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Number One With a Bullet

What does India's lush Kaziranga National Park have that the rest of the country's decimated reserves do not? Plenty of tigers, for starters. (The world's highest density.) Fleets of endangered one-horned rhinos. (More than two-thirds of the remaining population.) And, since last year, a take-no-prisoners anti-poaching policy that allows rangers to shoot on sight. Welcome to the future of conservation.

By: Rowan Jacobsen *Photographer: Steve Winter*



One of Kaziranga National Park's forest guards surveying a poached-rhino carcass. *Photographer: Steve Winter*

THE CAREER OF THE NOTORIOUS Indian wildlife poacher Naren Pegu came to an end early on the morning of December 13, 2010, in the Eastern Range of Kaziranga National Park. Tucked away in the northeastern state of Assam, hugging the southern bank of the wide Brahmaputra River, Kaziranga is India's Serengeti, a mosaic of grass, jungle, and wetlands supporting a staggering amount of biodiversity, including Asia's highest concentration of endangered one-horned rhinos and Bengal tigers. Since 2005, Pegu had poached about 30 of those rhinos, which live in Kaziranga and almost nowhere else. He'd shoot a rhino, cut off its horn with a machete, and sell it for thousands of dollars in Nagaland, a lawless state that runs along India's fuzzy border with Myanmar. From there, the horns travel to Myanmar and then to China, where they sell for tens of thousands of dollars a kilo. In powdered form, they cure everything from cataracts to cancer, or so say believers. It's really just a big fingernail.

Pegu was a member of the Mishing tribe, one of Assam's many indigenous groups that, like their equivalents everywhere, have lost land and livelihoods. Mishing villages line the park boundary, their inhabitants pressed against it like kids at a candy-store window. If you can't pay \$50 for a jeep safari, you can't get inside. Growing up here, Pegu learned to sneak past the border; he knew the park like his own backyard. He'd come and go undetected by the forest guards—India's version of wildlife rangers. Poaching ran in Pegu's family; his father was a poacher before him.

Most Mishing involved in the trade are content to serve as illegal guides for the bigger regional guns—sharpshooters and brokers from Nagaland—whom they lead in and out of the vast park, taking a small cut. But Naren Pegu was enterprising. He taught himself the rules of the trade, cutting deals in seedy hotels. Learned where to get black-market .303 rifles from the separatists who control the Nagaland hills. He thought big. Typically, poachers blow any money they come into, but not Pegu: he'd saved enough to invest in three vehicles, a big house, even a plot of land, where he was starting his own tea garden in some sort of psychological stab at legitimacy. While Pegu was bringing down more than \$20,000 per year through poaching, his Mishing relations scabbled to earn \$200 a year in the rice paddies.

Pegu had every right to feel cocky as he and an accomplice slipped into Kaziranga on the evening of December 12, waiting out the night munching on rotis and precooked rice; a fire would have given them away. At dawn, rhinos scatter across Kaziranga to feed on the rich grasslands, and Pegu was ready. He came upon a mother rhino feeding with her calf. Got out his rifle. Shooting a rhino is like shooting a barn: when you take aim, they stop and stare, deciding whether to charge. Pegu shot the mother dead, hacked off her horn, and left the baby standing there. The park border, his village, and a payday in Nagaland were not far away.

Pegu should have been home free. He knew the landscape, and Kaziranga employs only about 500 forest guards to cover more than 300 square miles of tall grass and jungle—on foot. What were their chances of finding him? Yet, unbeknownst to Pegu, before he even fired his shot three forest guards had entered the area, searching for him. As soon as he fired, they closed on the spot. Unlike most guards in most parks in India, they were armed. And they had license to kill.

Pegu saw the guards first and opened fire. Missed. The guards took cover. As the shooting continued, one guard calmly raised his antique .303 Lee Enfield rifle to his shoulder, lined up Pegu in his sights, and blew his head off.

Pegu's accomplice was shot in the hip by another guard. An hour later, he, too, had died "from his injuries," according to the park's report. Pictures from that day show the two men lying on the forest floor. The accomplice has dried black blood around his eyes, nose, and ears. Pegu's head is split open like a watermelon.

