

Rhinos are Struggling for Existence

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The cruel commercial exploitation of rhinos in both Africa and Asia is still continuing as this innocent animal carries horn which is as valuable as gold. During last 20 years poaching has snuffed out many rhinoceros. As a result of this gruesome and merciless killing all species of rhinoceros are now struggling for existence. All the three species of the Asian Rhinos (Javan Rhino, Sumatran Rhino, and Indian Rhino) are slowly and steadily becoming extinct. As a matter of fact, they are now critically endangered and vulnerable creatures.

There are five species of rhinoceros in the world—two belong to the African species and three belong to the Asian species. The African rhinos are white as well as black. They live in Africa, whereas Asian rhinos are found in India, Java and Sumatra.

Features

The Indian rhino is a grazer similar to the African white rhino. But the Sumatran rhino is a browser just like the African black rhino. The Javan rhino, however, is a mixed feeder. The Indian rhinoceros have one horn, whereas their African counterparts have two.

The African white rhinoceros (*Ceratotherium*) weigh 6,000-8000 pounds. They are 6 feet tall and have the longest horn averaging between 18 inches and 4 feet. The weight of African black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis*) is 4000 pounds. They are 6 feet tall and their horn size is about 16 inches-45 inches. The Sumatran rhinos

weigh 750-2000 pounds and the size of their horns is between 12 inches and 20 inches. Their height is about 5 feet. The Javan rhinos, on the other hand, weigh upto 3000 pounds and their height is 4-6 feet. But what about the Indian rhinos? Their weight varies from 3000 to 4,500 pounds and their average height is between 5 and 6 feet. Their horns average 6 inches-18 inches. The horns of African rhinos are bigger and more curved than the horns of Asian rhinos.

Of the Sumatran rhinos (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*), the most critically endangered are the two-horned. The one-horned Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) are also endangered. However, the rarest of all rhino species are the one-horned Javan rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*).

Asian rhino-bearing habitats today

1. Javan rhinoceros (<i>Rhinoceros sondaicus</i>)	North Pakistan, Assam, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal in India and Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh.
2. Indian rhinoceros (<i>Rhinoceros unicornis</i>)	
3. Sumatran rhinoceros (<i>Dicerorhinus Sumatrensis</i>)	Burma, Malaysia, Thailand, Sumatra.

Approximately, there are more than 2500 Indian rhinos living in India and Nepal. In the census year 1999, 1552 *Rhinoceros unicornis* were counted within Kaziranga National Park (KNP), Assam, and more than 500 were traced in Nepal, while the rest were found in other protected areas of Assam.

The Indian rhinos have various names, such as the Great Indian One-Horned, Greater One-Horned Rhinoceros and the Rhinoceros unicornis. The Indian rhinos which in the past were distributed in the grassy flood plains of the Indus, the Ganga and in the plains of the Brahmaputra river, including southern India, are now distributed in Nepal, North Bengal and Assam. They love to live in marshy lowland, low hills of woodland forests, grasslands and streams and even dry and mixed forests.

Primary needs and nature of Indian rhinos

Indian rhinos enjoy munching short grasses, while they use tall grasses as their shelter. They also need water for having a dip and for spending their time there. These apart, they need to wallow in the muddy pastures. Imagine, how small is their need in comparison with our human wants which are endless! Yet we are unhappy and destroy their natural happiness by disturbing them in all possible ways and even kill them to satisfy our inhuman greed!

The Indian rhinos are generally considered to be solitary. They eat in the morning and evening and sleep on dry grounds at night. Normally, they do not migrate to long distances without special causes. They damage the crops as protests if fields close to the rhino-bearing area are cultivated.

The Indian rhinos generally eat grass and reeds. But they sometimes also move to the cultivated areas for feeding. Sometimes they eat water hyacinth, fruits and shrubs, and some particular herbs and seedlings. They like, for example, *Trewia nudiflora*, *Phyllanthus emblica*, *Zizyphus zuzyphus*, etc.

There is no fixed breeding season for the rhinos. However, it has been observed that the common time is between the end of

February and April. Gestation in rhinos lasts about 16 months.

Usually one calf is born at a time to an Indian rhino whose maximum life expectancy is 45 years.

Habitat of Indian rhinoceros

Country	Name of PA's	Category	State
India	Kaziranga	I	Assam
	Manas	II	
	Orang	II	
	Pobitara	II	
	Katerniaghat	II	
	Lawkawa	II	
	Jaldapara	II	West Bengal
	Gorumara	II	(North Bengal)
	Dudhwa	II	Uttar Pradesh
Nepal	Chitwan	I	-
	Bardia	II	
	Sukhlaphanta	II	

Ecological and conservation problems

Among the most serious problems facing the rhinos, mention may be made of the following:

1. Poaching: The poaching problem has increased due to the sky-rocketing value of the Indian rhino horn which is believed to be an aphrodisiac. The belief has not been substantiated by fact and clinical tests.

2. Predatory attack: About 178 rhinos including their calves were killed by tigers in the Kaziranga National Park (KNP) only.

3. Weed infestation: The lightning growth of the *mimosa pudica*, *mikania sp.*, *leea sp.* and *eupatorium sp.* weeds, in particular, in the rhino habitat area hampers free movement of the rhinos. It has also

threatened the grassland which is frequented by them.

