mentioned from the terai of Nepal by Blyth (1862:151) and Blanford (1891:473).

From 1846 to 1950, the rhinoceros was protected by order of the Rana family and their prime ministers, who ruled over Nepalese territory. Rhinoceros hunting was strictly forbidden, except to members of the ruling class and their friends. It was also asserted that a rhinoceros was killed every time a rajah died to accompany his body (anon. 1852), pointing at some revered status (a rather dubious statement). It is known, however, that whenever a Rana became a prime minister, for religious reasons he had to kill a rhino in a ceremony called ‘blood tarpan’.

The period of Hodgson

The earliest unequivocal references to the rhinos in Nepal were made by Brian Houghton Hodgson (1800–1894), who stayed in the Kathmandu Valley from 1820 to 1843, starting out as assistant resident to become resident in 1833 (Cocker and Inskipp 1988). During this time, he collected a wealth of careful observations on the mammals and birds of the Himalayas. In a paper read to the Zoological Society of London on 26 August 1834, Hodgson enumerated all species of Mammalia that he had found in Nepal, which included *Elephas indicus* and *Rhinoceros unicornis*: ‘both abundant in the forest and hills of the lower region, whence in the

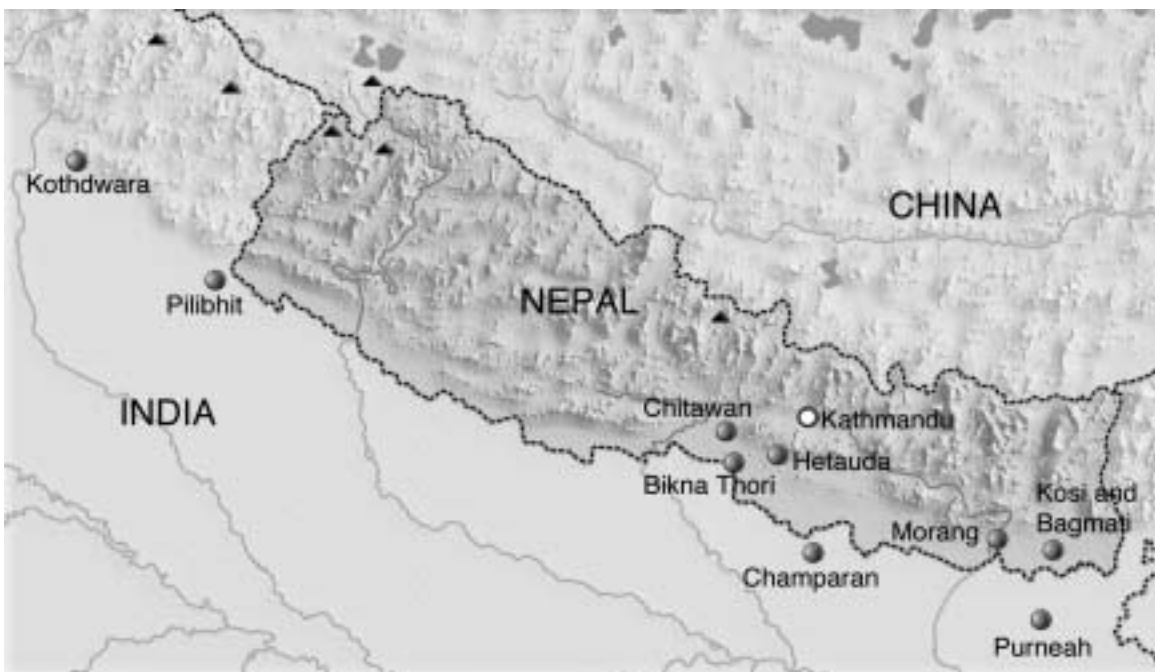


Figure 1. Nepal with some of the turn-of-the-century place names indicated.

rainy season they issue into the cultivated parts of the Tarâi to feed upon the rice crops' (Hodgson 1834:98). As his movements were restricted to the area around Kathmandu, Hodgson had no chance to see the rhino in its original habitat, but he had observed a couple of specimens kept in an enclosure in Kathmandu. This pair produced the first ever rhinoceros bred in captivity in May 1824. The young animal was sold after 10 years to Calcutta, but there it is lost from the records (Rookmaaker 1979, 1998:79). Soon after leaving the country, Hodgson (1844:288) again listed *Rhinoceros unicornis* in a catalogue of Nepalese mammals. A specimen of the Indian rhinoceros that Hodgson obtained is in the collection of the Natural History Museum, London (Gray 1846:35).

