



11th - 17th february 2005

Celebrating the century's  
greatest conservation success story

# kaziranga

*friend  
you are about to enter  
the sanctuary of mystic serenity  
that even the wild animals revere*

*here  
the birds and the bees sing together  
the flora and fauna waltz along  
sprawling raw green grass-land  
in celebration of life  
mesmerizing*

*here  
the playful winds  
whistle past your restless mind  
touching the waves and curves  
of the elephant-grass and  
the rain-washed greenery  
along the dancing water-bodies  
soft love-stories echo  
on the silver lines of the virgin sunrays  
stealing through the moist cloud  
magical and enchanting*

*come and take  
a sip of the sweet melancholy  
of a freshly born dawn  
not yet fully awake  
and still warm  
from the caress of  
the shyly retreating moonlight*

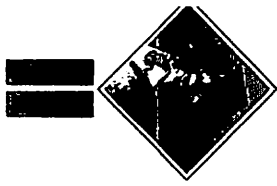
*don't be surprised  
if your love-crazy eyes  
chance upon a quiet invitation  
from a half blown bud of a wild flower  
radiating fluttered happiness*

*as if  
reflecting the wild abandon of  
an innocent girl going into teens  
the joyful colours  
of honest emotions and mysterious feelings  
the quiet desire and simple dreams*

*surely  
the purity and the beauty  
of the quiet invitation  
would transport your heart to eternity  
in a sojourn  
into the world of love and hope  
the half smile  
of the unknown flower bud  
romancing through the virgin dews  
would cleanse your soul*

*so friend  
ponder a while  
and lend your voice to  
preserve and conserve  
encroach not  
in mind and spaces.*

bhupati das



# When Monómoha Gorh Smiles

Anjali Tirkey

Much before the crimson rays of the setting sun filters through the silvery green canopy of the trees, wallowing in the muddy *beel* the old *Grandpa Rhino* sighs. The jungle and its denizens stand still for a while. They know that the good old *Grandpa Rhino* is lost in the past. Reminiscing. They throng to the *beel* as they know it is the usual story time. Grandpa Rhino unfolds the history slowly, punctuated with some longing and more sighs.

## Rhino Reigned

Much before Man walked on this planet, the rhinoceroses ruled the Earth. Moving freely, care freely, for the world was theirs. And while their contemporaries, the dinosaurs etc. failed to adjust to the ever-changing Earth of about 50 million years ago, the rhinos evolved, remained persistent like true rulers and became an emblem for valour, strength and perseverance.

The Great Indian One-horned Rhinoceros once reigned over the entire marshlands of the Indian subcontinent, almost skirting the Himalayas extending over 2,500 km in the Terai arc of the Indus, the Ganga and the Brahmaputra Rivers.

His voice was coated with an obvious pride.

"Elephants, tigers never dared us. For the jungle respected us. Much later even the poets penned couplets on us: *Fearing nothing, caring for nothing; Wander alone, like the rhinoceros.*"

Lost was he in the memories of bygone days- the days of grandeur and more importantly, freedom.

The forest waited. Waited for him to shed the tear he was holding back.

## Paradise Lost

But grazing, nearby, the green grass was the *Goonda Gainda*,



Photo courtesy : Arup Ballav Goswami

named so for his short-temper and cynical nature. Bitterness filled his heart. He had seen the days turn sour. He had a different tale to tell. Tales of Man's gruesome deeds which pushed the rhinos to the brink of extinction.

It did not take Man, the otherwise weakest of all creatures, to become the master of the Earth because of his superior mind. And when they multiplied, they unhesitatingly encroached into the homes of the dwellers of the forests. With an inflated "I" and "all for me" attitude they destroyed the jungles for their many needs (or was it greed??). That, accompanied with a reckless desire for "game" and the deep rooted belief however mistaken about the magical powers of rhino's parts especially the horn, resulted in the extermination of the rhinos.

"Our might and courage failed to stand in front of the cunningness and sophisticated equipments of Man." He snorted and kicked the mud in disgust. Disgust for the species that he thought was the cause of all the chaos.

Forced to live in an ever-dwindling habitat, killed for a mere "thrill or an adrenaline-rush" or for its supposedly aphrodisiacal power, their numbers shrank perilously to just a few.

