

Oryx

The International Journal of Conservation

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Oryx - The International Journal of Conservation, is now published quarterly by Cambridge University Press on behalf of Fauna & Flora International. It is a leading scientific journal of biodiversity conservation, conservation policy and sustainable use, with a particular interest in material that has the potential to improve conservation management and practice.

The website, <http://www.oryxthejournal.org/>, plays a vital role in the journal's capacity-building work. Amongst the site's many attributes is a compendium of sources of free software for researchers and details of how to access Oryx at reduced rates or for free in developing countries. The website also includes extracts from Oryx issues 10, 25 and 50 years ago, and a gallery of research photographs that provide a fascinating insight into the places, species and people described in the journal.

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THE FAUNA OF ASSAM.

By R. C. HANSON.

During the past ten years or so, game in Assam has considerably decreased mainly due to the Government's short-sighted policy of repealing the Arms Act and permitting a large number of licences to be issued every year to ignorant villagers and so-called sportsmen who take advantage of this leniency and destroy every living thing to be seen inside or outside a jungle. This deplorable state of affairs should be checked at once before it is too late even to attempt conserving wild life by forming Game Associations. There are Game Laws in the province, but nobody ever troubles himself to observe them; nor do the powers that be often take steps to enforce them.

Recently, the formation of a Game Society was attempted, but it failed to function for several reasons. Enough members were not forthcoming on account of the unsettled conditions in the country and official apathy in the matter. Without Government support no Game Society can ever function, as guards and wardens must have a certain amount of authority and power to arrest poachers. Moreover, the Forest Department is only interested in conserving wild life in the Reserves; whereas there are large tracts of forest outside the Reserves holding a considerable amount of game that require careful protection, and sportsmen soon lose interest in a Game Society when they find that it cannot exercise any power in these outside areas. The present Game laws of Assam are not suitable for protecting the fauna in the province at the present moment, and new rules are absolutely necessary. This is not the time to think of hurting people's feelings, or being reluctant to introduce more severe punishments for those infringing the Game Laws. The rules must be enforced if wild life is to be conserved. Confiscation of arms and ammunition, besides the usual fines and terms of imprisonment, would go a long way in preventing unnecessary poaching. The sale of skins and meat must be prohibited everywhere and persons responsible brought to

book. A tax on arms and ammunition would also prevent a great number of new weapons being brought into the country. These are points worth considering by the Government, and when ignorant villagers and others realize that more interest is being taken in game protection they will naturally desist in destroying animals and birds wholesale as is happening at present.

The animals that require careful protection at present are the rhinoceros, elephant, *mithun* or bison, buffalo, sambar, takin, serow, swamp deer, spotted deer (the few that have been seen), hog-deer, and barking deer. The rhino Sanctuaries are situated near the Bhutan border and also in three or four places along the Brahmaputra River. There are rhino in some of the other ordinary Forest Reserves like Ripu, Manas, and Chirang, and also near the foot of the Lushai Hills. These should all be converted into National Parks and properly protected. For the other animals mentioned, four or five National Parks in each district would be necessary. The districts of Goalpara, Garo Hills, Kamrup, Khasi, and Jaintia Hills, Nowgong, Darrang, Cachar, Sibsagar, Sylhet, Lushai Hills, and Lakhimpur each have suitable Reserves that can be thus converted, while there are railways and main roads within easy reach of them. Large tracts of land for purposes of settlement and cultivation could be found near the Sadiya Frontier Tract and along the Brahmaputra River, and these would not interfere in any way with the Reserves taken over for conversion into Sanctuaries or National Parks. The question of guarding these National Parks when formed will have to receive careful consideration. Watchers will have to be picked men from the Forest Department and the police force, and they must be suitably rewarded every time a person is convicted for poaching. This is essential if the men are to be employed solely on this job, so that they will not be influenced in any way by the enemies of game preservation. Villages in close proximity to the National Parks will have to be thoroughly combed for weapons, and all *shikaries'* names carefully noted. A European Game Warden would have to be employed who could in his turn

get outside information regarding these villages and also the efficiency of his own subordinates.

In the Darrang district a Game Association was started a few years ago, but it proved a failure as the Game Warden appointed to protect wild life in the district had no powers to make an arrest or enforce the existing Game Laws. Time and again he made representations to Government, but no notice was taken of these complaints. The result is that game in this district is being annihilated by poachers at present. Between Gauhati and Shillong the Nongkhylllem Reserve is situated close to Nongpoh on the main road, and this holds elephants, bison, sambar, and other game, but poaching is rife, while skins, horns, and meat are often sold in the market-places nearby. This Reserve could very easily be converted into a National Park or Game Sanctuary, and timber cutting entirely stopped. There is enough timber in other localities nearer Shillong or Gauhati where there is no wild life that could be exploited, instead of spoiling this fine game tract.

During the year 1930 a large number of rhinoceroses were destroyed by poachers in the North Kanrup, Manus, and Ripu Game Sanctuaries and Forest Reserves. This number is estimated at about ninety or a hundred, and the people responsible for this terrible slaughter are mostly Kacharis and Assamese living on the borders of the Reserves. If we estimate the loss to Government by the destruction of these beasts it would work out into lakhs of rupees. (Since then the rhinoceros has been protected by a Government order ; it is not known if this is, in practice, effective.)

Rhinoceroses are valued at from Rs 15,000 to Rs 18,000 by Zoological Parks in America, and if these animals could be captured it would be worth while exporting at least some of them to other countries, instead of permitting them to be butchered for the sake of their horns. For no matter how Government tried to conserve them, without a proper Game Society a certain number is bound to be destroyed every year. The close proximity of the Bhutan Hills makes it more difficult to protect these beasts, as there seems to be

no control by the Bhutanese Government over the villages bordering on our Reserves, and guns and ammunition are being manufactured every day in these hills. The Government of India might be able to reach an agreement with the Bhutan State regarding this vital question and something good might come of it in time.

Elephants in these same areas, as well as in other tracts, are killed for their tusks every year, and no record is kept of those destroyed. If we estimate the value of a full-grown tusker at between Rs 5,000 to Rs 7,000 the loss suffered by Government in the course of one year would be very great. This money could well be expended on a Game Society run on proper lines with Watchers, and a Game Warden or Secretary in charge. Moreover, all rewards offered for the destruction of rogue elephants, tigers, etc., could be withdrawn and spent on building up a Game Society for the protection of these and other beasts, as very often it is not the rogues or dangerous animals that are sought and killed, but other harmless ones, and the rewards are invariably given without a careful inquiry in each case.

In conclusion, I wish to remark that if wild life is to be conserved at all in Assam, the Government must be prepared to introduce stringent Game Laws as suggested, and all high officials must co-operate in trying to form a powerful local society affiliated to the Society for the Preservation of Fauna of the Empire.

[*Ed. Note.*—The author's proposal that the local Government should delegate the administration of the Game Laws to a "Game Society" is a somewhat novel idea and precedent for it would, it is believed, be difficult to find. The facts stated in the article show, however, that the wild fauna of Assam is steadily being decimated. It is thus considered that a good case is made out for the appointment of a Game Warden and staff by the Assam Government, and it would appear that such revenue would accrue as would prevent the establishment being a burden to the province.]