Captain Thomas Smith, assistant political-resident of Nepal from 1841 to 1845, and Hodgson's second-in-command during his last years in the country, was proud of his achievements in hunting and other sports. During a visit to the Durbar in the capital, the rajah asked Smith to kill a rogue elephant for him. Setting out in the company of two native chiefs, Sirdar (or 'sardar', meaning 'chief') Bowanee Sing and Sirdar Delhi Sing, he soon reached Hetauda, on the northern edge of the terai. He published some impressions of this hunt in the royal reserve, in the style typical of that age:

'We opened our sporting campaign at Hitounda, the half-way house from Nepaul to the British territory. Many deer, eleven tigers, and seven rhinoceroses, fell to my battery, the two Nepaul chiefs having shown a most religious horror of coming in contact with the last-named formidable animals. The Indian rhinoceros is certainly an ugly customer, evincing a great dislike to being disturbed in his muddy bath. Upon being compelled to move, he at once makes off to another swamp, and, if interfered with on his way, he invariably shows fight, and is not then to be despised; for when he once takes up a position, he will dispute it to the last with the most determined ferocity, neither giving nor receiving quarter. I was much amused, after killing my fifth rhinoceros by being waited upon by the two chiefs in the afternoon, and after the usual compliments, informed by them that they had received an intimation from the Durbar, that the Court was surprised from their own sporting qualifications, they should allow an Englishman to kill so many rhinoceroses in the Terai, without their having destroyed one; and, that if they were either unwilling to attempt, or incapable of achieving such an enterprise, they were immediately to return, to be replaced by other chiefs, who would be more careful not

to disgrace themselves as they had done. My chiefs were evidently in a great state of alarm, so I told them, if they felt inclined to distinguish themselves, I would soon procure them a favourable opportunity. They frankly confessed their incapability of profiting by my offers, but earnestly implored me to save their *hoormut* (honour). To this I acceded, and the next day intelligence was brought that there were four rhinoceroses within a mile of us. At their own request, I lent each of the chiefs one of my guns, as they had a firm impression that they were endowed with some kind of *jadoo* (witchcraft). We soon arrived at the head-quarters of the *ghindahs*. They were rolling in the mud, in the midst of a heavy swamp; and, finding themselves disturbed in the midst of their luxurious ablutions, they, as usual, got up, and made for another bath. I immediately intercepted them, and provoked two of the party to hostilities, when down they came to the charge. The brute that rushed at me I killed within six yards of the elephant Megreath, on which I was mounted, and which stood to the charge like a rock. I fortunately hit the rhinoceros in the only vital part, just under the foot of the ear, which is not easily accomplished. The other animal selected my friend Sirdar Delhi Sing's elephant, which immediately turned tail and bolted, but the rhinoceros was too quick for him, came up to the elephant in a few strides, and with his tusks cut the fugitive so severely on the stern—nearly severing his tail—that he attempted to lie down under the pain. But the rhinoceros was again too quick for him, and bringing his horn into play, he introduced it under the elephant's flank; the horn tightened the skin, and then with his two frightful tusks he cut the poor animal so severely, that his entrails came rolling about his legs, as he fell, undergoing the dreadful assaults of his antagonist. The Sirdar now threw himself out of the howdah, and scrambled up a tree (which was close at hand), like a galvanized monkey. The other Sirdar was going across country, at Melton pace, on his elephant. Having disposed of my rhinoceros, I pushed up to the rescue, fearing, indeed, the Sirdar had been killed. On approaching within twenty yards, the rhinoceros relinquished the fallen elephant, and turned to have a charge at me. I brought him on his knees the first shot, but he recovered, and fought me valiantly; and, in consequence of my elephant being a little unsteady, it was not until the fifth shot that he fell to rise no more. The poor mutilated elephant lived about two hours, and died in endeavouring to rise. I should at once have put it out of its misery, had the mahout not assured me, that if he could be got to the tents he should be able to recover it. From



Nepalese 100-rupee banknote, in use since 1961, showing a Chitwan Valley rhino.

this account, it will be seen that the rhinoceros is armed with much more formidable tusks than the boar. These are the weapons he brings into such deadly operation, and not the horn, as many persons are led to believe.’ (Smith 1852:87–91)

Early hunting permits

Although the rhinoceros in the Nepalese terai was protected by the Nepalese rulers for over a century after 1846, animals could be shot with a permit from the maharajah or the prime minister. There are no statistics to indicate how frequently such permission was granted. During the 19th century, a few specimens shot in Nepal were added to museums outside the country. The Royal College of Surgeons of England had specimens collected by Sir Jung Bahadur in 1876 (Flower 1884:417), while the Indian Museum in Calcutta received rhinos from Sir E. Baring in 1875 and J. Anderson in 1880 (Sclater 1891:202). The hunts organized for the maharajah invariably took place in the Rapti Valley and surroundings. When Brown (1912:53) arrived in Hatawa (Hetauda), he said that this ‘village is in the heart of the best sporting country, and is usually the starting-point for shikar expeditions. Ordinarily it is a squalid collection of huts, but becomes a bustling centre of life when, as in the days of the great Jung Bahadur, it was made the rendezvous for a tiger, rhino, or elephant hunt.’