"It was not Nature, but Man who wanted us to become another extinct species, to become a part of only books, museums and .... History...." His voice trembled with pain and contempt. The sky wept silently. The raindrops shook and glistened on the greens.

## The Unicornis Curse

The great Indian one-horned rhinoceros carries its curse on its nose. Its biggest tragedy is to have been endowed with numerous magical and medicinal properties in the folklore of Asian countries and medieval Europe. This probably transformed the one-horned rhino into the mythical unicorn. Over the centuries, this peculiar creature became a universal apothecary: Drinking its urine, it was claimed, would cure skin diseases, a plaster of rhino dung could ease swellings, and the umbilical stump boiled in soup was good for rheumatism. But the horn, in reality only a mass of hair

tissue, was and continues to be the prized item, especially in traditional Chinese medicine, where it is prescribed for everything from cancer to headaches and fever to aphrodisiac.

## Paradise Regained

Suddenly, the tall elephant grasses moved. *Monómoha Gorh* hopped in with a rainbow on its nose. The wind brimmed with a zest unseen. "Let bygones be bygones" was his mantra. "And if you still want the story to continue, hear mine for in my story hope floats," said he.

On the winter afternoon, of 4<sup>th</sup> November, 1902, when perhaps only a dozen rhinos basked in the sun, not knowing for how long they could afford to do that, a letter from J.C.Arbutnot Esq. C.I.E, ICS Offg. Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts reached to the Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam. The letter bore the message of a new dawn for the wildlife, in particular, the rhinos. The humans had realized the need to conserve the Majestic Maharaja from the pre- historic era.

Of course, things did not change with just one letter, in one day and without hiccups. (In fact, often files and more files need to be moved in *babudom* and they often take much longer to move than Nature to change from one season to another or a snail to cross Alexander's Kingdom.)

Wild fauna and its conservation had never been a priority but the ball did start rolling, letters being exchanged and the dark clouds of despair thinning.

It was in January, 1905, the draft notification regarding the Proposed Kaziranga Game Reserve was submitted and finally later in the same year, it was proposed to constitute as reserve forest by the Chief Commissioner of Assam.



Photo courtesy : Arup Ballav Goswami

It is even said that Lady Curzon who had paid a visit in 1905 and was so spellbound by Kaziranga and its pride – the rhino- that she had persuaded Lord Curzon to spur the Government's role in the conservation of the animal.

This was the beginning of a new leaf in the pages of Kaziranga's applause-worthy Conservation History.

Finally in 1908, Kaziranga was declared a Reserve Forest and in 1916 it was notified as Game Sanctuary. But since the word "Game" did not sound "correct", in 1950, Kaziranga was termed Wildlife Sanctuary.

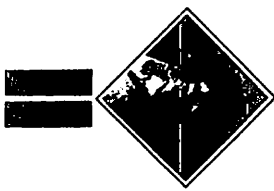
But the road was uphill. While shooting for "sports" stopped, poaching for the horn continued in a large scale. In fact in the 30's Kaziranga was a forbidden place. The old records put it as a closed book. A closed door for visitors. And death loomed for the rhinos near every *beels* and *dandies*. It was the Chief Conservator A.J.W. Milroy who thought different. His decision to open up the sanctuary for visitors in 1938 and his clean up drive against the poachers and poaching paid dividends. Officers like Mahi Miri and others joined the drive showing dedication nonpareil for the cause of wildlife. Mahi Miri and a few, with a spirit painted with the colours of Nature, paid the price of dreaming a green world with their very lives.

In 1968, Assam National Park Act came into being and in 1974 Kaziranga was catapulted to the status of National Park. In 1975 it became the first protected area to be equipped with wireless.

And the Government, the foresters, the wildlife enthusiasts and the nature loving people of Assam had a reason to celebrate when in 1985 Kaziranga was declared one of the 5 Natural World Heritage sites in India by UNESCO under UN Convention for Protection of World's Cultural and Natural heritage under the criteria N (II) and N (IV) of Article 2.

And that was not the end of the encouraging tale.

- The 1998 census showed that Kaziranga with its 1552 Great Indian One-horned Rhinoceros was the place with their world's largest population. Now it is estimated to be about 1700.
- It also has the highest ecological density of Royal Bengal tigers (86 in nos. as per 2000 census) in the region.