Krishna Deori, the director of Kaziranga's Eastern Range, one of the park's four divisions, proudly shows me the gruesome pictures when I visit his office, a concrete bungalow beside the park entrance, in April. "I almost gave up!" he says. "I was ready to leave this place because of him." Then, in a red UNITED COLORS OF BENETTON shirt, Deori models for my camera with rifles seized from poachers. I try to envision a ranger in the U.S. doing the same. But nothing in Kaziranga is like anything in the U.S. There's the superdense concentration of tigers, rhinos, and elephants—and the fact that they're thriving. The sheer value of that wildlife on the black market. The grinding poverty of the surrounding villages.

And the tsunami of money and demand pouring out of China. Kaziranga is an ark bobbing upon a frothing sea of humanity. Yet somehow it keeps on floating.

APPROACHING THE PARK on Highway 37, the main road that runs like a vein through Assam, you come around a curve and suddenly look out over a grassland stretching green, blue, gray to the horizon. You wonder why it has off-white minivans parked on it. Then the minivans raise their heads and look around.

Kaziranga is an ocean of grass ten feet high. Elephants glide over it like ships. Tigers hide in its shadows. Of the approximately 3,000 Asian one-horned rhinos still pawing the grass of this planet, more than 2,000 live in Kaziranga—India's greatest conservation success. In the early 20th century, when the British government in Assam first noticed that the one-horned rhino was being hunted to extinction and set aside Kaziranga as a game sanctuary, there were a few dozen living here. The rhinos, who have one calf every two years, have been slowly repopulating the place ever since. By 1974, when Kaziranga became a national park, there were a few hundred. In 1985, when Unesco declared the park a World Heritage site, there were maybe a thousand. To accommodate the growing population, the park has expanded six times since the 1980s, increasing its size from 167 square miles to 333 and evicting tribal villagers and ranchers. It now harbors the largest population of Asiatic wild buffalo, 1,168 of the world's 5,000 remaining swamp deer, 1,100 wild elephants. Hog deer, sambars, wild boars. King cobras? A dime a dozen. Birds? There are 490 species and counting. Most parks would be thrilled to host one species of stork; Kaziranga has six. I saw them all in an afternoon.

And then there are the tigers. Kaziranga has about 100 of Asia's remaining 2,000 Bengal tigers, the highest density of any park in the world. Its tiger population continues to increase—in sharp contrast to the rest of India, where poaching has reduced Bengal tiger numbers from 3,600 in the 1990s to about 1,700 today. In China, a tiger skin can fetch \$20,000, and a large rhino horn will set you back about \$37,000. Over the past two decades, as a new wealthy Chinese class has found the money to pay for such things, thousands of Asian rhinos and tigers of all species, but largely Bengals, have been killed. Now more than half of the world's remaining tigers and virtually all of its one-horned rhinos live in India, whose nearly 100 national parks make up about 1 percent of the country.

Yet India's national parks are woefully underfunded. The central government does have a Ministry of Environment and Forests, but park administrators and rangers are hired, managed, and funded by the often impoverished individual states. As poaching has grown into a billion-dollar system of organized crime, India's outgunned forest guards have been little more than speed bumps.

The one bright spot has been Kaziranga. "It's an exception rather than the rule," Belinda Wright, executive director of the New Delhi-based Wildlife Protection Society of India, the country's most prominent nongovernmental antipoaching organization, told me via e-mail. "There have been shoot-on-sight orders in Kaziranga for years, and they aggressively track down poachers. This is probably the reason why Kaziranga has such a high density of tigers and their prey species," she wrote. "But it will be a long time before similar antipoaching methods are used elsewhere—forest staff are generally not mandated to use arms (a sturdy stick is still the order of the day) and they lack training, equipment and motivation."

The forest guards of Kaziranga are ferociously motivated, and at first I wondered why. Stationed in 138 isolated camps, they patrol on foot and are regularly chased, and occasionally killed, by the animals they are sworn to protect. I hadn't been in the park an hour when word came that a forest guard had been killed by a rhino—the third such casualty this year. Bharat Chandra Das was 55 years old, the father of four. Worked for Assam's Forest Department—as the Eastern Assam Wildlife Division is universally known—for 25 years but as a forest guard for only one. He and three other guards had been walking down a road when a mother rhino charged out of the grass 150 feet away. She was on them in seconds. Three guards veered left. Bharat veered right. She chose him.

