



Photo: Ghorpáde

ALARM CALL FOR GREAT INDIAN RHINO (*Rhinoceros unicornis*)

by Kedar N. Baidya

The Government of India's recent plan to translocate a few great Indian rhinos to some other potentially suitable habitat, has caused controversy in North-Eastern Assam State.

The great Indian one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*), an animal once at the point of extinction, is still a major attraction for tourists visiting the marshy and difficult Kaziranga Sanctuary of Assam. In spite of the enforcement of a tough antipoaching law (Indian Wildlife Act, 1972) this magnificent animal is still under severe threat for its horn². The single horn when fully developed may weigh up to 1.5 kg. and can reach 12 in. in length. It is believed that when in powder form, the horn has aphrodisiacal qualities and it is much valued by some groups for this reason. As another example North Yemeni tribesmen take pride in carrying daggers with decorative rhino horn handles⁴.

Regarding the controversy over the translocation scheme, it has been argued that the proposal to translocate the rhino is designed to gradually strip the state of an important tourist attraction. A group of students in their recent protest note to the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, mentioned that the

proposed translocation scheme of what they call "Assam Rhino" into any other reserve, outside Assam, will "deprive the people of Assam of an object of their hereditary pride." The agitated student groups are receiving support from some local politicians, 'conservationists', and wildlife officials.

The wildlife authorities in New Delhi are surprised at the controversy and feel that the rhino translocation programme is based on sound conservation principles. They say that Kaziranga Sanctuary, whose total area is about 425 sq.kms., is overstocked with rhinos and some of them must be shifted to new suitable habitats.

The recent rhino population estimate shows that there are about 1,200 animals in India, and some 960 of them are in Kaziranga alone. Reflecting back, Kaziranga was established as a Sanctuary in 1908, at which time there were about a dozen rhinos in the reserve. Poaching, encroachment of the habitats by man, the drying of wetlands, all contributed towards pushing the magnificent rhino into small isolated pockets of the savannah swamps of Kaziranga and the foothill forests in West Bengal and Nepal.

Though scientists say that there are no aphro-

disiacal properties in the rhino horn, poaching continues. Kaziranga Sanctuary officials admitted that 40 rhinos had been killed during the year 1981.

The Indian Wildlife authorities believe that the Javan one-horned lesser rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*) became extinct by 1900 and its other counterpart the Sumatran two-horned rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) by 1935. Thus, the Indian authorities are seriously considering methods to safeguard *Rhinoceros unicornis*, and that is why they are in favor of the translocation of a few selected animals to other suitable habitats. The experts recommended last year that six rhinos should be lifted out of Kaziranga and introduced into Dudhwa National Park in the Northern State of Uttar Pradesh. A few others could be translocated in later stages into the State Reserves in the Northern part of West Bengal.

Some wildlife officials in Assam think that the rhino may not be able to survive the threat from the poachers who are prevalent in the Dudhwa and North Bengal forest areas. Their suggestion is to resettle the rhinos by dividing them between reserves within Assam, which they say, would provide an ideal habitat for the species.

The experiment to translocate rhinos into Dudhwa National Park is expected to take place next winter and this could perhaps be the starting point of similar projects involving other endangered Indian species. It is worth mentioning India's recent notable

conservation success programme – "Project Tiger", which was launched in 1973 to save the magnificent big cat from extinction. Rigid protective measures have helped increase the tiger population, both in the wild and in the reserve areas. The recent (1981) population estimates have recorded 3,015 animals, whereas the initial (1972) count was only 1844.

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TROPICAL RAINFOREST SYMPOSIUM

"We probably know more about the surface of the moon than about the forests of Amazonia," commented a number of scientists at the Tropical Rainforest Symposium at Leeds University in England recently.

The meeting, attended by 300 delegates from 36 nations and organized by the British Ecological Society and the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society with the support of WWF-UK, focused on action to halt the destruction of tropical rainforests. This will be the theme of WWF's next international Fund Raising Campaign.

Several key recommendations made by the delegates were:

- to set aside 10% of the world's tropical rain forests as conservation areas, with effective protection, monitoring and research (at present only 2% are conserved);

- to increase public education for all those dependent on the forest and to explain its value for their continued welfare. 50 million farmers in the

tropics are directly dependent on the forest for their livelihood;

- to exercise greater control of forest clearance on lands unsuitable for permanent agriculture, and the encouragement of more efficient use of land already cleared. Pressure on natural forest can be reduced by providing tree plantations of fuelwood, pulpwood and commercial timber; and

- for developing nations to consider assuming a much larger share of the costs of conserving the rainforest habitat and to provide increased training programmes in tropical ecology and management.

- One of the speakers, Brian Johnson, an economist and Fellow of the International Institute for Environment and Development, and a Council Member of WWF-UK, analysed Britain's past and future responsibility for the conservation of tropical moist forests.

He called for the establishment of a Forestry Policy Centre which would study and disseminate information on tropical forestry ecology, economics and management techniques.

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