- 1431 numbers of Asiatic Wild Buffaloes made it the park with their largest population in the world in 2001.
- The world's largest population of Eastern Swamp Deer dwells in Kaziranga (468 as per the 2000 census).
- The 2002 census showed a significant population of 1048 Asiatic Elephants.

The awesome "BIG FIVE" of Kaziranga. The largest assemblages of flora and fauna! A result of adequate protection and in-situ conservation efforts that dates back to a century.

*Monomóha Gorh* stopped for a breath. Nature smiled. Somewhere someone gave a silent clap.

## Amazing Ambience

North East India had always been Nature's blue-eyed baby, for Nature had been more than generous in bestowing its beauty to it. Considered a bowl of plant diversity, the place is identified as Bio-diversity Hotspot due to its unique ecological setting; the meeting point of temperate Himalayan flora, palaeo-artic flora of Tibetan highland and wet evergreen flora of Southeast Asia and Yunnan.

And Kaziranga, the heart of the North East, with its rare flora and fauna, high endemism and rare Taxa is especially known as a Living Hotspot. The fluctuations in the river Brahmaputra make it a spectacularly alive, ongoing ecological and biological process in the evolution of the riverine floodplain eco-systems in the world. One of the largest protected area under Burma Monsoon Biogeographical Province; it stands apart for its uniqueness and diversity. The canvass stretches from the microscopic aquatic herbs to lofty deciduous trees and the fauna life from the soil invertebrates to the Mega Fives.

And what more can be said about its being the bird watcher's delight?

Located at the junction of the Australasia and Indo-Asian flyway, Kaziranga becomes an abode for the many species of migrating, and seasonal breeding and nesting avifauna. The 480 species of birds recorded in its vicinity includes around 25 globally threatened and 21 near threatened species of birds.

The place showcases a biological richness which has considerable Conservation, Research, Education and Recreation values.

And Kaziranga100 is the time to celebrate all this. A time to salute the many, who made sacrifices (and are still doing) for fulfilling Nature's dream.

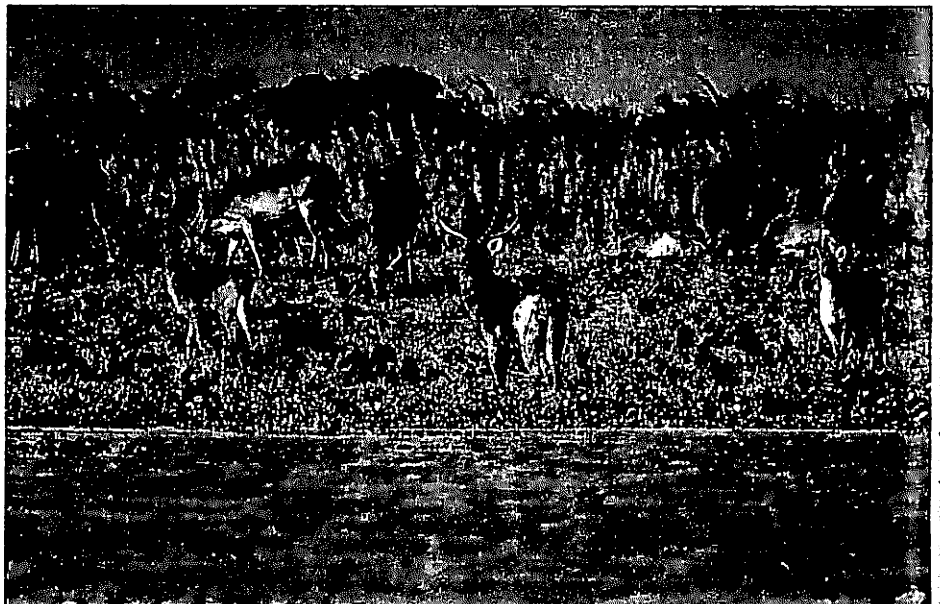
## The Green Warriors

Kaziranga saw many dedicated wild lifers who had a burning passion for its denizens, like those of

- **J. C. Arbuthnott** : the pioneer who heard the cry of the rhinos.
- **B. Fuller** : *Chief Commissioner of Assam* who suggested possibility of

establishing an asylum for the rhinos.