Asian rhinos have three-inch incisors, like giant rats, and industrial-strength jaw muscles for chewing elephant grass, which is about as tender as a jute coffee sack. The mother rhino used her teeth to puncture Bharat's thigh, then to pop his head like a jujube. The others had to fire 18 rounds into the air before she finally moved off.

The guards receive a tiny stipend, a camp to live in, a uniform, a gun, and a few bullets. That's it. They have to provide their own food and communication device. They have no way of leaving their camps unless they radio for a jeep pickup—not a big problem, since they rarely get a day off to see their families anyway. The chronically strapped Forest Department sometimes goes months without paying them; it hasn't had the money to hire new guards in 20 years, so there are a hundred unfilled positions, and the existing guards are stretched too thin.

I meet Pawan Baruah, a typical middle-aged forest guard, at his camp. Crisp and handsome in a khaki army uniform and flip-flops, he's just harvested a crop of red onions and is hardening them in the sun. He's been at it 21 years. Ever meet a poacher? "Once, in 1993." What happened? "I found some footprints on the road. Two sets. So I tracked them into the woods. Very quietly. I snuck up on two poachers sitting on a log. I got within six feet of them. They had .303s." What did you do? He shrugs. "I shot one. The other ran away." He goes back to his onions.

Every guard I speak with mentions his pride in protecting Kaziranga's animals. The guards have no money, no possessions, but they have a cause, an ordering principle for their lives. In Assam, where the economy has been wrecked by 30 years of insurgency, there are no other jobs anyway.

That long-smoldering insurgency, which has claimed 20,000 lives, helps explain how Kaziranga became the badass park that it is. Killing has lost its taboo status in Assam, where death arrives like your neighbor dropping by for tea. Every day I was in Assam, the local paper was filled with carnage. Soldiers killed militants. Militants killed soldiers. Militants killed rival militants. A rhino wandered out of a park and killed a bicyclist. Old women were killed on suspicion of witchcraft. A tea-plantation worker was found shot dead. Jitney drivers atomized each other on the lanes-optional roads.

Shooting poachers? A no-brainer. According to Unesco, nine to twelve poachers are shot in Kaziranga each year, and 50 were killed in the nineties alone. Has it worked? Since the peak in 1992, when 48 rhinos were poached, the past decade has averaged fewer than ten poachings per year. In 2010, only five rhinos were shot in Kaziranga, while nine poachers were killed, the first time poacher deaths surpassed rhinos. (For comparison, in South Africa, where rangers fire only in self-defense, five poachers were killed in 2010, while 333 rhinos

were poached.) In July 2007, the arrest of three guards connected to the shooting of a poacher sent a chill through Kaziranga's staff, but in July 2010 the government of Assam finally made the unofficial policy official: it passed a law declaring that rangers who kill poachers in Assam will not be prosecuted.

To keep the megafauna capital of the universe going strong, it helps to shoot first and ask questions later.

IF YOU HAVE THE misfortune of being a Bengal tiger in the year 2011, Kaziranga is where you want to be. Wildlife biologist Firoz Ahmed explains this to me as we enter the park in a jeep, accompanied by his assistants and an armed forest guard, and quickly abandon the tourist roads for a path little wider than a game trail, pockmarked with ruts made by rhinos and elephants. Every bolt on the jeep vibrates in a death rattle, and we jounce around, splatting through piles of elephant poo emitting the unmistakable aroma of Barnum and Bailey. "Picture doing this every day for four months," Ahmed says. Since 2008, he's been studying the park's felines for Aaranyak, an Assam-based conservation nonprofit founded 22 years ago by a team of Indian biologists.

Suddenly, Ahmed slams the jeep to a stop. "You smell that?" Um, no. He hops out and sniffs the trunk of a tree. "Right here, sniff." Ah, yes, cat pee. "Fresh tiger spray," Ahmed says. He points out the claw marks, raking nine freaking feet up the trunk. A gigantic scratching post. Huge pugmarks in the dirt. I get a little mouse shiver.

