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FORGOTTEN UNICORN: THE SUNDARBAN RHINO CHRONICLE



Krish Bohra (Vyāghra) · Follow

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Situated in the Indian state of West Bengal and Bangladesh, Sundarbans is the world's largest mangrove forest at the delta of the river Ganga as she meets the Bay of Bengal. Home to incredible biodiversity, the resilient ecosystem acts as a line of defence for cities like Kolkata and Dhaka from being completely submerged into the sea. The name Sundarbans is synonymous with man-eating tigers. Not only do these iconic tigers famously have the highest concentration of man-eaters, they are also the only tigers in the world adapted to living in mangrove forests. But annals of history reveal Sundarbans used to host many animals that unfortunately no longer live there.

. . . marshy islands, near the mouth of the Ganges . . . wild haunts of the rhenoceros and tiger.

—The History of Hindostan by Alexander Dow (1772)

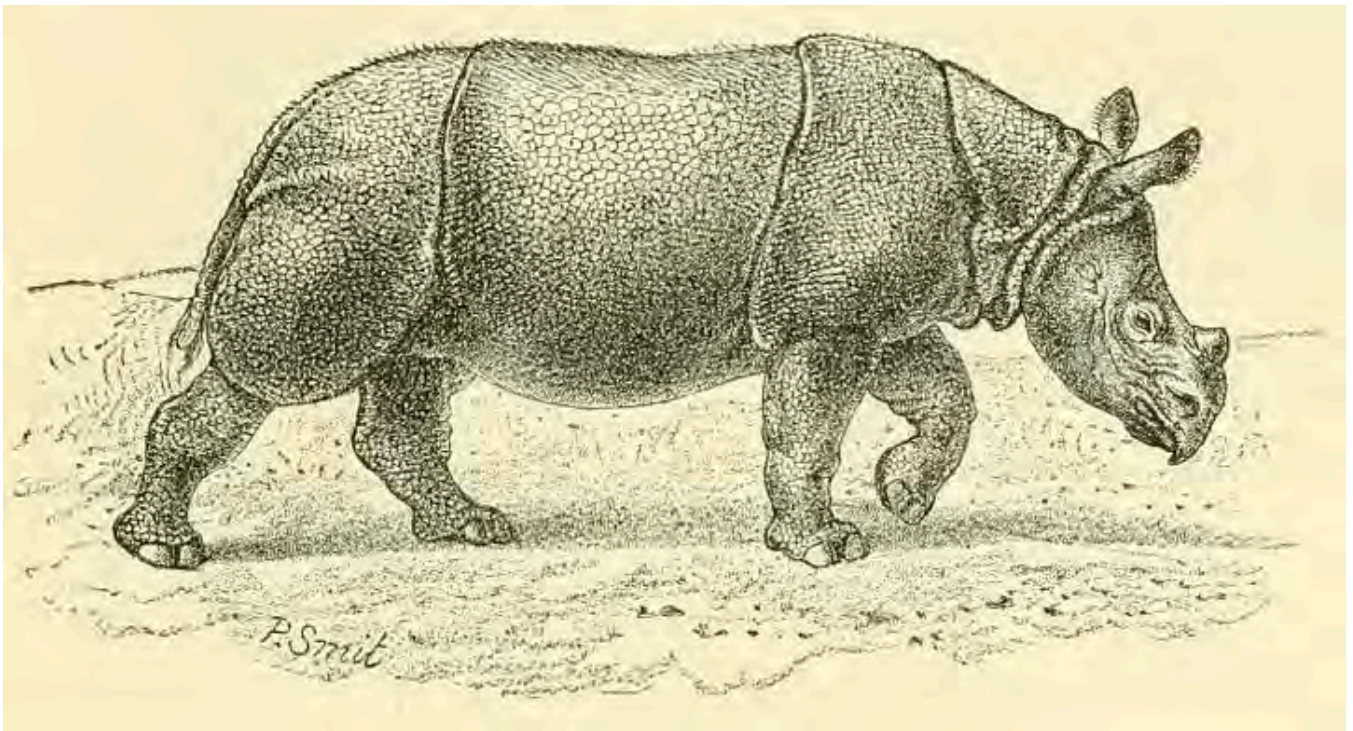


Illustration of a Javan rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*)

Source: *The Fauna of British India, including Ceylon and Burma. Mammalia*, edited by W.T. Blanford (1888–91)