- **Major Gurdon** : who surveyed the area for the Proposed Reserve.
- **Lady Curzon** whose legendary love for the wildlife spurred the government to hear the cries of the wild especially that of the rhinos of Kaziranga.
- **Major A. Playfair** : *Forest Settlement Officer & Deputy Commissioner, Sibsagar District*, who overruled strong objections from local people and European community of tea planters for the extension of Kaziranga in the year 1913.
- **H Carter (1908)** : *Conservator of Forests, Eastern Circle*. He immediately banned hunting, shooting, trapping and fishing by an executive order.
- **W F L Totton (1916)** : *Conservator of Forests, Eastern Circle*, declared Reserve Forest as Game Sanctuary with the approval of the Chief Commissioner.
- **P D Stracey (1950)** : Ordered the name Wildlife Sanctuary in place of Game Sanctuary.
- **P Barua (1968)** : *Chief Conservator of Forests, Assam*. The proposal to declare Kaziranga Wildlife Sanctuary as National Park was taken up by him.



- **A. J. W. Milroy** : the man who started the drive against the poachers and opened the Park for visitors in 1938.
- **Mahi Chandra Miri** : the first Indian officer appointed in Kaziranga. Death was the price he paid in saving the wild fauna.
- **E. P. Gee** : a naturalist whose love for Kaziranga put the place in the world map.
- **J Juan Spillet** : the man to conduct the first animal census.
- **Padamshri Dr. Robin Banerjee** whose movie "Kaziranga" telecasted from Berlin TV in 1961, gave Kaziranga an international fame.
- The many, often bare-footed, unsung heroes – the frontline staffs of KNP who work ceaselessly to preserve the legacy that is Kaziranga.
- The staff elephants.

### The Wonder that is Kaziranga

Kaziranga with the initial area of 430sq km in the Brahmaputra Valley spreading over the districts of Golaghat and Nagaon and the foothills of Karbi Anglong Hills, has over the years acquired new additions (6 in nos.) and now covers an area of 860 sq km. Imbued with myriad tints of green, it is a place redolent with the spirit of adventure and the fragrance of freedom. Marshes, *beels*, the woodlands, sprawling grasslands, cane groves, orchids, rugged reeds and the rivers and streams that crisscross the Park make it perfect piece of paradise for its inhabitants.

*Monómoha Gorh* thought it was time to call it a day. "Some discoveries must be made oneself or told with much breaks," he said. And when he again disappeared in the grasslands, the rainbow still following him, the jungle resounded with the joyful cries of the wild. They knew that now they can sleep in peace for the men in khakis were keeping the vigil.

### The Laurels

The efforts made by the management in Kaziranga, were not unnoticed by the world. Gigantic concerns like floods, poaching, erosion, forest fire, weeds and siltation of water bodies, habitat improvement have always been dealt efficiently.

Kaziranga has many laurels up its sleeve like:

- The Best Managed National Park in anti-poaching strategies. (1985)
- Millennium Award for Best Managed Park in Tiger Conservation areas. (1999)
- Fred Packard Valour Award of the IUCN's World Commission to D.D. Boro (Range Officer, KNP) for exemplary valour shown by him to protect wildlife and forest wealth. (1977)
- Special Award for Teamwork in handling exigencies. (1998)
- Green Guard Award (Jungles)

### Pats on the Back

Kaziranga has attracted tourists from far and near.

Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru paid a visit along with Indira Gandhi and Firoze Gandhi on October 1956.

Lal Bahadur Shastri, (then Minister for Transport and Railways, India) wrote "It was a delightful experience to wade through the marshy jungles, moving quietly and slowly to have a peep at the rhinos resting in isolated corners... I hope Kaziranga will soon develop into an important tourist centre..."