In Kaziranga, Ahmed has proved, there's always a tiger nearby. Aaranyak, which means "of the forest" in Sanskrit, has 100 camera traps scattered throughout Kaziranga's game trails, and another 70 in neighboring Orang National Park, on the other side of the Brahmaputra. The cameras have motion detectors and flashes; they provide a record of every creature moving. (In January, two poachers in Orang even managed to get themselves photographed, leading to their arrest.) Over the past three years, Aaranyak has compiled hundreds of thousands of photos—the best database of tigers and their prey species ever produced.

From November through May each year, Ahmed and his team of young volunteers collect their data, operating from a bunker-like house near the park entrance. When I was there, 17 of them were sprawled on cots, their laundry strung on lines, cameras and laptops being fixed, data being plotted. It was like a dorm room, except with a squat toilet and a pile of 200 tiger scats awaiting analysis.

There are four official tourist loops in Kaziranga, plied by about a hundred jeeps that cart more than 100,000 Indians, plus a few thousand foreigners, around the loops each year; the other 90 percent of the park is off-limits except to the forest guards and a handful of researchers like Ahmed. The Forest Department provides Aaranyak with rare access to one of the world's biodiversity hot spots, and Aaranyak has become a vital patron. Until Aaranyak provided walkie-talkies, the forest guards had no way of communicating. It has given them boots, raincoats, and solar panels to charge their radios. It also funds some less publicized initiatives, about which I was soon to learn.

Just beyond the tiger-scent post, camouflaged cameras are lashed to trees on either side of the trail. We open one up, replace its 12 AA Duracells, and pull the memory card. Ahmed fires up his laptop, squats beneath a shady tree, and squints at the screen. Each picture is a little surprise, like a stocking stuffer. A rhino. An elephant. A dove. A barefoot guard on patrol.

Twelve shots of an annoying grass blade that bent down and blew around in front of the lens. (Ahmed mutters to a volunteer, who takes a machete to the offending plant.) A hog badger. A big male tiger. Ahmed studies it for a few seconds. "I know this guy." Every tiger has a unique stripe pattern, like a bar code. "The stripe of a tiger never lies," Ahmed says. "From the time they're in utero, it's the same." He can identify many of Kaziranga's tigers from memory.

More pics. An elephant. Another elephant. A civet. A porcupine. Twenty close-ups of a wild boar that rooted around in front of the camera and took a liking to it. Then, suddenly, a lovely female tiger. Ahmed cocks his head. "I don't know this tiger."

Ahmed has identified more than 90 individual tigers in Kaziranga. His original study estimated 47 tigers in 55 square miles, a ridiculous density of 83 tigers per 100 square miles—dwarfing that of any other park and 50 times that of Siberia and China. "The hunting success rates for tigers are very high here," he says, thanks to those incredibly productive grasslands. Forests don't make that much food, which is why there are few big animals in the Amazon. Grasses make tons of food, if you have the guts to digest it. Ungulates do, transforming grass into protein on the hoof and providing an all-you-can-eat buffet for predators from *Panthera tigris tigris* to *Homo sapiens*. We tend to think of tigers as a forest species, but they are perfectly adapted to grasslands, their vertical stripes disappearing against the blades. Kaziranga's tigers are so elusive that the park wasn't even recognized as important habitat until the 1990s, when the first camera traps were used. Now everyone knows they're here.

But they aren't getting poached. The forest guards get some credit, but the rhinos get more. Poaching a tiger is hard. You have to find it, shoot it, skin it flawlessly, then bag the bones, which sell for hundreds of dollars a pound. By contrast, poaching a rhino takes just a few minutes. Shoot, hack off the horn, run. As long as Kaziranga is full of rhinos, no poacher wants to bother with a tiger.

IN 2008, KAZIRANGA became India's 32nd tiger reserve, which qualified it for \$1 million of desperately needed federal funds. Until then, it had to pay its 700 employees; maintain its roads, buildings, and vehicles; buy its equipment; and feed its 50-plus domestic elephants on a \$2 million annual budget supplied by Assam's Forest Department, plus whatever money was provided by Aaranyak and other NGOs. But the designation also requires Kaziranga to establish a core area with zero human presence, surrounded by a buffer zone with limited human impact, and to restrict the amount of tourism.