A small detour from our journey through the history of Sundarbans and its lost unicorns, a little about the animal itself. There are five species of rhinoceros in the world, black and white rhinos of Africa and Indian, Javan and Sumatran rhinos of Asia. The latter two of the Asian species are some of the rarest animals on earth today with habitat loss and poaching having destroyed their numbers to the brink of extinction. Both of them in all likelihood number less than 50 and are restricted to the islands in their names (though an extremely small number of Sumatran rhinos are found in Borneo as well). This wasn't so about 150 years ago. Their range went all the way from present-day Indonesia, towards mainland southeast Asia and further into parts of the Indian subcontinent. India once had all three of the Asian rhinos. And Sundarbans was the biggest stronghold of the Javan rhinoceros in south Asia.

In fact, Edward Blyth objected to the use of the names Javan and Sumatran rhinos because the range of these animals went well beyond these islands. Hence, he found the names Asiatic two-horned rhinoceros and lesser one-horned rhinoceros, for Sumatran and Javan respectively, better. Oh how he'd feel if he saw the present condition of these animals.

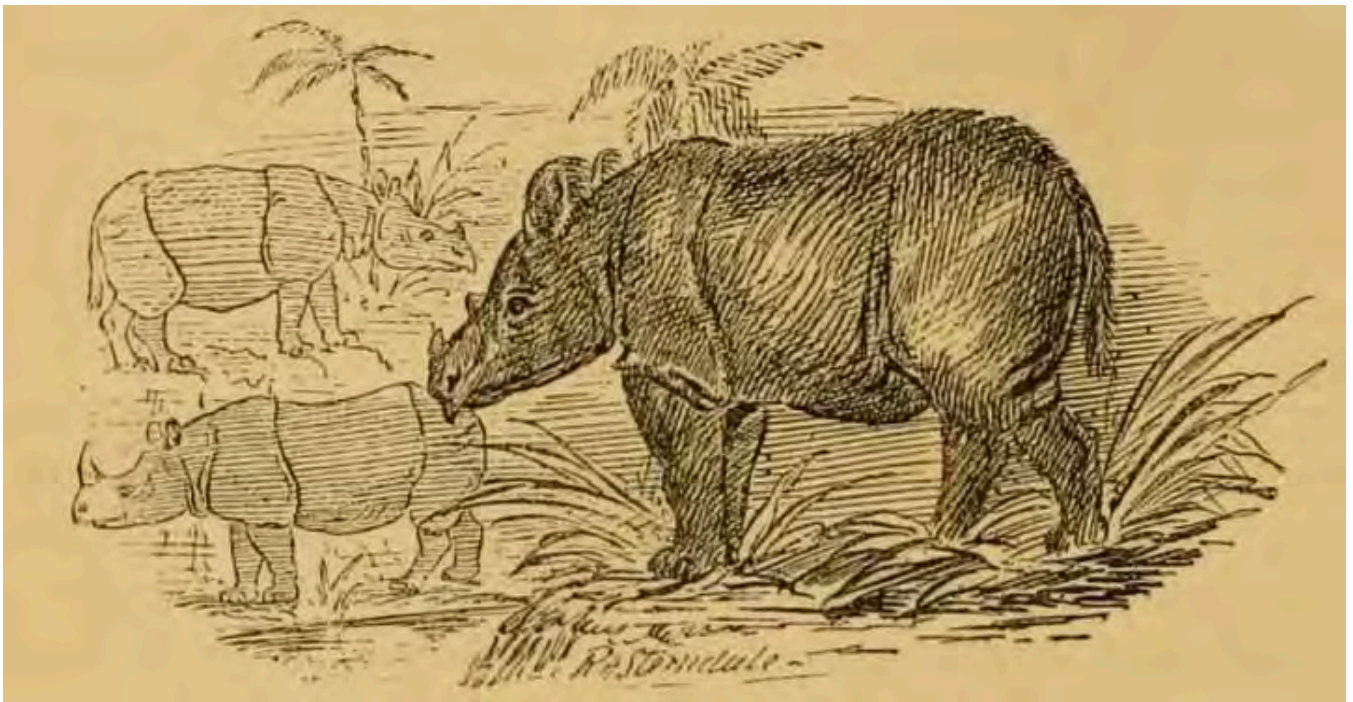


Illustration of the three Asian rhino species

Indian or greater one-horned rhinoceros, *Rhinoceros unicornis* (bottom left); Javan or lesser one-horned rhinoceros, *Rhinoceros sondaicus* (top left); Sumatran or Asiatic two-horned rhinoceros, *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis* (right)

Source: Natural history of the Mammalia of India and Ceylon by R. A. Sterndale (1884)

A 9th century traveller writes about Javan rhino horns and products made using them in the Dhaka region,

the Horns of these are the most esteemed, and upon them are generally seen the Figures of Men, Peacocks, Fishes, and other Resemblances. The Chinese adorn their Girdles with these sorts of Figures; so that some of these Girdles are worth two or three thousand pieces of Gold in China, and sometimes more, the Price augmenting with the Beauty of the Figure.