4. Shrinkage of water bodies: Invasion of small lake or ponds has also been the cause of shrinkage in water body in the rhino habitat site and in the World Heritage Site in Kaziranga National Park.

5. Flood: Severe floods also affect the rhino habitat sites in Assam, including the KNP. Floods are responsible for the death of rhinos, especially their calves, which are swept away by gushing flood water. They had also been knocked down by speeding vehicles on the National Highway when they were trying to migrate to safer places. Besides, the recurrence of floods in the KNP increases the threat of the rhinos being killed by poachers. Moreover, the flood influences the physiological and behavioural pattern of wild rhinos and causes food shortage as the low-lying habitats are submerged by flood water and short grasses disappear because of water stagnation.

6. Encroachment: Another serious problem is the encroachment on the habitat sites of wild rhinos. This is still going on in many parts of Assam and other places.

7. Conflict: Social conflicts between the National Park authorities and the local people are also a serious problem. Such conflicts arise when the cattle belonging to the local people are found grazing in the rhino habitat illegally. Thus domestic cattle compete with wild animals for fodder and this has increased the risk of epidemic to the wild rhinos who are infected by the non-immunized domestic cattle. In 1980, 12 rhinos died of Haemorrhagic Septicaemia in the KNP.

8. Degradation: Last but not least, the rhino-bearing habitats are facing gradual degradation due to the expansion of human habitation and increased use of land for agricultural purposes throughout the world.

Conclusion

Since the 20th century the distribution of Indian rhinoceros has been confined to north-eastern India and southern Nepal, whereas, in the late 19th century, they were found everywhere except the Chitwan Valley, the Teesta Valley and the Brahmaputra Valley. At present, poaching is a major problem which threatens the survival of rhinoceros as the horn of the Indian rhino is much more valuable than the horn of the African rhino. We must not forget that the extinction of many mammalian species and sub-species has been caused by wilful human error that has upset the ecological balance.

The only palpable solution to the problem is to stop illegal trade in rhino horn and poaching. Now time has come when people should seriously think about the value of the ecosystem. Then and then only will the people be motivated and feel inspired to value the life of the mammals and other animals. Hopefully, due to strict protection the rhino population is gradually increasing in India and Nepal. This should not, however, encourage us to be too complacent about the rosy future of the endangered rhinos. To ensure their safety we should have to take the following remedial steps:

- Unhealthy resident cattle have to be immunized to save the rhinos from contagious diseases.
- More highland within rhino-bearing areas have to be provided to the rhinos during floods.
- Habitat monitoring of rhino-bearing places have to be conducted.
- Fodder facilities have to be provided during flood seasons.
- Number of guards and protective camps on the edge of the PA's boundary have to be increased to combat poaching effectively.

• Behavioural changes of wild rhinos during floods have to be studied sedulously.

Let me conclude this article by quoting Swami Ranganathananda, the former President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, who in his exposition of the *Gītā* made the following remarks and reminded all humans to be really humane. Said the Swami:

What is the uniqueness of the human being? It is *dharma*. Searching for some deeper dimension of human beings and nature. *Dharmena hīnāḥ paśubhīḥ samānāḥ*, 'take away *dharma* from human life, he or she is equal to any other beast', *Hitopadesha* concludes. That should not be. Though endowed with this profound brain, we find plenty of men and women today who remain a beast, often a beast of prey; cheat other people, kill animals and destroy nature. If

they had only directed a little energy to investigate this higher spiritual dimension within, they would have been constructive and creative. Many people want to consume more and more of material goods in what we speak of today as a consumerist civilization; and the result is that the world is becoming bereft of many things, including forests and even animals and birds. Thus, the human being becomes the enemy of nature, and eventually one's own enemy as well. We are destroying the whole of nature. No animal destroys nature. They live in it, they are part of it. Human beings alone have the capacity either to destroy or to improve; but because one is concerned with this organic system alone, one becomes a destroyer of nature. How many birds have been destroyed all over the world so that men and women may have a feather to put on their heads or adorn their caps! ■

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'By Hurting Nature Man Hurts Himself'

This sense of oneness grows as man grows in his power of understanding the forces that shape his destiny. He realizes the value of co-operation to fight the hostile forces of Nature to create an environment that will give him security and comfort. Later, he realizes that he cannot survive by fighting Nature but by striking a relationship of give and take only, for his continued hostility against Nature can in the end recoil on himself, as indeed it has started doing now, thanks to man's thoughtless depredations against Nature over the centuries. 'Save Nature' is the call now, for man has realized, hopefully not too late, that by hurting Nature man hurts himself. Everywhere today one hears of the hazards environmental pollution poses to mankind and there is a growing awareness that man and his environment are so

interdependent that man can neglect his environment only at peril to himself. Man makes his environment as much as the environment makes man.

Indian thinkers say that existence itself is one. Man, animal, plant, the elements—all that exists is basically one, the same thing varying only in degrees of manifestation. The universe is like a big banyan tree, with its trunk, boughs, leaves, and shoots, an integral whole despite its diverse details and every one of its details drawing its sap from the same source. There is diversity but underneath the diversity there is a unity. The diversity is important just as the unity is important. The former is an expression of the latter. Both are identical, their essence being the same. ■

—Swami Lokeswarananda in *Practical Spirituality*, p. 248.