For these reasons, locals living near parks all over India hate tiger reserves, and the people around Kaziranga are no exception. "Kaziranga National Park is famous for the one-horned rhino," says Tulshi Bordoloi, secretary of the Kaziranga Development and Jeep Safari Association. "We want to protect *only* the one-horned rhino." Tigers kill about 150 cattle per year outside the park, sometimes breaking into sheds and tearing open their throats. In 2009, a tiger entered a nearby village and killed a man—a rarity. By the time forest guards, policemen, and a vet from the Wildlife Trust of India arrived to tranquilize the cat, a thousand-person mob had cornered it in a bamboo grove. One guy attacked the tiger with a machete; the tiger ripped out his throat and began eating him. The mob freaked, the tiger charged, the policemen fired in panic and shot the vet. The tiger then mauled a policeman, at which point somebody—no one knows if it was a forest guard or the police—shot the tiger. Welcome to Assam.

Many people here would like to see every tiger dead. They leave poisoned cattle carcasses around the park, which kill a handful of tigers each year. In February, locals from 16 villages marched outside Kaziranga, calling for the park's removal from the tiger-reserve system. Impossible, replied Suresh Chand, the Forest Department's chief wildlife warden. "This is the major source available for management of Kaziranga," he says. "If Kaziranga is de-notified as a tiger reserve, we will starve for funds."

Shortly before my arrival, this smoldering anger was ignited by cell-phone-stoked rumors that Aaranyak's research would lead to severe restrictions on the number of jeep tours. A mob surrounded Ahmed one evening as he left the park. "They threatened to beat me," he told me. "They threatened to kill me. I said, 'Come and kill me then. I'm right here. If you want to talk, let's talk. If you need any help, I'm happy to help. But don't threaten me. That doesn't work with me. I'm not the type of person to run away. I'm an Assamese guy, born and raised here. I have as much at stake in Kaziranga as you do.'" They let him go—for now.

Ahmed and I drive out of the jungle onto a bright green plain, the steely chop of the Brahmaputra in the distance. "Welcome to paradise," he says. An infinity of short-cropped grass, storks swirling overhead, herds of Pleistocene-size ungulates grazing lazily. I could play golf and get a pretty good lie. But I don't much want to play golf; I want to grab an atlatl and chase wild buffalo. It's like the explorers' accounts of the New World. Life filling every acre. An Ice Age cartoon landscape come alive. Enough for everyone to have seconds.

Yet in all this vast landscape, I can see only a single guard tower. How does the same aging, overworked guard staff that was overrun by poachers in the 1990s now have the upper hand? Ahmed lowers his binoculars, hops back into the jeep, and tells me there's a guy I need to meet.

BOKAKHAT IS A TOWN of about 6,000, the largest that borders Kaziranga. Bicycle-repair shops, open-air markets piled with dried fish and chiles, the incessant sound of the default Nokia ringtone. Ahmed and I step into a café called Balaji, a concrete cube open to the street with plastic chairs and a glass counter lined with sweets nobody buys. You sit and a boy pours scalding chai out of a dented tin teapot into filthy little glasses and you watch the world go by. You watch the world spit gobs of blood-red betel-nut juice onto the sidewalk, the street, everywhere.

Uttam Saikia—middle-aged, tiny build, black hair slicked neatly to the side—holds down a table. We join him. Everyone who passes waves. Saikia writes for the Assamese papers. He's old-school, and Balaji is his base of operations. He sits, chats, drinks tea, keeps his ears open. If anything happens in Bokakhat, Saikia hears about it.

Saikia grew up in Bokakhat. Loves Kaziranga. Knows the people, their families. Knows that all the big-shot poachers in Nagaland depend on the locals. Knows how desperate those villagers are. "Just before the festivals, Nagaland agents come with money," he tells me. "They say, 'Here, take this money, buy your family new clothes. Buy some good food to throw a big celebration. But in return, you must give us a horn.' Once the guy accepts the money, he's in the grasp of Nagaland."

That's not a grasp you want to be in. Nagaland has been fighting for independence for 60 years, supporting its semiautonomous government through extortion, kidnapping, and wildlife, gun, and drug smuggling. You can buy and sell anything in Nagaland. The Nagas

are ex-headhunters who scared the bejesus out of the British in the 19th century, freaked out the invading Japanese during World War II, and only grudgingly renounced the practice. It wasn't a big leap to rhino horns.

