

# Religion, royalty and rhino conservation in Nepal

Esmond Bradley Martin

**For religious, medicinal and decorative purposes, the Nepalese use more parts of the rhino than any other people in the world, but only a very few rhinos have recently been killed there. Moreover, since 1976 the rhino population has been growing by about eight per cent a year and when the author visited Nepal in 1982 there were approximately 375, which provides an exception to the commonly held belief that government officials in Third World countries are unable to protect rhinos in the wild. The author, who is a geographer, explores the fascinating background to a successful conservation story.**

## **The demand for rhino products in Nepal**

The Nepalese have been using rhino products for many generations. Today the most widely used rhino commodity in Nepal is the hide, which plays its most important role in an elaborate religious ceremony, called *Shradda*, performed by both Hindus and Buddhists in Nepal to commemorate parents or grandparents on the anniversary of their deaths. It is believed that a piece of horn or skin, shaped into a container to hold rice, water and some flowers, will attract the attention of the spirit of the dead. Although rhino horn would be preferred to skin in this ritual, no one other than the King himself is allowed to possess any rhino horn in Nepal now (unless it is an antique carving).

Rhino skin is also used to make bracelets, earrings and walking sticks, and in the recent past many

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more items, some utilitarian, some decorative, were in vogue. In 1938 when Kiran Shumsher Rana, the son of the Prime Minister then, shot a rhino in southern Nepal, he gave almost all of its skin to a craftsman in Patan to make a spice container, a flower pot, picture frames, two table lamps, a chandelier, a bowl and a jewel box, all of which he still keeps as very special treasures. In the middle of the nineteenth century many hundreds of rhino-hide shields were made, in India as well as in Nepal. The Indian shields, mainly from Rajasthan, were sometimes decorated with gilt, but the Nepalese shields, made in Patan, the city of craftsmen, were usually unadorned. Rhino hide was ideal because it is strong enough to deflect arrows and sword blows and there may have also been a belief that it brought warriors luck. Today, one can see more than 50 Indian and Nepalese rhino-hide shields in Kathmandu's National Museum. In Kathmandu I found for sale a rhino product that I had never seen elsewhere in Asia, rhino umbilical cord, which is tied around the waist as a remedy for gastric upsets and tied around a small child's arm to prevent crying.

When a rhino dies of natural causes in the Chitawan valley, the park authorities remove the horn and hooves, which are royal trophies. During the Rana rule, horn and hooves were held in a store in the Hanumandhoka, but then a certain amount did make its way on to the local market. For the past 10 years all rhino horn and hooves have been sent to the King's Wildlife Office inside the palace. Traditionally in Nepal, people have used rhino horn and hoof for medicinal purposes, but nobody was willing to admit to me that this still occurs, probably because of

the stringent laws against possession of raw horn or hoof.

One widely available rhino product in Nepal, the collection of which poses no threat to live rhinos, is urine. Substantial quantities come from the animals in captivity in Kathmandu's zoo, and Chitawan park employees often collect it in the field. Whenever my elephant handler took me out he carried a bottle with him. When we came across a place where a rhino had recently urinated he gathered up the liquid or, if it was embedded in sand, he stuffed the sand into his bottle. He explained that he would later place the sand in a strainer and pour a little water through it to extract the urine. The diluted urine, he maintained, was still useful. Nepalese drink rhino urine as a relief from asthma attacks, congestion and stomach disorders, apply it to the skin to prevent infection in wounds and soothe sore muscles, and sometimes put drops of it inside the ear to relieve earaches. From two different sources, I heard that rhino dung can be mixed with pipe tobacco and smoked to alleviate stomach pains. However, I do not think that this is a common practice because I never saw anyone bother to collect the dung, and it was certainly easy to find.

When the park authorities have removed a dead rhino's hooves and horn (and usually most of the hide as well), they notify nearby villagers, who collect the remains. Next to the hide, the blood is the most coveted product and the villagers take as much as they can. Later, they dry it in the sun to preserve it. Women are the main consumers of rhino blood; they mix it with water to drink to ease menstrual pain; but men also occasionally swallow some as an aphrodisiac.