—Ancient Accounts Of India And China By Two Mohammedan Travellers Who Went To Those Parts In The 9th Century by Eusieus Renaudot

He also says, the meat of the rhinoceros wasn't forbidden and that he tried it.

In 1630, Sebastien Manrique, a Portuguese Catholic priest, at the Meghna river estuary on his way to the island of Xavaspur, now known as Dakshin Shahbazpur, came across many rhinoceroses. He writes that their horns were used in a defensive drug.

So, we can see, as evident by such writings, trade and use of rhino body parts was taking place for a long time.

We often call mangroves defence walls against the raging waters of natural disasters when they strike, very important for cities like Kolkata that are practically next door and would not exist without these natural fort walls, what this also means is that the wildlife of these jungles is exposed to such dangers when they strike. About the Calcutta Cyclone of 1737, where people faced massive losses of life and property, an article from 1739 reads, “several Rhinoceroses were drowned.”

Once, these forests, like all others, were much bigger. They extended much further north. Thing worth noting here, is that European presence in Bengal was on the rise, with corporations like English, French and Dutch East India Companies beginning to make a space for themselves in the social, economic and political realms of the region. Why is this important here, you ask? Well, it’s because the coming Europeans who had begun to explore Bengal saw Sundarbans as a place shrouded in mystery. The deep, inaccessible jungle full of wild beasts dangerous to life. In fact, it was very difficult for even the English East India Company to manage parcels of this land and somehow get a profit out of it—described as an extensive and unprofitable tract of territory. Yeah, Sundarbans certainly had a reputation.

One of the things that historian Dr. Rookmaaker points out in his book *Rhinoceros of South Asia* is that early accounts of Europeans who came to India through Bengal and mention the presence of rhinoceros here may have been based on information and encounters with Javan rhinoceros of Sundarbans given its close proximity to places like Kolkata and Dhaka, not the greater Indian one-horned rhinoceros. Makes sense, considering they had to cross Sundarbans at close quarters to reach Kolkata, Dhaka etc. We’ll never know to what extent this is true, but it is certainly interesting to look back and wonder. Food for thought.

I would make a distinction here though. A lot of Indians did go into the forests for resources like firewood, timber, honey, fish, bushmeat etc. I think rhino body parts can safely be included in these resources.

Rhinoceros are by no means scarce . . . fortunate killer of one of these brutes realises from twenty-five to thirty-five rupees by his deed . . . Each rhinoceros hide yields three valuable shields, and this, added to the presents bestowed to the grantees as well as the wealthy natives, by whom the flesh is much esteemed as an article of luxury, and who pay well for the same, makes the value of the quarry, when obtained, amount to what I have put it down at.

