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Sentinel An endangered species

The factors behind the reverses in rhino conservation

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Kings doted upon it, travellers spoke about it and the East revelled in its glory. The Indian or greater-one-horned rhinoceros (*rhinoceros unicornis*) was the virtual lord of the Orient. It reigned from Peshawar in Pakistan to Mytkhina in Burma. The Indus Valley was once the home of the one-horned rhino about 5,000 years ago, during the Mohenjodaro era. Al Beruni and Ibn Batuta mentioned the animal in their travelogues. Emperor Timur the Lame loved hunting rhinos on the frontiers of Kashmir in 1398 AD. Mughal monarch Jehangir's memoirs mention the one-horned beast, which at the time lived near Aligarh in Uttar Pradesh.

Then, the incredible happened. The one-horned rhino did the disappearing trick. By the 19th century, it lived only in the Terai grassland of northern Uttar Pradesh, Southern Nepal, Northern Bihar, Northern Bengal and the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. One sees rhinos also in Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland. The global strength of the rhino has dwindled to just 11,000 from an impressive one lakh populace at one stage. The Indian rhino numbers 2,000 at the moment, of which more than half, i.e., about 1300, are confined to the Kaziranga National Park. The other game

sanctuary that houses a few rhinos is Nepal's Royal Chitwan National Park. Very few exist in Jaldapara and Gorumara in North Bengal.

The absolute population of rhinos in Kaziranga was 400, 670, 960 and 1080 in the years 1966, 1972, 1978 and 1984

respectively. But the growth rate for the years 1966-72, 1972-78 and 1978-84 were 67.5 per cent, 43.3 per cent and 12.5 per cent respectively. The 12.5 per cent growth during 1978-84 is really alarming when compared with 67.5 per cent of 1966-72.

Who is causing the reverses in rhino conservation? Answer: the poacher. Poaching is not a

new phenomenon at all. Hunting for ivory not only dates back several centuries — hunting teams sent had been to the Tundra lands also to extract ivories from the extinct mammoths which were well preserved under permanent cover of snow. In the case of the rhino, it is the horn for which it is persecuted. The fanciful belief in the properties of its horn in southern and eastern Asia, and its demand in Yemen are the main reasons why it's become a major target for poachers. The rhino horn is

not really a horn at all, it is not fixed to the skull but to the flesh.

In south and east Asian countries like China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Singapore, etc, many people believe that the horns possess magical, medicinal properties. The traditional pharmacists sell horn as an antidote for heart troubles, headaches, etc, and also to

cleanse the pancreas and liver. It is also used as an ointment for skin diseases. And in Yemen Arab Republic horns are sought for use as carved dagger handles, which are regarded as prestigious. These are called Jambias in local parlance.

In Kaziranga, abode of most of the surviving Indian rhinos, poaching has taken a menacing turn in recent years. In 1966, 1968, 1969 and 1970 poachers killed 5, 10, 8 and 10 rhinos respectively. In 1979 only two rhinos were killed. But

in 1981 around 25 rhinos were killed; it further increased in 1983 when about 45-50 animals fell to poachers. According to unofficial sources as many as 83 rhinos were hunted down by poachers in 1985. Although in 1988 poaching was slightly checked (about 16 to 20 were killed), the devastating flood has taken away lives of about 50 rhinos besides many other animals. This year, in just one fortnight starting from mid-January, five rhinos were killed by the poachers.



Only about 2000 rhinos survive the world over

Outside Kaziranga, in other parts of Assam also, the picture is a gloomy one. In Laokhowa Wildlife Sanctuary of Nagaon District the number of rhinos killed was 6, 1, 6 and 5 in 1979, 1980, 1981 and 1982 respectively. By 1983 they were wiped out from the face of the earth: all the remaining 40 rhinos were killed by poachers. Not a single rhino exists in the Panidihing area of Sibsagar district. Between 1982 and 1985 no less than 300 rhinos were killed by poachers in Assam. This is in sharp contrast to the position of Nepal's Chitwan National Park where the second largest concentration of Indian one-horned rhinos is found. It may be mentioned here that not a single rhino fell victim to the poacher between 1976 and 1985. The position after 1985 is not known. But why this sharp contrast?