On 20<sup>th</sup> April 1948, Sir Akbar Hydari, Governor of Assam mentions "... 11 rhinos were seen by my party and we also saw two (rhinos) *Kaziram* and *Kamalarani*, who were recently caught and were due to go to

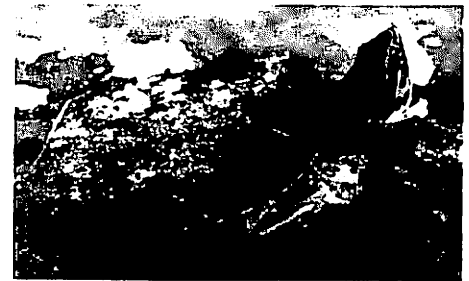


Photo courtesy : Prasanta Kr. Bordoloi

*Chicago Zoo... We spent many hours on elephant going to reserve and saw wild buffalo, swamp deer and the pig... I hope soon it may be possible for large number of people to see this interesting game sanctuary which is one of the last known homes in the world of the one-horned rhino."*

Famous ornithologist Dr. Salim Ali from the Bombay Natural History Society, Anthropologist Dr. Verrier Elwin, Padamshri Dr. Robin Banerjee found the sojourn in Kaziranga "an enchanting experience".

Ralph Graham of Chicago Zoological Society thought it was "worth the trip from America" in 1948.

E.P. Gee in 1939 says "charged by the first rhino and cine photographed by the second" when attempting to shoot them.

(I would say to the over enthusiastic tourists follow the rules of the Park and you will be charged only by the Forest Department.)

***But the spirit of Kaziranga100 is about much more. It is also about the people of Assam. The lovers of green, the crusaders in their own right who joined hands in translating dreams into realities.***



Photo courtesy : Arup Ballav Goswami

Jagjivan Ram (Minister for Agriculture, India) in 1953 said " .... *thrilling experience... arrangements for the protection of animals as well as comfort for visitors should be an example for other states....*"

Dr. Manmohan Singh (Prime Minister of India) recorded in 1982 as Member Secretary Planning Commission, Govt. of India "A lovely, exciting place where man and nature learn to live in proper balance."

Rajiv Gandhi during his Prime Ministerial tenure in 1988 was moved by the plight of animals during the floods (the year saw the worst floods in Kaziranga) and came with Sonia Gandhi.

U.S. Ambassadors Mr. Blackwill and Mr. Mulford had an enjoyable trip in 2002 and 2004 respectively.

### **Hands that hold the Olive Branch**

But the spirit of Kaziranga100 is about much more. It is also about the people of Assam. The lovers of green, the crusaders in their own right who joined hands in translating dreams into realities.

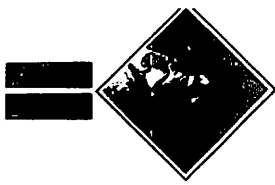
Assam. An emerald vale; where the people of various culture and religion melted, predominantly those of Caucasian origin and the Mongoloids. The different ethnic groups brewed up a cultural

identity and ethos that is un-encountered anywhere else in the country. This is the time to lose oneself in their world. A world that's an unbeatable blend of the Ahoms, the Misings, the Karbis, the Dimasas, the Bodos, the Adivasis in the tea gardens to name a few. A time to enjoy their myths and folklores, their songs and dances, their culture and cuisine, their handlooms and craft and their relaxed lifestyle and laidback ambience. A time to lift the veil from the strangers of the mist. A time to revive the bonding between Man and Nature and in today's fragmented society, between men themselves.

Kaziranga that has rightly been termed as the flag bearer amongst all wildlife conservation efforts across the globe beckons you into its hundredth year. It's time to join its tradition and celebrate the bliss of living and let living.

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# The last of the Rhinos

Excerpts from the book -  
*The twilight of India's  
wildlife*

Balakrishna Seshadri



Photo courtesy : Ritu Raj Kanwar

It was around the year 1910 that concern seems to have been first expressed about the future of the giant rhinoceros of Asia, the great one horned rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*). The then estimate of just over a thousand animals was sufficient cause for alarm. The first steps to legislate for its protection in India were initiated. Rhino were officially closed to sportsmen in Bengal and Assam. Many years later, in 1932, the Bengal Rhinoceros Act was passed, and in 1954, the Assam Rhinoceros Bill became law. The bills prohibited the killing, injuring or capture of any rhinoceros, and penalized contravention by fine or imprisonment.

Yet, this largest of the Asiatic rhinoceros had a former range extending from the north-western passes of India eastward towards Burma, precisely how far east is not known. Historical and hunting references leave no room for doubt that it must have lived in large numbers once.