Sometimes an old rhino carcass is discovered. Even if it abounds with maggots and flies, it is nevertheless in demand by the villagers, although they will not touch the flesh from any other decaying animal. They arrive *en masse*, excitedly brandishing their knives all around the carcass, often inadvertently slashing one another in their haste. Rhino meat, which is usually cooked with mustard oil, sliced tomatoes and curry powder, is believed to confer immunity to serious diseases. Rhino liver is eaten to cure tuberculosis, dysentery and, occasionally, to speed up the elimination of after-birth.

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General Kiran Shumsher Rana, whose father was Prime Minister of Nepal, displays his collection of objects made from rhino hide of an animal he shot in 1938 for the Blood Tarpan religious ceremony (*Esmond Bradley Martin*).

The bones are also very important and the most desirable is that from the knee-cap, which is fashioned into an oil lamp for use during religious festivals. Other bones are carved into finger rings to keep away evil spirits. Some are made into charcoal, the fumes of which are believed to cure diseases among penned cattle. In some cases, the penis from a dead rhino is taken. I saw a few dried ones for sale in Kathmandu, and I was told that older men boil them in water and eat them to try to cure their impotence. A few people use them like the umbilical cord, tied around their middle to alleviate stomach pains. In Bodhnath, a shopkeeper showed me the jaw from a rhino, and he said that votive statues of gods and goddesses are carved from rhino teeth, although I never saw any.

### Prices for rhino products in Nepal

By far the most valuable rhino product in Nepal is raw horn. Although demand for it is small because it is regarded as almost impossible to

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obtain under present circumstances, Nepalese traders admitted that they have occasionally dealt in raw rhino horn in recent years. They claimed that its wholesale price in 1982 was \$7000 a kilo, which probably reflects the demand from businessmen in India, who put it on the international market. In 1981 the horns were removed from two rhinos that died of natural causes before the park staff found the carcasses, which indicates that some still reaches the black market.

On the other hand, in the only known instance of rhino poaching in recent years in Nepal, the poachers received just \$378 for a 250-gram horn—less than one-quarter of its wholesale value in Kathmandu. In January 1982 three of the poachers involved in this case were apprehended when they were attempting to hunt another rhino. I was permitted to question them and discovered that they had sold the horn of the animal they shot in April 1980 to a butcher in Nayarayanghat. Since it had been a successful venture, and as someone had promised a much

higher sum, they were trying their luck a second time. They had not entered the park on either occasion, but kept near the village of Tikoli where rhinos often wander. They undoubtedly faced imprisonment for three to five years, plus a huge fine which none of them would be able to pay. They would be forced to beg the money from their families, whose only income came from the few crops they grew for local markets. The poachers realised that their lives were in ruin and they gained resentment rather than sympathy from their peers.

The Chitawan Park authorities proudly boast that not a single rhino has been poached within the Park's boundaries since 1976; moreover, it is generally accepted that the rhino killed in April 1980 was the only one poached outside the Park between 1979 and early 1982.

Thirty years ago, Nepalese carvers could purchase Asian (they never use African) rhino horn for about \$630 a kilo. However, it was rare for them to do so; instead, members of the aristocracy who hunted rhinos commissioned the carvers to make ceremonial bowls out of their trophy horn. The Buddhist Silpakar family in Patan was famed for its expertise in working rhino horn and Ratna Lall Silpakar told me that he had carved nine cups a year until the Rana regime fell. It took him just over two weeks to make one decorated with motifs relating to the god Vishnu. In 1951 such a cup was worth \$1000; today it would sell for \$2000 in an antique shop in Kathmandu. Other antique rhino horn carvings available include ceremonial rings; and *kukries*, Nepalese traditional knives with rhino horn handles, which vary in price from \$90 to \$200.

While rhino-hide shields were probably not made in India after the turn of the century, three families in Patan, including the Silpakars, continued to produce them until around 1945. They paid \$8 in 1940 for a piece of hide sufficient to make one shield. To render it pliable, they soaked the raw hide in water for several days then placed it between blocks of wood to dry it in the exact shape wanted. Afterwards, they trimmed the edges, sand-papered and polished the shield, sometimes adding charcoal for a black finish. Metal bosses for the inside handles were purchased from blacksmiths and attached to the



The Warden of the Royal Chitawan National Park examines the horn, hooves and hide of a rhino that had recently died of natural causes in the Park (Esmond Bradley Martin).

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shields by the artisans. The Silpakars sold their shields for between \$15 and \$20 in the 1940s. Today, one can purchase rhino hide shields that were made around that time for \$45–\$300.