In the 1990s, as he watched poaching metastasize, Saikia decided to do what the park couldn't. Using his contacts, he cultivated a network of informants. He couldn't afford to pay them—but Aaranyak could. "It's not much money," Ahmed says to me. "If you give them \$100, they'll give you very good information. If you give them \$400 or \$500, they'll help you trap a poacher. We give them extra money if their information leads to the killing of a poacher, up to \$1,000."

I set down my tea and stare. Ahmed sees the look in my eye and adds, "There's no human rights in India." This is how you do conservation work in a country that, with 1.2 billion people and counting, will by 2025 surpass China to become the world's most populous. You do rigorous science, but you also buy boots for guards, mollify homicidal mobs, and fund undercover information divisions. "Like a mini-CIA," Ahmed explains. "Sometimes we get information on how many there are, how they're armed, where they're entering the park. Sometimes we even know what they are planning before they act. Based on that information, the park acts, and they get killed."

Suddenly, I begin to understand why Naren Pegu and eight other poachers were gunned down in Kaziranga in 2010.

"I have a profile of all the poachers," Saikia explains, sipping his tea. "Names, fathers, mothers, relatives. I have boys working for me all over town. Once they try to go inside, the first information comes to me. I'm the bridge, because nobody trusts the Forest Department."

But doesn't that make him a target? "Yes, I worry," Saikia admits. "But nobody comes face-to-face with me. They're scared. And I'm very straightforward about it. I say, 'Yes, if you want to kill me, kill me. But it's not a solution. You won't get any money for killing me.'"

"I like the people in the villages very much," Saikia says. "They're very innocent. Nobody around here visits them except for me." He looks at me. I know what he's thinking. If I really want to understand what's going on at Kaziranga, I need to meet some poachers.

ON A HAZY AFTERNOON during Bihu, the spring rice-planting festival, Saikia and I drive out to Dhoba Ati Belaguri, a village of 62 Mishing families hugging the eastern edge of the park. Saikia calls it "the poacher village." We're here to meet Kartik Pegu. "Kartik has been the number one headache for the Forest Department," Saikia says. "He's more than a guide; he does the shooting, too. He's very deadly. When the Forest Department raided his house, they found a .303 rifle, bullets, and a pistol. That's not for hunting rhinos. They asked what it was for. He said to kill informants."

But isn't that you?

Saikia laughs nervously. "I'm very deep into this."

The huts are bamboo, raised on posts to escape the monsoon floods. Each has a dugout canoe underneath and a betel palm in the yard. No televisions. No electricity. Cows grazing the fallow rice paddies. Troops of boys walk through town with drums, beating out a tribal patter.

“This is like my second home,” Saikia says. “I hate cities; I prefer to spend time out here. Last year, with the help of Aaranyak, I started a workshop where all the schoolchildren get to learn about wildlife conservation. Ahmed helps out. And the kids get to visit Kaziranga.” Kids who otherwise might never set foot legally in the park.

Several men welcome us into one of the huts. We sit cross-legged on square bamboo mats and drink metal bowls of sour, cloudy homemade rice beer.

The men are some of the 17 poachers whom Saikia has recently convinced to forsake the practice in exchange for a promise from the Forest Department to stop harassing them. “The Forest Department is always watching these people,” Saikia says. “At any moment they could be arrested. They can’t move freely. They can’t go to town. To get confessions, sometimes they’re beaten very badly. Some have even been sent to the hospital.”

People here are forced to poach, the men tell me. Every night wild animals raid their crops. Every night. You think your garden has deer problems? Try chasing a rhino out of your squash patch. They apply to the Forest Department for compensation; the waiting list is years long. And there are no other jobs—Kaziranga is surrounded by some 40 lodges, but the waitstaff and housekeeper jobs go to educated Assamese, not the villagers here. A few men do menial labor in town—a one-hour walk each way. The pay is next to nothing.

And here is the deadly Kartik Pegu. He’s wearing traditional Assamese silks for Bihu, plus a necklace and an ersatz Timex. His cell phone (and his coverage) is better than mine. He looks like he’s 16 years old.

In fact, he’s a smooth-chinned 24. Newly married, handsome as hell. Not much taller than five feet, leanly muscled, bowl haircut, eyes like black buttons. How’d he get started poaching? He looks at me and shakes his head. Too many ears here; come to my hut later.