Anarchy, or breakdown of law and order, in 1982-83 may be an important factor. Riots and clashes among various ethnic groups resulted in the deaths of no less than 5,000 people which meant that there was virtually no concern for wildlife. The bulk of security forces deployed to track down poachers had to be withdrawn. But the phenomenal increase in the price of the rhino's horn in the markets of south-east and East Asia is supposed to be the main force behind recent spurt in poaching. With the demand being so high, an illegal market thrived. In 1969 the price of a kilogram of rhino horn was around Rs 33,600 in the South-east Asian markets which soared to Rs 80,000 in 1980. In 1988 the retail price of a kilo of Indian rhino horn in the markets of Taiwan touched an all-time high of about Rs 5 lakh or US dollars 42,880.

However, the actual poachers hardly get Rs 25,000 - 30,000 per kg from unscrupulous middlemen. In the early 1980s the poachers were paid about Rs 13,000 - 14,000.

Till the 1980s most of the poaching was done by using pit traps throughout Assam. In such cases the help of local residents was a must because they knew the terrain intricately. The process was time-consuming and so naturally the animals killed were also quite few.

But after the 1980s poaching has been revolutionised and took a menacing turn especially in the famed Kaziranga area where the bulk of the rhinos are now concentrated. And this is due to easy availability of sophisticated



Rhinos wallowing in the water at Pabitara: cool times

fire-arms and involvement of Naga tribes. 303 and 762 rifles are now widely used. While Nagas are basically not poachers and have no background of rhino-poaching, they are recruited by the syndicates of middlemen mainly for the supply of arms. It may be mentioned here that many Nagas are still underground guerrillas like those of NSCN (National Socialist Council of Nagaland) having links with Burmese terrorist groups and those of China. Thus, the sophisticated arms are easily available in Nagaland.

In Kaziranga and Panidihing areas the Mishings are the actual field poachers. One Mr G Miri (age, about 50 years) of village Bohikhowa, adjacent to Kaziranga is reported to have killed about 30 rhinos in his lifetime as a poacher. In Manas Tiger Reserve it is the Bodo-Kacharis who do the actual killings. In other areas of Assam Nepalis, immigrant Muslims, and Assamese settled in the chars and chaporis of the Brahmaputra are the actual poachers. They simply kill the rhino and remove the horn, leaving the carcass behind to be taken care of by nature or the forest department. The meat, however, is also in demand locally, the last

The bulk of Indian rhino horns ends up in Singapore. The route is through Calcutta. In April 1988, while on a trip to Manipur, I was reported that some horns are routed through Imphal, capital of Manipur. One Sattar of Imphal is quite famous in the area as a dealer in rhino horns. Other important markets of the horn are Taipei, Kaohsiung (both in Taiwan), Macao, Hong Kong and Bangkok.

The killing of the rhino in India was banned as far back as 1910. However, the illegal killing/poaching could not be stopped fully, not even in national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. Though most strict laws are now being enforced under the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, strict laws have failed miserably to contain poaching. Moreover, considering the present rate of poaching in Kaziranga particularly, it appears that existing conservation measures have failed miserably. Unless a new conservation policy is taken to contain poaching one cannot be optimistic of the rhino's survival.

It has been lately seen that some forest and police officials collude with poachers. Sometime in 1984-85 two forest guards and one policeman were among those arrested on charges of poaching. For more forest guards were taken into custody for their alleged involvement in rhino-poaching during the period 1986-88.

The Government should take stern measures. For crushing the backbone of the poachers the services of the army or Border Guard may be requisitioned as has been done in Chitwan. Since 1985 in every article of poaching, I have been pleading for this but in vain.

rhino of Panidihing area of Sibsagar which was killed in April, 1987 had every bit of its meat eaten by locals belonging to many communities like the Mishings, Assamese and Bengalis.

They thought it had some medicinal value.

The poachers have come up with another method of killing rhinos: electrocution. The poachers place live wires on the regular rhinotracks and connect the same with high-tension cable passing over the sanctuaries.