From the rhinos that die naturally there is ample hide to supply the markets in Nepal today. In fact, it is very widely available and the cheapest I have seen anywhere. A very tiny piece, but large enough for a *Shradda* ceremony, retails for as little as eight cents, and 10 grams of rhino hide sold in a medicine shop in Kathmandu are only \$1.60. Many bracelets, which are worn for good luck, are still made out of rhino hide; a plain one in southern Nepal costs just \$2.25, while one with a silver clasp retails for \$35. In various parts of Kathmandu itinerant sellers of traditional medicine, who display their commodities on the open ground, on the side of the pavement or in a public square, sell the zoo's rhino urine (85¢ for a whisky bottle filled with it—double the price 10 years ago) and rhino umbilical cord (\$3.00 for a small piece). In the smaller antique shops of Kathmandu and Bodhnath, a variety of objects made from rhino products can be purchased, the most popular being bowls and cups made from horn, hide or bone; both tourists and wealthy Nepalese buy these. Some of the most attractive items are bowls carved from rhino hoof. An outstanding one had a 7-cm diameter and was lined in silver; it was priced at \$100. There was an exquisitely made box carved out of rhino hoof, with a carved buffalo bone lid, which was selling for \$270. Rhino hooves were formerly very cheap; in 1972, following a period of heavy poaching in Chitawan, illegal hunters sold them for only a dollar each to dealers in Kathmandu, who in turn retailed them for \$3. Now, of course, raw rhino hooves are rare. I was offered a large rhino bone pendant for \$15 and a 50-cm long dried rhino penis for \$190. The merchant who had a rhino jaw complete with a full set of teeth assured me that his price of \$31 was a real bargain.

### Rhino conservation today

The demand for rhino products in Nepal comes mainly from the people who look upon this animal as a special beast, one whose skin, bone, hoof or horn can intercede with spirits of the dead, and which can also be used to guard

against evil, prevent and cure certain diseases. That the people do not slaughter rhinos wholesale today for their own needs or for financial gain is the result of an enlightened conservation policy that came into effect in the early 1970s.

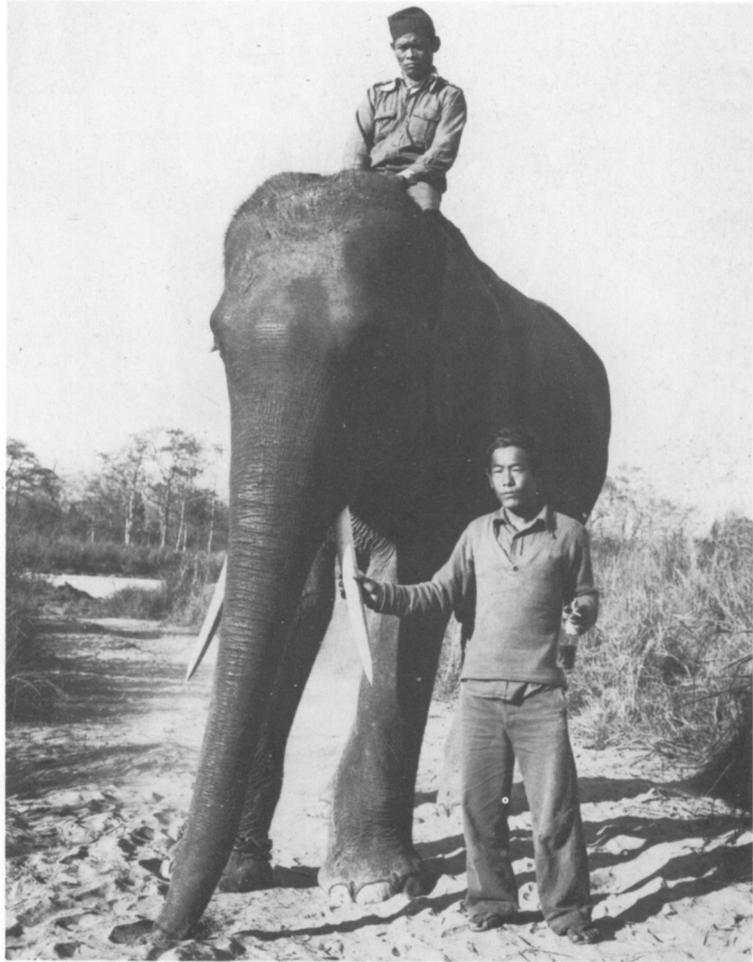
Before then, the outlook for rhinos in Nepal was precarious. In the wake of political turbulence during the 1950s, poaching reached unprecedented heights. The wildlife expert, E.P. Gee, believed that 75 rhinos were killed illegally in 1960 alone. A helicopter census of Chitawan in 1968 came up with a figure of 81–108 remaining rhinos, undoubtedly an underestimate, since the population was at least 280 in 1977. Nevertheless, that census indicated a severe loss from approximately 800 rhinos in 1950.

