

Rhinos electrocuted for wildlife trade

Electrocutions, tribal uprisings and illegal hunting have caused the deaths of at least 58 Indian rhinos since last year. This is the highest figure since 1983.

Poachers in Assam, North East India, which is home to nearly 80% of the world's one-horned rhino, have developed a new and terrible way of trapping the endangered animals for their valuable horn.

The great one-horned rhinos are being horrifically electrocuted using high voltage wires which run through two wildlife parks in the region. The poachers have developed a way of suspending the 11,000 volt wires over the rhino tracks.

As rhinos follow tracks through the undergrowth they walk straight into the wires and are electrocuted. At least seven rhinos are known to have been killed in this way since the end of last year.

Anti-poaching units in Kaziranga National Park and Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary have now cleared the undergrowth near the pylons and patrol the area regularly, especially at night. But their job is made more difficult by the added risk of touching the live wires themselves.

by
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As the concentration of rhinos has increased in the parks and sanctuaries, it has become easier for a poaching gang to creep in at night and quickly shoot one. Many are armed with sophisticated automatic rifles supplied to them by middlemen. Alternatively, the poachers dig deep pits in the middle of rhino tracks, cover them with branches, and

wait for an unsuspecting rhino to fall in.

Assam's rhino population faces yet another threat to its survival. The lives of about 80 rhinos in the Manas Wildlife Sanctuary were endangered by an uprising of members of the Bodo tribe early in 1989. Some Bodos want a separate state and this has led to a breakdown in law and order in the area.

Some extremist Bodos sought refuge from the police in the sanctuary, killing several wildlife staff. All forest guards were moved out of the sanctuary, leaving it open to poachers. Consequently at least six rhinos were killed.

Peter Jackson, author and Chairman of the IUCN Cat specialist group, recently heard from Assam that the Bodo extremists have left Manas. Dr M. K. Ranjitsinh, Secretary in the Ministry of the Environment in India, told Mr Jackson that it

was not known whether control had yet been re-established in the area. Two guard camps have moved back into the sanctuary, but the guards are demoralised. The former Chief Conservator of Forests and Wildlife in Assam, Mr Deb Roy, wants an armed police force to stay in the camps with his people. However, he admits it will take a long time to re-establish control and a sense of authority in Manas.

Much could be done to improve the morale of Assam's wildlife officials. More funds and equipment are badly needed. In 1985, the Central Government in Delhi allocated US\$3,500,000 for rhino protection, but only around half of this has been spent so far.

More patrol guards are needed as well as additional funds to set up an intelligence gathering network. Compensation also needs to be made available to local farmers, who consider the rhinos as enemies because of the



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The retail price for Indian rhino horn in Taiwan is now US\$54,000 a kilo the highest price in the world. Rhino horn, used in traditional Asian medicine, has virtually no medicinal qualities.

damage they cause to crops. Recently, a different extremist group has started to fight back against the poachers and middlemen. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) published a list of poachers' names in the local newspaper, warning that they would be killed unless they stopped poaching. Last year, they claimed responsibility for killing three poachers and one middleman. So now the hunters have become the hunted.

The price of rhino horn has

increased dramatically during the past few years. A kilo can fetch US\$54,000 retail in Taiwan and middlemen in India are offering poachers four times the price for horn compared with four years ago.

Despite the heavily weighted odds, the rhino population in North East India is growing. However, with threats to these endangered animals on the increase, Assam's wildlife personnel must get the backing they ask for and require.