So we drink more rice beer and learn how the village is trying to earn money from ecotourism. Visitors pay \$20 to see them do their songs and dances, to eat village food, to watch the residents weaving. So far in 2011, 13 people have come.

When everyone has a good buzz on, we slip away to Kartik’s hut and pass around betel nuts and leaves. Nowhere to spit, so we just swallow the bitter alkalines. And Kartik talks, staring straight ahead. There’s no shame, just the steely confidence of a young hunter-gatherer.

As a teenager, he was picking up odd jobs in Bokakhat. Then he and a friend began sneaking into Kaziranga at night to catch fish. Scary at first, then it got easy. No problem: in, out, the animals don’t mess with you unless you do something stupid. Sold the fish in the marketplace. Better money than hauling bricks, for sure. One day his friend said, “Hey, how about a rhino? That’s real money.” Kartik thought about it.

One night while fishing in the park, he saw his distant cousin Naren Pegu sneaking out with a rhino horn. Naren paid him some money to keep his mouth shut. Easy money.

Not long after, he was hired to help deliver a domestic elephant to Nagaland for logging. There, a man approached him. Wasn’t he a Mishing, from the borders of Kaziranga? Would he like to make a lot of money? Here’s a gun, just in case.

Kartik smuggled the gun, in pieces, through the security checkpoint on the Nagaland-Assam border. Then he learned that his name was on the Forest Department's list of suspected poachers. "At that point," he says, "I knew they were going to beat me up. Why should I get beaten if I haven't killed a rhino? I may as well do something to earn it!"

He did it. No problem. One shot, ten minutes to hack off the horn with an ax, out of the park before the forest guards even got close. Gave the horn to Naren, got \$200 in return. More money than he'd ever seen in his life. Did it again.

Then, in 2007, the Forest Department raided his house, and Kartik was charged with possession of an illegal weapon. He was 20 years old. Three months in jail, then bail. - Ridiculous legal bills. So he went underground and kept on poaching. Five rhinos total. "No choice," he says. "Where else was I going to get the money?"

In 2010, after three years of discussions, Saikia convinced Kartik and 16 other Mishing poachers to turn themselves in, along with a pile of rifles, handmade pipe guns, bullets, and a grenade. In front of the director of Kaziranga National Park, they held a "surrender ceremony" attended by more than 100 villagers. "I assured them, 'If you come to me, nobody will arrest you. If they try, they'll have to arrest me first,' " Saikia says. The park, he says, promised not to prosecute, to provide a "rehabilitation package" to the poachers, and to "work out a self-employment scheme for the group."

With their surrender and the killing of Naren Pegu, the poaching network collapsed—at least temporarily. One of the reformed poachers, a hard-jawed, sinewy man named Numal Doley, tells me that Nagaland agents threatened to kill him: "They think I'm an informant now that I surrendered." Instead, the agents shifted their efforts to the northern bank of the Brahmaputra, encouraging new poachers to slip into the park by boat. Now Saikia is reaching out to those villagers.

Meanwhile, no rehab package has appeared for the Mishing. "The director assured them, 'Yes, yes, we'll do something for you,' " Saikia says. "But still nothing." Doley makes about two dollars a day collecting firewood, and he's facing years in jail unless he can come up with \$550 to continue paying his lawyer. He's already spent more than a thousand dollars on bail. When I ask him what he'd like to see happen, he turns to Saikia and says, "It depends on you! You said you'd help us. Do something!"

Saikia looks stricken. "How's the poor guy supposed to get this money? I'm completely helpless. It's very upsetting. They gave me their trust. They surrendered on my request. For more than a year they've been waiting for support. They can't wait much longer. They'll go back to poaching, no question."

I look in Doley's eyes and see that it's true. Fear? Morality? Meaningless. He and Kartik are survivors; that's what got them to this point. Really, they're no different from the tigers, or the rhinos, or the park director, or any of the other coils of DNA scratching out an existence in this vicious, magnificent land. They will keep doing the things they need to do to survive. Until one day they don't.

<http://www.outsideonline.com/outdoor-adventure/nature/Number-One-With-a-Bullet.html>