One hunt organized at the end of the 1870s for one of the Nepalese ministers is described by Oldfield

(1880:235–237) as follows, with references to the local folklore:

‘The great beat for rhinoceros is along the valley of the Rapti River, in the neighbourhood of Chitoun (at or near the confluence of the Rapti and the Manhauri rivers). There are large tracts of level country here, covered with dense high grass jungle; in this the rhinoceros lives, constructing runs or burrows in the grass, along which he moves, the grass meeting over his head, so that he is not seen by one out of the run, although he may be very near. Maharaja Jang Bahadur was very successful this year; they killed several and wounded a large number of rhinoceros. Generally the elephants are afraid of them, and were it not that the long grass screens the rhinoceros from the elephant’s eye, there are very few would stand the charge. The elephants are stationed in different runs along which the rhinoceros is expected; when he gets very near, if he sees his way blocked up, he makes a peculiar grunt like a boar and charges straight ahead. The elephant almost invariably bolts when he hears this grunt; the great thing is to get a good shot at the brute’s head as he comes slowly along his run, before he utters the grunt and before he commences the charge. Bam Bahadur shot one, at Chitoun, just at this moment, the ball entering through one eye and smashing his brain; so that the brute rolled over dead with only one ball in him. The skull and skin were sent up to Nipal, and are now at Thappattalli. Out of the skin, after being cleaned and cured, they make capital water-buckets; these are immensely strong, never break, and are

impervious to water. Out of the horns they manufacture: from the spreading base they make richly carved cups or *urgas*, which are susceptible of high finish and polish; from the thinner upright part they make handles for *kookeries* [*kukri*, a curved Nepalese traditional knife]. Of the rhinoceroses shot on this excursion very few were killed outright; they escaped into the jungle severely wounded and died, some of them almost immediately, others not for two or three weeks. Their bodies were found by men sent to look after them, and their skulls and skins sent up to Nipal.'

The royal shoots

In February 1906, King George of England went on a shoot in Nepal from a camp in Kasra (Ellison 1922:675), which, due to an outbreak of cholera, was away from the more permanent camp originally planned. The area originally set aside for the purpose, 'which had not been shot over for something like thirty years', was subsequently entered in the first months of 1907, when either 27 rhinos were seen and 21 females were shot (Lydekker 1909) or, more likely, 14 males and 14 females were bagged and 6 calves were caught (Manners-Smith 1909). Although Lydekker (1909) thought that the young animals were captured to experiment with rhinoceros racing, Manners-Smith (1909) believed that the maharajah planned to translocate them to the eastern terai where rhinos had become scarce through a disease. This operation was aborted when it was found that all the calves were males. Four of these rhinos were then bought by the German animal dealer Carl Hagenbeck, who sold them individually to an American circus and to zoos in Antwerp, Manchester and New York (Rookmaaker 1998). The rhino population showed 'no appreciable diminution' and in February 1908 Lieut.-Colonel Manners-Smith was joined by the maharajah of Bikaner and another friend in the Naolpur valley bordering on Chitwan in shooting four rhinos (Manners-Smith 1909). In 1911, King George returned and killed a young rhino (Smythies 1942:19).

The next royal shoot was organized in December 1921 for the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VIII. Camping at Bikna Thori on the southern side of Chitwan, the members of the party together shot nine rhinos (Ellison 1922, 1925). The prince himself accounted for two of these, the first at Thoba on the 15th, the second at Sarasoti Kola on the 19th. Other rhinos fell to the rifles of Capt. Dudley North, Capt.

Poynder and Percival Landon. On the afternoon of Sunday, 18 December 1921, according to time-honoured custom, the Prince of Wales was presented with a selection of live animals and birds, including a baby elephant, a tiger and a rhino calf. The animals were transported overland to Bombay, where after their arrival on 10 January 1922 they were temporarily housed at Victoria Gardens (fig. 2; Ellison 1922; Rookmaaker 1997). The female rhino, called 'Bessie', lived in the London Zoo from 7 April 1922 to 28 April 1926 (Rookmaaker 1998:87).

Historical distribution

The rhinoceros was royally protected and therefore allowed to live in relative peace; the occasional shooting of 10 or 20 animals hardly had an impact on the population. Nepal in those days was remote and rarely visited, but at the same time most of the rhinos arriving in zoos and circuses in Europe and America between 1905 and 1939 (around 29 individuals) came from Nepal (Rookmaaker 1998:35). The available historical sources almost invariably pertain to the region now occupied by Chitwan National Park and surrounding areas. Manners-Smith (1909) is one of but a few to comment on the occurrence of the rhinos in other parts of the country, stating that *Rhinoceros unicornis* 'is found in the Nepal *terai*, in Morang, north of Purnea, on the Kosi, at Patharghatta, on the banks of the Bagmati north of Muzaffarpur, and . . . it is even more numerous still farther to the west in the Chitwan and Naolpur valleys along the banks of the Gandak and the Rapti rivers.' All these localities being located in the southern and south-eastern parts of Nepal, it appears that there is not a single reference to the existence of rhinos in the west of the country. Many recent authors believe that the rhinoceros formerly must have occurred in western Nepal, because the species was known across the border in India. In Pilibhit District of northern Uttar Pradesh, the last known rhinoceros was shot in the early 1870s by R. Drummond (Hewett 1938; Rookmaaker 2002). Unfortunately, the picture remains fragmentary.

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Figure 2. A rhinoceros from Nepal kept at the Victoria Gardens in Mumbai, India, in January 1922 en route to London Zoo. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Bombay Natural History Society, from the *Journal*, vol. 26(3), 1922.

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