



GREATER ONE-HORNS RHINO CONSERVATION PROGRAM UPDATE

FEBRUARY 2025



Over the past year, the International Rhino Foundation (IRF) has remained steadfast in its mission to conserve rhinos through a unified approach built on scientific research, community collaboration, and hands-on action. By leveraging innovative strategies, engaging local stakeholders, and utilizing comprehensive data collection and monitoring, we've achieved meaningful progress in safeguarding the future of the greater one-horned rhino and its habitat. Our conservation efforts focus on community involvement, habitat restoration, and anti-poaching measures, fostering a brighter future for these incredible animals and their ecosystems while generating income opportunities for local communities through roles in protected area management, rhino protection, and ecotourism.

In Assam, IRF partners with Aaranyak to advance the greater one-horned rhino translocation program, support intelligence and law enforcement initiatives to combat poaching and illegal wildlife trade, restore essential rhino habitats by managing invasive plant species, and provide

critical security support to national parks with rhino populations. The invaluable contributions of Zoo Basel are vital in sustaining and growing the greater one-horned rhino population in India.



2024 Progress

Translocations

IRF is continuing our work with the Assam Government and our partners to help increase the rhino population in Assam, India, by supporting the implementation of the Indian Rhino Vision 2.0 (IRV2.0) strategy. IRV2.0 aims to secure and manage a minimum of three meta-populations with a total population of 4,500 - 5,000 greater one-horned rhinos in Assam by 2030. Unfortunately, in 2024, rhino translocations were not feasible. Our partners on the ground in Assam are hopeful translocations will resume in 2025, with the intent that it will repopulate the Laokhwa and Burhachapori Wildlife Sanctuaries, as these two sites have the potential to house about 100 rhinos. Although we are eager for translocations to resume, we're nonetheless pleased that the government of Assam is exercising caution and taking time to prepare appropriately and ensure that conditions are as safe as possible for the rhinos.

In the meantime, however, five greater one-horned rhinos have returned to the Laokhwa-Burhachapori Wildlife Sanctuaries (WLS) on their own. This is the first time this imperiled species has been seen there since they were poached to local extinction in the 1980s. Two rhinos entered the area in December 2023 and were followed by three more several months later.

The new residents found their way into Laokhwa-Burhachapori a year after the Assam government finalized the addition of approximately 200 sq km to Orang National Park in north-

central Assam and cleared the area of encroachers in 2023. This initiative connected Orang National Park to Burhachapori Wildlife Sanctuary and created a linked corridor of protected rhino-bearing areas from Orang National Park to Kaziranga National Park through Laokhowa and Burhachapori WLS. The rhino corridor was created to facilitate the natural movement of rhinos to enhance gene flow. With intended translocations in the preparatory stage, the “natural” dispersal of these rhinos into this new safe habitat was a wonderful development, but one that required urgent support to make sure that rangers in Laokhowa-Burhachapori were prepared to start monitoring and protecting the rhinos even earlier than originally planned.

Working with local NGO Aaranyak, IRF staff quickly traveled to Laokhowa-Burhachapori to provide training on rhino monitoring and funding for winter gear and fuel so rangers can comfortably and safely monitor the newly settled rhinos.

Improving wildlife crime investigation and enforcement

Rhinos in Assam constantly face the threat of poaching, prompting IRF to take proactive measures to combat wildlife crime. Our efforts center on empowering frontline forest staff with the skills to detect and investigate illegal activities, reducing future risks. To strengthen this approach, we employ an Intelligence Specialist who gathers critical information on poacher and smuggler activities, enabling timely interventions to prevent incursions and support arrests and prosecutions.

Led by Intelligence Specialist Rahul Dutta, IRF's team has built an extensive network of informants to safeguard released rhinos and identify poachers and wildlife traffickers operating in Assam and beyond. We collaborate closely with forest rangers and police to maintain a comprehensive database on wildlife crimes and implement an effective system for information sharing. In consultation with senior forest officials, IRF also ensures enforcement agencies are well-versed in changing wildlife laws, enabling more effective prosecutions and stricter sentencing for offenders. Dutta conducts several wildlife crime training sessions for forest officials each year. These sessions focus on wildlife legislation, crime scene management, evidence collection and case preparation, fostering a coordinated and skilled response to wildlife crime.

Rahul conducted three workshops in Assam this year, which resulted in 36 forest staff trained.



IRF's Intelligence Specialist conducting a 3-day workshop on wildlife crime investigations for forest officers in Makum (Assam), India.

Restoring degraded wildlife habitat through invasive species management.

IRF collaborates with Aaranyak and local communities to combat the spread of invasive plant species and encourage the recovery of native grasses in rhino habitats. These efforts aim to restore vital grasslands, providing rhinos with more space to thrive and leading to an increase in rhino births.

In the eastern range of Manas National Park (MNP), IRF supported habitat restoration across 2 square kilometers of prime rhino territory. In partnership with local communities, invasive plants were manually removed, allowing native grass species to reclaim the area. A focused intervention on a 3-hectare plot within this range demonstrated remarkable success, with invasive plants reduced by 90% within three years of restoration activities.

To tackle the spread of the aggressive *Bombax ceiba* tree species, IRF has implemented a method called "tree girdling." This technique involves stripping the bark and disrupting the tree's nutrient flow, effectively killing the tree within a year. In 2023 alone, 200 invasive trees were girdled, complementing ongoing monitoring of previously girdled trees. Approximately 65% of these trees have died within two years of treatment, demonstrating the effectiveness of this approach in restoring rhino habitats.

In 2024, approximately 100 hectares of grassland habitat in MNP were restored through the removal of invasive alien plants (IAPs) and the girdling of woody species such as the *Bombax* tree. Grassland restoration efforts in Manas National Park have provided livelihood support to

approximately 18 members of the Eco-Development Committee (EDC) from a nearby village. These EDC members actively contribute to controlling invasive species, and their efforts are supported through daily wage payments, offering a vital supplement to their income.



Local community members receive income to manually uproot invasive plant species in Manas National Park.

Conclusion

The greater one-horned rhino is a beacon of hope for rhino conservation worldwide. Through dedicated anti-poaching initiatives, habitat restoration, and strong partnerships with local communities, this Vulnerable species is making a remarkable comeback in the wild. Your support enables us to safeguard and protect these incredible animals, paving the way for more conservation success stories. We extend our deepest gratitude to Zoo Basel for their invaluable support—thank you for helping us make a difference for rhinos!