The situation turned around completely with the restoration of law and order under a powerful king. Chitawan, the former royal hunting preserve for kings and Ranas, which was subjected to massive settlement schemes in the 1950s and 1960s resulting in half its area being put under agricultural crops, became a national park in 1973. Today, inside this Park, rhinos are protected by 500 armed men of the Royal Nepalese Army who carry out foot patrols twice daily; outside the Park's borders, an additional force of 200 men from the Royal Nepalese Forest Department's Rhino Patrol stand guard.

The greater one-horned rhinoceros must have full protection in order to thrive in Chitawan (there are 150,000 more people in the area than in 1961 and there are now roads linking the valley to Kathmandu, rendering the movement of illegal goods much easier and quicker). Yet, the expense and manpower involved are much greater than one would expect to find in a less developed country. True, international conservation bodies have helped, but the motivation to rebuild the rhino population has come from the King, who rules with almost absolute authority, and it is his Government that has supported and enforced the laws concerned with rhino safety. Until poaching was brought to a halt, the Government gave rewards of sometimes over \$400 to people who provided information that led to the arrest of rhino poachers. Today, if a person is caught in possession of an illegal rhino horn, the law courts will imprison him for a period of up to

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An elephant handler in the Royal Chitawan National Park holds a bottle containing rhino urine, which he has collected (*Esmond Bradley Martin*).



five years and, in addition, may impose a fine of \$400–\$1500. The people have learned how serious rhino poaching is now; they are afraid of the penalties and since they also know that they can be punished as accomplices simply by knowing that someone is attempting to break the laws, they are even likely to report suspicious behaviour to the authorities.

However, the management policy of Chitawan is not wholly restrictive to the people; there are both direct and indirect benefits to them. Aside from a growing number of jobs engendered by the tourism industry in Chitawan (the yearly number of visitors increased from 836 in 1974 to 8094 in 1981), the local people are allowed to take products from the rhino carcasses, a practice that has kept prices for these commodities con-

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siderably lower than in other rhino-consuming countries and has reduced the desire to poach. Also, the park is opened for a short period to allow local people to cut tall grasses and reeds, which are used for roofing houses and building fences; as many as 55,000 people whose land is entirely under food crops took advantage of this offer in 1982 and cut many thousands of tonnes.

The King has also benefitted from the support he has given to rhino conservation. On 9 January 1981, when rhinos were no longer endangered, he was able to perform a sacred rite that all Nepalese kings are obliged to do once in their lifetime. This is the blood *Tarpan* ceremony, and it consists of offering rhino blood libations to the Hindu gods. King Birendra, accompanied by Queen Aishwarya, other members of the royal



A pedlar of traditional Nepalese medicines in Kathmandu weighs a small piece of rhino umbilical cord (*Esmond Bradley Martin*).

family and several Hindu priests, were mounted on elephants and led by the Park's people, also on elephants, to a large male rhino outside the Park's northern boundary. Altogether 26 elephants were used to encircle the rhino to prevent its escape and to allow the King to shoot it at close range. On the following morning, the fallen beast was dragged to the Rhapti river near Kasara, where a group of men disembowelled it. The King, dressed in a simple white robe, entered the abdominal cavity, knelt down and filled his cupped hands with rhino blood, which he offered to his gods in memory of the late King Mahendra, his father. Hindu priests chanted prayers throughout the ceremony of the rhino sacrifice.

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Although this little known rite may appear a negative factor for rhino conservation, it actually is a major impetus to make certain that rhinos are plentiful enough to allow its performance, which is regarded as an extremely important event. It is carried out just once in a king's life and only a mature male rhino, never a female, is sacrificed. A small price to pay in return for the protection granted to the rhino population as a whole, it epitomises the role of religion and royalty in Nepal's rhino conservation.

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