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SPECIAL
FEATURE

NP

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Women in Conservation

Sabita's Journey with WWF

In helping understand and protect Nepal's iconic species in the Terai Arc Landscape



Sabita monitoring radio-collared rhinos in Chitwan National Park

Sabita Malla, 27 years of age, is WWF-Nepal's Senior Research Officer. With a Master's Degree in Wildlife Sciences from Wildlife Institute of India in Dehradun, Sabita has made significant strides as a young female conservationist. Her professional career started with WWF-Nepal in 2010 as Research Officer for the Terai Arc Landscape (TAL) Program; she was promoted to Senior Research Officer in less than two years.

Sabita has been a part of some of the most challenging and successful wildlife monitoring and research operations at WWF-Nepal. Some of these included the ID-based rhino monitoring program and gharial population survey in TAL, Nepal's first satellite telemetry to monitor tigers in Bardia National Park, and the implementation of Management Information System Technology (MIST) in Shuklaphanta Wildlife Reserve, Chitwan National Park and Bardia National Park to aid patrolling and species monitoring activities.

As we celebrate the indomitable spirit of women in the backdrop of International Women's Day, WWF-Nepal brings to you Sabita's story through excerpts of an interview conducted with her at Bardia National Park in Nepal's Terai Arc Landscape. Sabita is currently leading a team of 33 people in the national park in setting up about 120 camera traps to help monitor tiger populations in the area, and also conducting prey-base population monitoring.

What motivated you to work for tigers and wildlife conservation?

Growing up in a small village in western Nepal, the outdoors was my playroom. I would go looking for butterflies and birds in the forest, wading through streams, climbing up and down the hills while naming every tree I crossed along the way.

It gave me a deep love for nature that motivated me to study about species ecology, habitats and conservation at India's prestigious Wildlife Institute of India.

But it was only during my field research in 2009 that the wildlife conservation crisis in Nepal became real to me. I can still hear the echo of gunshots as poachers killed wildlife inside Bardia. It made me realize that I had to be part of the efforts to save my country's iconic species.

And here I am today, right back in the same protected area, working with the government and local communities to assess the important progress we've made in the past few years.

How does it feel to be leading an all-male team for this tiger monitoring project?

People tell me that being the only woman during field operations is probably a big challenge. I don't think so. And I do not think that I should be treated differently from my male colleagues. The most important thing is to be very adaptive and able to work with others. You need to create a bond of trust and respect with each and every team member. When I am in the field, I am the same as my other team members. We are connected by one cause—to help understand and protect wildlife.

How does a camera trap work?

Camera traps are a stealthy way to monitor tigers in the wild. Through images of individual tigers retrieved from the camera traps, we develop a history for each tiger over time and this helps us estimate the population of tigers within the survey area. The tiger studies are complemented by a simultaneous monitoring of prey species and habitat. Finally, we compare data with past studies and analyze the best solutions to help tigers thrive.

Your work is obviously risky and exposes you to some danger.

Some of my memorable encounters include being chased by wild elephants and finding myself eyeballing a six-foot long python hanging from a tree. Sadly, I have yet to encounter tigers and rhinos. I'm not sure about how my family would react if they heard about some of my close calls. My parents wanted me to become a doctor, serve my community and make them proud. It took me a while to convince them that I was born to be a conservationist. Today, they are proud of me and what I do.

I must say that wildlife research is not for everyone. You need to have an undying passion for it. Then you will live it and love it. From chasing butterflies to tracing a tiger's stripes, I have come a long way although in many ways, this is but the beginning! I cannot imagine any other life as this is what I love doing.



Sabita with one of the two rhino calves that were rescued by WWF-Nepal after they were swept away by the flooded Narayani River in Chitwan, June 2010



Sabita assessing gharial habitat and measuring water levels



Sabita holding the 'giant paw' during her tiger satellite telemetry work

	<p>Why we are here To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.</p> <hr/> <p>www.wwfnepal.org</p>
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