



DARWIN INITIATIVE



Pre-Project Funding Report

This report should be completed and submitted with a Stage 1 Darwin Application

Project Title	Conserving Nepal rhinoceros and <i>Terai</i> grassland habitat in a changing community context.
Country(ies)	Nepal
Project Ref No. (if known)	EIDPRO70
UK Organisation	Zoological Society of London
Names / Titles of those who travelled to the host country	Richard Kock and Raj Amin
Grant Value	£2,642
Start and Finishing Dates	27.8.06 – 8.09.06
Report Date	15.9.06

1. An earlier visit to Nepal in February 2006 dealing with vulture issues had brought concerns over rhino conservation to our attention, which is why a scoping application was submitted. There were 4 sites of interest for scoping. Kathmandu where much of the planning and decision making historically on rhino has occurred at the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) with support from key NGOs: the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC), WWF and others. The other sites were Chitwan and Bardia National Parks and Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve where rhinos occur. These field sites are managed by the DNPWC and the associated buffer zones are managed by the community. The scoping mission included; discussions in Kathmandu with key stakeholders (DNPWC, KMTNC, WWF and IUCN) as well as research of available written materials on the Terai and rhino and most important, extensive visits to all the field sites where meetings were held with all available stakeholders, including the Army (mandated with wildlife protection), DNPWC, local politicians and community leaders and resource user groups as well as NGO field staff. Field visits included accessing the terrain and rhino habitat both in the Parks and community buffer zones by foot, vehicle or elephant. It was monsoon season (and the worst floods in Bardia region for 40 years) which helped to identify seasonal constraints for rhino monitoring and protection. The trip included a journey across the entire west to east axis of southern Nepal – the Terai Arc by car. This provided a good insight into the current security and social situation in the country, which is particularly relevant at this time in Nepal's history. This latter trip was not planned. The last phase involved obtaining endorsement of the findings and proposals for the DI application from the key stakeholders and partners. The proposal was then constructed taking into account all the activities, observations and discussions from the scoping visit. Budgetary details for the proposal were also discussed with partners, with current local costs used in its preparation.

2. Initial discussions with WWF in Kathmandu raised some concern on our part as much of the discussion was defensive regarding the history of rhino conservation in Nepal, suggesting that the politics of rhino conservation were currently slightly tense. Recent highly critical press articles in Nepal blaming the authorities and their supporting institutions for the decline in rhino might have been the reason for this. Much of the decision making on rhino conservation has historically been top-down with a strong influence from WWF on Government due to their significant funding of wildlife and the DNPWC in Nepal. There seemed to be some denial about the seriousness of the current situation and nervousness over external agencies viewing the current scene. On the other hand the Government and the KMTNC were very open and the local stakeholders at each

field site could not have been more cooperative and willing to help us and they seemed desperate to speak to someone about their problems. The scoping team did its best to be apolitical and passive. Another constraint was the fact that the Government endorsed – Nepal Rhino Action Plan (September 2006) was kept from us until the end of the mission, which was surprising at first but when we saw what a technically deficient and dated document it was, we were less concerned and its weakness endorsed our scoping findings. However the general areas endorsed for action are consistent with the proposals recommendations. The relationship with all stakeholders was relaxed by the end of the mission and any suspicion on the intentions of the scoping mission, were allayed. These initial concerns did not prevent access to key information and did not constrain the proposal development in fact they helped us to focus.

3. Without the scoping exercise it would have been very difficult to understand the very significant and recent political changes in Nepal and the opportunities this is providing for new initiatives. It also provided a clear insight into the real “on the ground” needs of the DNPWC and other stakeholders in rhino monitoring and protection of the Terai grassland, which cannot be gleaned from available reports and publications. Finally, the appropriate focus for the proposal was more easily identified and this encouraged changes to be made.

4. The discussions highlighted the current poor governance, the need for management integration and improved management skills for rhino and Terai grassland conservation. The situation has been allowed to deteriorate over many years with the current crisis only being accepted internally in Nepal and publicised in the last few months. The historical difficulties experienced between the various stakeholders, the changing socio-political conditions and top-down decision making (and to some extent corruption) remains a constraint on the Nepalese finding an internal solution to the decline in Rhino. Even WWF cannot be impartial with ex- government civil servants, previously involved in rhino conservation in key positions. An external project would be apolitical and a catalyst for the change necessary to raise morale and provide the technical knowledge and skills to get on with the job. The DNPWC, the main National NGO (KMTNC) and IUCN (a partnership not initially envisaged) all see the DI proposal in this light and are very keen to have it implemented and can provide matching funds, administrative and management support as well as implement certain aspects of the proposed project directly. WWF is a little nervous of another external player but as they carry a lot of the burden of the recent negative history, they are willing to support the project and share the responsibility to some extent and provide matching funds.

5. The conclusion from the scoping was that it was an appropriate time to put in a proposal as a significant proportion of the proposed work was urgently needed. The scoping had enabled the team to understand; a) the main issues negatively affecting (and critical) to rhino and Terai grassland conservation in Nepal and where investment and training would be most usefully applied; b) a more realistic assessment of what overall improvements a DI project could bring to the situation given the complex socio-political situation. To strengthen scoping a pre-scoping brief from DI on available knowledge at DEFRA on the target country and biodiversity would probably have helped.

Signed:

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Date: 15.9.06

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