

Rhino shock

Poachers of greater one-horned rhinos in India's north-eastern state of Assam have struck upon an altogether new way — both ingenious and crude — of killing their quarry, and one of the best hopes of putting an end to the practice may lie with a group of illegal extremists. The United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) has warned poachers, some of whom have been killing rhinos by electrocuting them, that if they do not stop their assault on "the pride of Assam," they will be found out and murdered.

Greater one-horned rhinos were given official protection in India in 1910, and since then their numbers have grown steadily to about 1,500 — with 1,250 in the 430km² Kaziranga National Park, and the rest scattered among Manas and Pobitora wildlife sanctuaries and Orang Game Reserve. But the increase in rhinos has been nothing compared to the rise in the price of rhino horn — which now sells wholesale in Singapore and Taiwan at US\$15,000 a kilogram and brings the poacher nearly half that. That much money, particularly in a place as poor as Assam, can make people desperate, and the poachers have turned to electrocution.

The first case of this occurred in September 1989 in Pobitora, a sanctuary that contains 60 rhinos in only 16km², and it has now spread to Kaziranga. Both areas have high-voltage power lines running through

them. To one of these lines, where it runs near a track regularly used by rhinos, poachers will hook the two ends of a long wire, which is then suspended about a metre above the ground. When a rhino — which is usually using the track to reach nocturnal grazing in nearby paddy fields — touches the live wire, it receives an 11,000-volt shock. The animal struggles for about five minutes before it dies.

The poachers then quickly unhook the wire and cut off the horn and sometimes an ear — which can be shown later as proof to the middleman that a rhino is dead and the horn is genuine. Five rhinos in Kaziranga and two in Pobitora were killed this way in late 1989 and early 1990. Forest guards have responded by clearing the undergrowth beneath the power lines and patrolling regularly around them. In Kaziranga, about 25 guards walk along the 25km stretch of electricity line each night. In Pobitora, 35 men patrol the whole sanctuary and are on constant watch near the pylons.

Unfortunately, the police in Assam take the offence of rhino poaching lightly — to the extent that poachers and middlemen are never convicted — and forest guards who risk their lives understandably get disillusioned. This is the sort of thing that gives the young, educated members of ULFA, which eventually wants north-east India to be a separate country, an issue they can capitalise on, gaining public support by



Electrocuted rhino in Pobitora, September 1989. Rebels pledge revenge.

trying to get rid of some of the crime in the state. When, last year, ULFA published the names of 50 alleged poachers in a local newspaper, three poachers and a middleman were killed.

To protect Assam's rhinos, nearly \$3.5 million has been allocated by the central government in Delhi since 1985, but only about a half has been spent so far. There is an urgent need for more equipment — rifles, radios, night-vision binoculars. More guards and domesticated elephants are also required, and park staff should be given improved terms of service because of their dangerous work.

The safety of wildlife areas ultimately depends on the good

feelings of the local people. With human and rhino populations increasing, there is competition and conflict. At night, wandering rhinos trample and destroy crops belonging to neighbouring poor farmers, which creates hostility towards the park and the rhinos. If more compensation for such damage were paid, there would be more co-operation between the villagers and the park, and if informant money were provided and an organised intelligence-gathering network introduced, the local people would help the wildlife officials by giving them information on poachers.

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Badger Bill tries to tiptoe past unhappy foxhunters

Despite the fact that badgers are covered by more conservation legislation than any other single British species, they are still falling in numbers because of the lack of protection given to their setts. In an attempt to resolve this situation, a Private Member's Bill giving protection to badger setts was introduced earlier this year, and having completed its committee stage, is to have its final reading this month.

Badgers received legal protection in Britain in 1973, when the Badgers Act was introduced to protect the animals from illegal digging. This was primarily welfare rather than a conservation measure. Subsequently, badgers were included on Schedule 6 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, which confers some protection on the animal but not its dwelling place (only the dwelling places of rare or endangered

species, as listed on Schedule 5, are protected). In 1985, an amendment to the Wildlife and Countryside Act further strengthened the badger-protection legislation by making it harder for people digging for badgers to claim that they were really after foxes — anyone found digging at a sett is deemed to be guilty of badger-digging unless they can show otherwise.

But as a recent report compiled by the National Federation of Badger Groups and published by the League Against Cruel Sports (LACS) has shown, diggers are now carrying with them dead foxes or parts of them as 'instant proof'. Also many setts are being rendered uninhabitable or being destroyed by foxhunts, landowners, developers, gamekeepers and farmers (see BBC WILDLIFE, July 1989).

It might seem that the best way completely to protect setts would be to put badgers on Schedule 5 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act. But this is impossible because badgers are not endangered nationally. To resolve the problem, Tony Banks (Labour MP for Newham North-west) introduced the Protection of Badger Setts Bill under the Ten Minute Rule. This is designed to protect setts against any wilful or reckless damage or destruction,

whether by landowners, developers, farmers or hunters. The abuses that occur include filling setts with slurry, pouring chemicals down them, ploughing them up or blocking them with stones or logs so that the badgers cannot dig out.

Not only is the Bill seen to be a useful conservation measure, but it is also likely to be a popular one — last year, the League Against Cruel Sports collected 200,000 signatures for a petition to Parliament calling for badger sett protection. It has not, however, been popular among foxhunters, who are worried that it will prevent them blocking setts, which they do to prevent hunted foxes going to ground.

Having got past the hurdle of the Committee stage, the Bill has done extremely well (most Private Members' Bills never even get to this stage), but according to the rules, it can be killed if just one MP objects. Detailed negotiations are therefore now in progress between the conservationists and the foxhunters to try to obtain a compromise.

Already, the Bill allows foxhunts to block setts with loose soil — a concession not welcomed by all conservationists. But the British Field

Sports Society, whose chairman is Sir Nicholas Bonsor, Conservative MP for Upminster, is still not satisfied, and is arguing for an exemption for foxhunts wishing to send terriers into setts or dig foxes out of them. If this is agreed it will, yet again, introduce a loophole into the badger legislation which could lead to a variety of abuses.

But the foxhunting lobby, too, has a dilemma. The three pro-hunting MPs who could be relied on to object to the passage of the Bill are all members of the Conservative Party, which is not doing too well in the opinion polls, and should one of them object at the Report Stage and kill such a popular conservation measure, this would not help the party's 'green image'.

Conservationists are now crossing their fingers and hoping, for once, that party politics will prevail and that the foxhunting lobby will resign itself to being confined to the use of temporary measures to stop foxes making use of badger setts as bolt-holes.

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'The Case for the Protection of Badger Setts — A briefing paper on the Bill for the Protection of Badger Setts', can be obtained at £3 (inc p&p) from: LACS, 83-87 Union Street, London SE1 1SG.