

# wildlife

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David Shepherd  
Wildlife Foundation

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# The rise and fall of India's tigers and rhinos

**Professor Debprab Kumar Talukdar Phd, Director of Aaranyak, member of the IUCN's Rhino Specialist Group (South Asia) and member of India's Ministry of Environment and Forests National Board of Wildlife**

**The BBC's Saving Planet Earth Series shown on BBC1 in July, reached over 20 million viewers and raised over £1,400,000.**

As you may have watched, one of the programmes featured Phil Tuftnell's trip to Kaziranga National Park to highlight the plight of wildlife crime and show the devastating impact it is having on the conservation of the rhino. This was graphically illustrated as Phil's arrival coincided with the slaughter of four rhinos:

"It's a battleground, not just for the rhinos, but for the park's guards who are trying to protect them – they literally lay their lives on the line. It's not a game. In the past 20 years over 60 people – poachers and guards – have been killed in combat. However, I'm starting to realise they are a long way down the supply and demand chain. Somebody, somewhere, is making a lot of cash out of rhino horn... and it's certainly not the locals. What's great to see though, is that these guys are not alone. The Aaranyak Rhino Project, supported by DSWF gives really important communications equipment to the forest guards to help them. It also funds anti-poaching operations and illegal trade investigations."

DSWF is hopeful that following the success of the programme additional financial support from the BBC Wildlife Fund for vital anti-poaching equipment will be possible.

Whilst neighbouring Nepal admits to losing most of its rhinos and tigers due to two years of armed conflict – India also announces shocking news. Whilst rhino numbers have generally increased the authorities admit that tiger poaching is out of control and that its total population of wild tigers is only 1,300 compared to over 3,600 surviving at the last count just five years ago.

One of the last strongholds for rhinos and tigers is Kaziranga National Park in the often forgotten Northeast corner of India in the State of Assam.

Having virtually eradicated poaching over the last few years, since March 2007, Kaziranga has suffered a sudden increase in rhino poaching as four rhinos were poached within 15 days of each other sending a strong alarm signal that wildlife crime needs continual monitoring, even in the best managed national parks. The total rhinos killed then rose to ten and, as terrible floods engulfed the park during the July/August monsoon, another four rhinos were poached as they tried to escape the floods to higher ground, bringing the total number of rhino deaths to fourteen.

The anti-poaching staff at Kaziranga and neighbouring rhino sanctuaries risk their lives almost daily and work extremely hard to protect the rhino. Sadly the flooding gave the poachers an unexpected opportunity to kill the animals for their horn, so prized on the illegal black market. Two poachers were killed in an encounter in April and it is hoped that this will act as a deterrent to wildlife criminals. Another gang of four were caught and arrested just last month inside the park.

Kaziranga is also home to between 75-86 wild tigers and with numbers being decimated elsewhere it is vital that we increase protection here. DSWF's new funding specifically for this tiger project has come at just the right time and we are hopeful that now the floods have abated the project can continue in earnest with the location of the first of 40 camera traps for tiger monitoring. An awareness programme in the villages surrounding the park will also begin.

It is a sad fact that more young men have been recruited to the poaching rings than they have as forest staff. This makes our work to protect the rhino ever more acute and underlines the need for urgently increased support for the project.

DSWF acts as a lifeline for this project, supplying the vital funds for equipment, training and community education. Without this support, the Kaziranga rhino and tiger project would not be able to operate in this desperate battle to save these endangered species in India.

