

Chapter Two

History of Chitwan National Park

Chitwan National Park (CNP) was the first national park in Nepal. It is located in the Terai, the southern plains bordering India. During the 19th Century, its natural, dense forests were already protected from some human intervention. The centralised Nepali State restricted cultivation in areas of dense forest cover, which also served as natural border protection. The purpose of this restriction was to preserve wildlife for the hunting parties of the rulers of Nepal. The feudal Rana prime ministers of Nepal used the area as a personal hunting reserve from 1846 to 1940. During the Rana regime, the Chitwan valley was a privileged hunting ground. The hunted species included tiger, rhinoceros, leopards, and other mega-fauna.¹

After the Rana autocracy ended in the 1950s, wildlife conservation became an issue of concern as massive deforestation and settlement followed malaria eradication in the Terai. The most well-known endangered species was the Asiatic one-horned rhinoceros. From 1957 onwards, the one-horned rhino and its habitat became a symbol for wildlife conservation in southern Nepal. The Wild Life Protection Act 1957 (2015 BS) provided a legal basis for the protection of wildlife. In 1959, a 175 sq. km area of Tikauli forest was declared a mriga kunj (deer sanctuary). In 1963, the area south of the Rapti River was established as a Gairwa Kunja (rhino sanctuary), which is now located on the edge of CNP.

As the pressure for wildlife conservation began to build, the then ruler, King Mahendra, gave sanction to the creation of the Royal Chitwan National Park (RCNP). The RCNP was created in 1973 and was the first such delineated area for wildlife preservation in Nepal. It was made possible by the enactment of the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (NPWC) Act, 1973 (2029 BS). The Regulations to the Act were formulated in the following year. The Royal Nepal Army (now the Nepal Army) established a barracks within the Park and was given sole responsibility for law enforcement from 1975 onwards. A 'rhino patrol' became responsible for the protection of rhinos outside the park.

CNP was declared a World Heritage Site in 1984. The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) received assistance from UNDP to start the Parks and People Programme (PPP) in 1995. A Buffer Zone² Management Regulation was implemented in 1996. The CNP buffer zone covers an area of 932 sq.km and extends to the Rivers Hata and Dharanga in the east, the River Narayani in the west, the Rapti

¹ In 1938/39, it is reported that Victor Hope, Lord Linlithgow, then Viceroy of British India, killed 120 tigers, 28 rhinos, 27 leopards, and 15 bears in a single hunting campaign.

² The buffer zone is an area peripheral to the park and is also regarded as a zone of impact. The fourth amendment to the NPWC Act 1973 defines a buffer zone as an area surrounding a park or a reserve encompassing forests, agricultural lands, settlements, village open spaces, and many other forms of land use.

River in the north, and the Riu River in the south. The buffer zone covers 19 village development committees (VDCs) in the Chitwan district, 15 VDCs in Nawalparasi district, two VDCs in Parsa district, and one VDC in Makwanpur district. The estimated population of the buffer zone is 223, 260 (UNESCO & IUCN 2003).

Gradually, as Nepal opened up to international tourists, CNP was added to the itinerary of wildlife tourists. Tourist brochures advertise CNP as lying in the sub-tropical lowlands and consisting of sal (*Shorea robusta*) forests, tall grasslands, hills, ox-bow lakes, and flood plains. Visitors are attracted by the opportunity to see over 50 species of mammals, 55 species of amphibians and reptiles, and 525 species of birds. Documentaries show local animals including the one-horned rhino, Bengal tiger, gaur, wild elephant, antelope, striped hyena pangolin, gharial crocodile, and the Gangetic dolphin. Reptiles such as cobras, kraits and pythons are also found in the National Park. It is significant that the existence of indigenous people is rarely mentioned in these accounts, nor are their images shown. When they are mentioned, they are more commonly depicted as poachers and smugglers of forest products.

Historically, the policy of the Nepali Government, with assistance from international agencies such as the United Nations, was initially dominated by biocentric scientific conservation. Government policies and legislation (including the NPWC Act 1973) were based on the assumption that people were responsible for the destruction of wildlife and, therefore, needed to be excluded from conservation areas. These policies severely restricted indigenous people's entry to the forest and made fishing in rivers illegal. By the mid-1980s, ferrying across the river was also banned.

By the late eighties, conservation policies in Nepal started to change. Concerned agencies became aware of conflicts between local fishing communities and the CNP. Slowly, these agencies began to approach conservation as a partnership between conservation agencies and local people. Nevertheless, exclusionary practices continued. The concept of the buffer zone only evolved after nearly two decades of state-dominated exclusionary protected area management. The Buffer Zone Management Regulation of 1996 stipulated that 30–50 per cent of the income from any conservation area must be spent at the local level through the Buffer Zone Management Council. Despite this advance, development initiatives were unable to reach the most marginalised communities. Several studies have shown that the poorest of the poor communities, which have no legal entitlement to resources, are often excluded from the benefits of buffer zone development programmes.

The 2000 Amendment to the CNP Regulation 1974 provided for permission to be granted for the collection of forest products or other services for the payment of a fee (Section 16a). This meant that traditional fishing communities could now apply for 'permission' to fish. This provision was made 26 years after the Regulation was initially promulgated. A notice issued by Royal Gazette dated 22 May, 2000 stated that:

"Local Bote, Darai, Kumal and Tharu ethnic groups who have been fishing traditionally for their livelihood shall acquire permission for fishing after paying a fee of rupees fifty in Nepali currency annually."

The notice does not include the traditional fishing communities of the Majhi and Musahar. To date, this provision has not been implemented in CNP or other protected areas in the Terai.³

Table 1: Chronology of events affecting Chitwan National Park

Period	Conservation Context
1846-1950	Under the Rana regime, Chitwan valley was a hunting ground for privileged classes. Declaration of one-horned rhinoceros as royal game and establishment of stringent punishments for poachers by then Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana
until 1950	Dense forest cover in Chitwan valley
after 1950	Malaria eradication; influx of hill migrants and deforestation
1957	Establishment of rhino sanctuary followed by mobilisation of a 'rhino patrol' to protect endangered Asiatic one-horned rhinos
1957	Wild Life Protection Act 1957 (2015 BS) provided legal basis for protection of wildlife
1959	Declaration of Mahendra Mriga Kunja (Deer Park) by King Mahendra
by 1960	Population of Asiatic one-horned rhinoceros declined from 800 in 1950 to 200
1963	Area south of Rapti River declared a rhino sanctuary
1966	Rhino population declines to 100
1973	National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (NPWC) Act 1973 (2029 BS) enacted and Chitwan National Park (CNP) established as the first national park in Nepal
1974	Formulation of CNP Regulation 1974
1977	Extension of Park boundary
1975	The then Royal Nepal Army joined the Park with sole responsibility for law enforcement. The rhino patrol became responsible for the protection of rhinos outside the park
1984	CNP Declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO
1993	Emergence of Buffer Zone Policy under the 4th Amendment to the NPWC Act 1973
Late 1994	Parks and People Programme started by Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation assisted by UNDP
1996	Buffer Zone Management Regulation passed and buffer zone declared around CNP
2000	Amendment to CNP Regulation of 1974 to provide for the inclusion of concessions for traditional fishing communities for a fee

³ Due to pressure from civil society and mounting people pressure, a few fishing communities from the buffer zone of the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve acquired fishing permits in 2006. Fishing licences have not been issued in other protected areas in the Terai.