It was about the time of Babar's hunt, in 1515, that the first Indian rhino is known to have been sent to Europe. It was a present from the King of Cambay to King Emmanuel of Portugal, and was shipped from Goa to Lisbon. A fight was arranged in Lisbon between this rhino and an elephant, and the elephant,



Photo courtesy : Arup Ballav Goswami

upon seeing the rhino, is said to have burst the arena and fled! King Emmanuel, who must have been very impressed then decided to present the rhino to Pope Leo X. It was shipped again, but the ship was caught in a storm in the Gulf of Genoa and sank with all hands and the rhino. This was the animal immortalized by Albrecht Dürer in an engraving; Dürer never saw the rhino but did his work from a sketch by Portuguese artist.

The first Indian rhino to enter England in 1684 was paraded round the country for the next two years. But African rhinos had often been brought to Rome in classical times, probably the white or square lipped rhinoceros, a more tractable animal than the black rhino.

In northern Bengal, the rhino was once sufficiently numerous to be saddled with a major responsibility for the destruction of rice and corn fields – with little justification, however, as the great Indian rhino is not a crop-destroyer, although occasionally it may enter cultivated fields for titbits. The government even offered reward of Rs.20/- per head for its destruction.





Photo courtesy : Arup Ballav Goswami

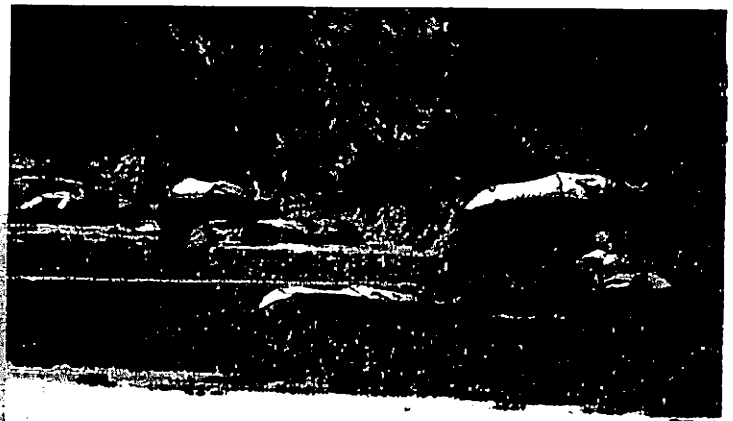


Photo courtesy : Arup Ballav Goswami

The position in India after the First World War was that sportsmen could not legitimately hunt the rhino. But, in Nepal- the second survival home of this rhino- it was a different story. High caste Hindus and Gurkhas considered the flesh and blood highly acceptable to the gods. Those who could, hunted the animals and offered libation of its blood after entering the disemboweled body. Special shoots arranged for distinguished visitors took heavy toll.

Even so, the rhino was still common thirty years ago in many parts of Nepal and in the Sikkim *Terai*. But with such organized slaughter, numbers began to deplete. A slow breeder, the ancient animal could never catch up with the losses. In the late 1940s, the rhino was not to be seen in Nepal except in the Chitawan jungles, east of the Gandak river. External pressure began to be brought on the Nepal Government to protect the rhino.

As the numbers decreased, the values of the rhino's horn, most coveted of all its anatomy, increased. The meat and hide could be sold, but it was false horn, which in an adult animal weighs from two to five pounds, that was of prime interest to poachers. It was false horn, because it is nothing but hair matted together so solidly as to appear and feel horn-like. The first poachers came with muzzle-loaders heavy enough to dispose of the rhino, or caught it in pits. The horn has been highly prized in the East

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from early times. It was endowed with a host of magical properties. In powered form it is still today considered in east and south-east Asian pharmaceutical trades a most potent aphrodisiac. Old accounts describe how the horns were sold in the Calcutta market – the most important rhino horn market in Asia – for ‘half their weight in gold’ and how eventually most of them found their way to China. It is known that in the first quarter of this century, single horns were sold for prices higher than £150. Lee Merriam Talbot reported in 1955, during an investigation of the status of the three Asian rhinoceros, that he saw individual merchants in south-east Asia offer prices as high as \$ 2,500 for one horn. In Sumatra, one Chinese merchant was offering a new American automobile in trade for a whole rhinoceros.

