

FIELD NOTES

Postscript: Rogue Army staff involved in poaching in Bardia National Park, Nepal, 2007–2008

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Details of the protracted period of rhino poaching in Nepal (2000–2007) are reported in this edition of *Pachyderm* based on investigative efforts of Esmond Martin, Chryssee Martin and Lucy Vigne. This postscript was discussed with these authors, who suggested that it should be provided as an additional comment.

The postscript arises from the experience of the authors in the field and after discussions with staff from the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC), the Department for National Parks and Wildlife (DNPWC) and community members of the *ad hoc* anti-poaching groups in the villages around Bardia National Park (BNP), Nepal.

The underlying insecurity in Nepal over the period 2000–2006 was without doubt a fundamental cause of the significant loss of rhinos in Nepal at that time in BNP and Chitwan National Park (CNP) but the unfolding of events of 2007–8 cast a different light on possible causes of many of the losses. This postscript highlights a spate of poaching in BNP that occurred between 5 November 2007 and 26 May 2008, most probably a continuation of poaching activity that had contributed to the decline of the BNP rhino population from approximately 87 animals in 2000 to 21 in 2008. The official figure for poaching in BNP for 2007 reported by Martin et al. was two individuals but three were probably poached in 2007 (5 and 11 November and on 19 December). The animal found dead on 11 November was most likely poached but this was recorded as an unknown death. Since there were 30 animals in BNP based on a total count (May 2007) and

21 free ranging (one captive) (January through March 2008), based on well executed total block counts and individual identification, at least six rhinos (not including any births) were unaccounted for by Martin's report. Some of those missing are perhaps animals that move at times across the border to India but since they remain missing, a year later, it is likely they are lost. Neither the 2007 nor the 2008 count included the Indian portion of this population's potential range. This is an often quoted explanation for rhino absence. A fourth death was recorded after Martin's review and before the second series of total block counts: bringing the number to three adults and a young (<6 months) calf (three poached and one unknown cause of death over the inter-count period; in addition the poached calf's mother has not been seen since and can be assumed to be dead and probably poached). Since the count starting in January up to end of May 2008, there were three further recorded deaths: one was traumatized whilst crossing a river, dying of its injuries, in addition to two further poaching cases. An estimated 17 animals remain to date in BNP.

Over this period, there was little progress in Army re-deployment. Only limited patrols were sent out and these were restricted within the park boundary with little proactive anti-poaching activity. Some repairs were undertaken on four abandoned posts, thus they were manned. Co-ordination between the DNPWC and the Army at this time was also reported to be weak. Following the spate of poaching cases in 2007 and information gathered suggesting there were plans for further poaching, a number of concerned and

disaffected youth and staff of NGOs and the DNPWC took these security matters into their own hands. Local groups were mobilized and they collected information from the community about the suspected poachers. For two months intelligence was built up, discussed and then acted upon. The suspects were a Mr Jaya Sahi who was with the Army command in Nepalgunj and three other soldiers who had homes across the Karnali River on the Western boundary of the park. The newly formed anti-poaching group went to the village, which was under surveillance and caught the gang red handed with three rifles, 12 kg of tiger bone and one rhino horn in a house. The gang was in the process of preparing for further incursions into the park on that day.

At the time of the community-inspired raid of the poachers' hide-out, the presence of the gang's leader, who was not from the village, and Army staff from Nepalgunj was further evidence of the gang's sophisticated organization. A woman of Tibetan origin, who acted as a support agent and probably the dealer, was identified in Nepalgunj. She was found to have been paid 10,000 Nepali rupees for handling the horn for the gang and for providing rooms when they were in Nepalgunj. The gang was taken to Kathmandu after the intervention of the Minister responsible and the departure of the Colonel in command of the Bardia battalion. Later, an unnamed man was arrested in the same area (Rajapur) and another, a Mr P. Shai—again, a so-called ex-Army man—was found with a gun. The *ad hoc* anti-poaching group informed the authors of another 17 Army or ex-Army personnel believed to have been involved. In the follow-up to these events, the Army reported that some of the arrested individuals were ex-Army members and that the leader of the gang, Mr Sahi, was reported to have been on leave at the time of the last poaching cases. It is not possible to dispute or confirm these statements and it is reported that the Army were co-operative as events unfolded. The other suspects are being watched now or have left the area; some are believed to be in India.

These events also shed light on an earlier occurrence that had confused staff at the time. An off-duty soldier had been found fatally shot near a rhino carcass in 2007. The Army could not explain this at the time and the event was not publicized. This event was more easily explained once the gang had been detected. It turned out that he was from the same village as some members of this gang and he had probably stumbled into them on his way home to his village after drinking late at night near the barracks (as was his habit apparently). He was perhaps a victim of an argument at the site of the carcass.

This evidence suggests that there had been an ongoing complicity among rogue/retired elements in the Army who had engaged in poaching and that probably this occurred over an extended period. Although there is no firm evidence that senior staff were directly involved, they were not taking action when given information and one must assume that there was some degree of complicity for this sort of activity to occur in a disciplined force. This is astonishing given that the only protection afforded to the rhinos in Nepal is through the Army stationed within the Parks. The Army apparently receives more than half of all the Parks' revenues specifically for this job; furthermore, some NGOs still advocate the current security policy as the solution to poaching and it is a recommendation of Martin et al. in their article in this journal. These events make it necessary to question the security policy in Nepal's national parks. One solution is to improve the DNPWC's capacity and integration in Army security to perform anti-poaching duties on a more sustained permanent basis as battalions and soldiers come and go, but it is clearly urgent that these issues are addressed.

Matters have moved on and through the prompt actions of the current political bodies and the Army command in Nepal, strict discipline is being reinstated and new approaches are being implemented to reduce the risk of this situation recurring. The new command in-charge of the National Park security has taken action and for Bardia there is now a proposal for the establishment of smaller well-equipped units dedicated to anti-poaching that combine department and Army staff that will act both within and outside the parks more proactively. They will provide improved monthly monitoring of rhinos by the DNPWC, supported by the NTNC, (all rhino are now individually known) and train staff in anti-poaching. This methodology was introduced by an ongoing UK Darwin Initiative project managed by the Zoological Society of London. It would seem these introduced measures in Bardia are helping. No further incidents of poaching in BNP were reported between May 2008 and April 2009 whilst poaching incidents have continued in Chitwan.

This experience highlights the importance of engaging communities around national parks in anti-poaching activities and for more permanent integrated approaches to security with adaptive management. This postscript is also a dedication to the bravery of the people involved in resolving the poaching crisis in BNP.