The horn had also other uses. A small fragment enclosed in a charm and worn round the neck or wrist made the wearer invulnerable to enemies. Extraordinary properties were also credited, to a lesser extent, to other parts of the body. Chewing the dry meat gave immunity against dysentery. Drinking the urine was a certain cure for all skin diseases. A sliver of bone inserted in an incision made on the arm injected the rhino's enormous strength into the man. Local hill tribes such as the Lhotas still bury a piece of rhino bone in their fields for a good harvest. Plaster made of the dung cured all kinds of swellings. Soup from boiling the umbilical stump was a certain cure for rheumatic and arthritic complaints. The Rengmas, another tribe, believe shields made from rhino hide impregnable in battle. This tribe has the further curious belief that the rhino sleeps on very steep ground, hooking its horn round a tree to save itself from slipping. It is easy to see that the poor beast, with such superlative qualities in its fleshy make-up, simply invited trouble.

Lest it be thought that rhinoceros superstitions are all of Eastern origin, many of these beliefs were once widely held in Europe. Rhinoceros-horn cups, for instance, were used by kings and popes to show up poison in their drinks by making the drink froth, or even cracking the cup. Rhino horn was also prized as an internal medicine, particularly for complaints of the stomach, well beyond the Middle Ages. Therefore, with the price they have carried on



their heads, and indeed other parts of their anatomy, the wonder is not that rhinos are rare but that they exist at all.

The rhino is a miracle of survival in the ruthless evolutionary process, in the disappearance of old life forms and unfolding of the new, a real present-day monster, but a peculiarly likable one to those who have some degree of acquaintance with it. Kaziranga is an area of monstrous swamps and therefore an appropriate habitat for monsters..

The sanctuary can be entered at more than one place, but is most easily accessible at Kohora by a jeep track which runs through open ground and paddy fields, which acts as a buffer zone between the sanctuary and the grazing lands of domestic livestock. Riding on an elephant in the thick grass, the grass looms over on all sides, and its sharp edges can cut into the flesh like a knife. On my first visit to Kaziranga in 1958, I saw my first rhino, a big bull, almost immediately on entering the sanctuary and while still on foot, making the transfer from jeep to elephant. I quickly scrambled on to my mount, a young female, and attempted to get near the rhino which was in a small, muddy pool. Due to some bad manoeuvring by the *mahout* and the greed of my mount, who on that trip never lost an opportunity of stopping and stuffing herself noisily with masses of green food, we were too slow, and the rhino beat a squelchy retreat from the mud-pool. He was an old beast, and I could see his flanks and rear were studded with masses of tubercles, which are characteristic of adult animals and become more and more prominent with advancing age.

A mother rhino and her calf on the far side of a *bheel*, as a small lake-swamp is called in these parts, made an interesting group. Rhino calves keep with their mothers for three years or more. The cow does not breed during this period, and a female therefore, gives birth to a calf only every four or five years – a slow breeding

Photo courtesy : John Everingham



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rate. Cow rhinos with young calves are known to have unpredictable tempers, and remembering the story that had been told to me the previous evening of the American visitor to the sanctuary whose elephant had been determinedly pursued by a mother rhino till she had inflicted a severe cut in the elephant's side, I did not consider it prudent to press too close an acquaintance with this mother. From where I was, she appeared to be almost white, in contrast to the big fellow I had seen before who was the usual ashy-grey, but this was due to the tricks of the early morning light and the ground mist which still hung about. The great one horned rhino inflicts injuries with its long lower teeth and not with its horn, as is generally believed. This is done by a quick side movement, and a terrible wound can result. I have seen the technique of it during later visits to Kaziranga, in not-too-serious tussles between bulls.

Often on the backs of rhinos were cattle egrets, pied mynas, or both, valets of the animal kingdom. Appropriately, it was Herodotus, the father of zoology, who first wrote of this association of a small creature with a big one. In his account of Egypt he wrote:

*The crocodile is a foe to all birds and beasts, but the courser, which does it a service. For, living in the water, it gets its mouth full of leeches, and when it comes out and opens its mouth to the westerly breeze, the courser goes in and gobbles up the leeches, which good office so pleases the saurian that it does the courser no harm.*

One local notable put the annual loss of rhino to poachers at thirty animals. In the 1964-65 scare, the carcasses were all found in the northern part of the sanctuary, and in one period of intensive search, thirty carcasses and over fifty poachers' pits were said to have been discovered. In all, there were hundred pits. Visitors to the sanctuary are shown around the southern fringe only, and the interior or the northern part which is waterlogged is seldom visited even by range staff owing to difficulties of terrain. Poachers accordingly cross the Brahmaputra from the north and gain ingress into the sanctuary. As an aftermath of the poaching, even as late

as the time of our visit, May 1965, the bazaars on the borders of the sanctuary were rife with rumors of the money involved, said to be in the region of Rs.4 lakhs. After the discovery of the carcasses and pits, the ensuring publicity was perhaps what brought the depredations to a temporary halt – temporary because the activities will no doubt be resumed should a favorable opportunity present itself. This nefarious work will cease only when the demand for rhino horn disappears, and as this is not likely to happen for a long time yet, the rhino is dependent entirely on the effectiveness of the protection given to it in the meantime

Kaziranga, like the Hluhluwe Reserve in the Union of South Africa, had its rhino personalities. The most famous of them was ‘Burra Goonda’ (corruption of Burra Gaenda or Big Rhino) who died in 1953. No one knew how old he was, but for the last fifteen years of his life he hardly left the locality he favoured on the southern fringe of the sanctuary, and visitors were assured of a close view of him either placidly wallowing in a mud pool or grazing peacefully among domestic animals on the verge of the sanctuary. He had many scars of battle with other rhinos, but at this period had become so gentle that with care he could be approached closely on foot. He was Kaziranga’s most photographed rhino. The *mahouts* still tell a story, apocryphal no doubt, of how once a brave army officer actually hand-fed him with grass and then slapped him on his rump as much as to say, ‘Well done, old boy.’ The riding elephants of the time knew him and he knew them.

After his death, his place was taken by another old bull, ‘Kankatta’, or ‘Torn-ear’. From being an aggressive animal, he settled down to the vacated number one position and lived for four years.

The estimated world population of the great one horned rhino is now thought to be about 745, connecting the figures of Gee (1963), Willian (1965 for Nepal), and J.J. Spillet (1967). Of this number, Assam has 525, Bengal 55, and Nepal 165. Again, of Assam’s number, Kaziranga alone is thought to have 400. The other Assam’s sanctuaries with rhino are Manas, Sonairupa, Laokhowa, Orang and one or two more very small reserves. A very few rhinos also live outside these sanctuaries, but their continued survival is uncertain with the poachers continually after them.

Kaziranga is, therefore, the rhino’s most important survival home by far. It is also the best looked after of the Assam sanctuaries. Even more needs to be done to ensure its permanence. Poachers apart, the pressure of human population on its borders is a threat which could lead to excision of small parts from it from time to time, if not guarded against. Demands have many times been made for more grazing area for the proliferating domestic livestock, and this problem, I was told, had frequently figured in the manifestos issued by the local political parties during elections. Danger also exists from the proximity of cattle, in that any disease carried into the sanctuary by them will have serious consequences. Surveillance itself, within the sanctuary, has also to be improved by provision of facilities for the ranger staff to patrol the area which is both large and difficult – such as wheeled transport, and boats for use in the northern riverside parts. The annual flooding is also a grave problem, as it leads to loss of wild life during its migration to higher ground. But it may be a mixed blessing, for the floods may be of benefit in maintaining the sort of habitat favoured by both rhino and buffalo, which latter is the sanctuary’s second most sought-after wild animal.



Photo courtesy : Ritu Raj Konwar

The great Indian rhino is of extraordinary interest to natural history. It is incapable of adapting itself to new circumstances or environment. In the final event, whether it will survive all the assaults on its continued existence will depend on the effective adoption of a policy which will safeguard it from every angle. There is no room for complacency with a world population of only 745 – and remembering that the other two Asiatic rhinoceros, the lesser one horned or Javan and the two horned or Sumatran, also lived in India but so no longer. The first of these disappeared from Indian limits probably around the turn of the century, but the latter is believed to have survived as late as the mid-1930s in the Mizo Hills.

The great rhino is a truly harmless animal, and does no damage whatever to human interests in the places where it still lives. It is often misrepresented as being aggressive or attacking on sight. Its blind, withering charge is delivered only when it believes it is in danger or when it is surprised in its haunts. Of course, it is then very dangerous. Otherwise it is neither truculent nor a crop-raider. It is one of India’s most spectacular animals, a left-over from bygone ages, and a source of mystery and wonder to all who see it in its natural home.

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