— Asmodeus, Estward Ho!, India Sporting Review vol. 12, 1850

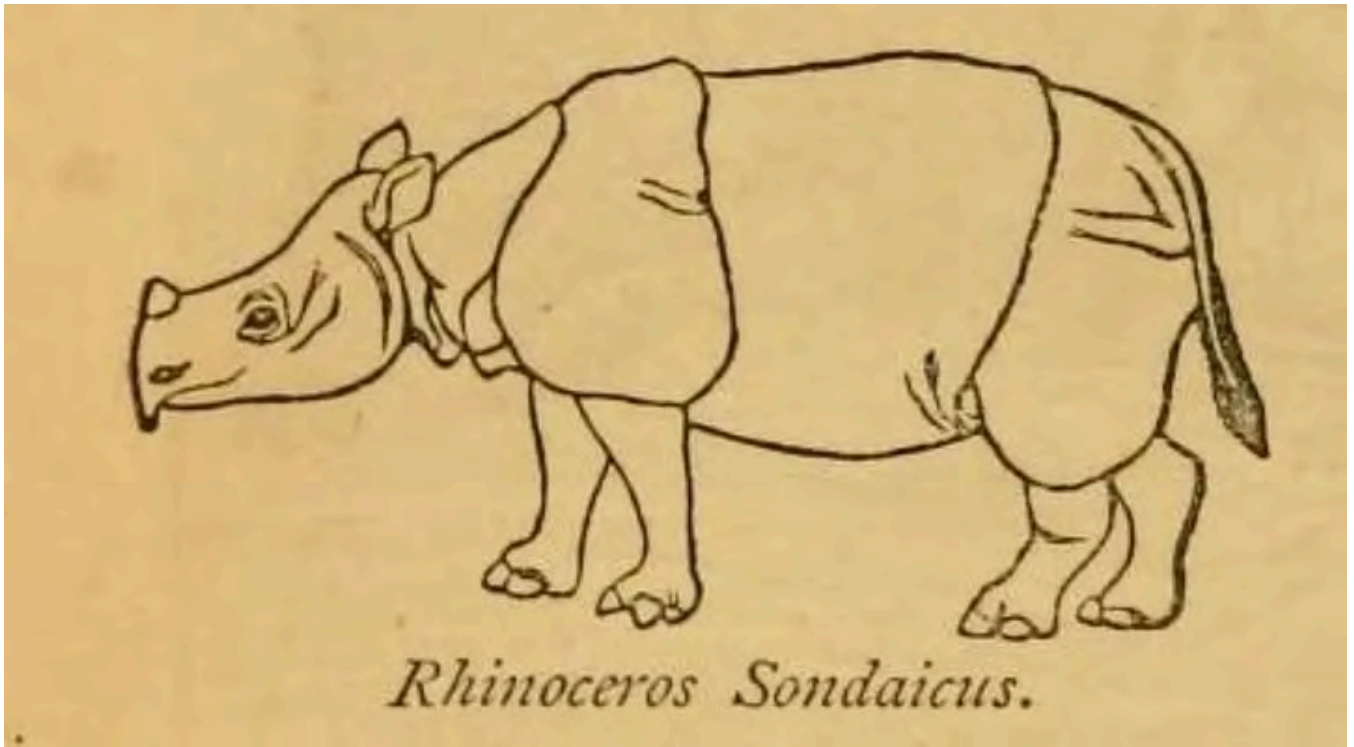


Illustration of a Javan rhinoceros

Source Natural history of the Mammalia of India and Ceylon by R. A. Sterndale (1884)

In 1727, Alexander Hamilton in his *A New Account of the East Indies* notes the tiger to be the main reason Sundarbans was sparsely populated, and that while rhinoceros wasn't as aggressive, it could still be dangerous. Apart from the horn attacks, he says, if the rhinoceros manages to hold someone down, it can lick them to death, leaving "neither Skin nor Flesh to cover their Bones," In his view, tongue is a protective weapon of sorts similar to the strong horn and thick hide. Certainly wrong factually but a record of historical importance.

When we look at this era for most parts of Bengal, a common appearance is that of the European men who looked for sport, in the wild spaces available to them, in their free time. Sundarbans in such a time stands out as a wilderness so mysterious and inaccessible the majority of them wouldn't ever think of venturing there. You would need to plan an expedition with several skilled men, whose food and water would need to be carried on the boats, horses and elephants as mounts would be of no help either. And of course, on top of it all, as a hunter wrote, "... reputation of the Sunderbunds as a health resort stands very low indeed, and I should not dare deny it."

Bagging a tiger elsewhere obviously was a much easier option.



1892. South Sunderbunds near the Sea. Malancha River—High tide.

Source: Journal of Bombay Natural History Society, vol. 37 (1935)

Thomas Pennant in his *The View of Hindoostan*, published in 1798, mentions an encounter someone — identified elsewhere as Charles Pigot, from the service of the English East India Company — had with a rhinoceros. This man supposedly came to one of these islands, roused a rhino, who flung him down and ripped open his belly. Interestingly, the animal left without injuring him more and Pennant claims he survived, living to “a very advanced age.”

This image of the Sundarbans with its tigers and rhinos was popular in Europe, based on what people had heard and read. Many writers of the time found inspiration in this enigmatic imagery. Several adventure stories were set in the unknown land of Sundarbans. Italian writer Emilio Salgari wrote a series of adventure novels set in different parts of India. Though he never came to India himself, his stories can give us an idea of popular things associated with parts of India he used as setting. One of his stories *I mistri della jungla nera—Mystery of the Black Jungle*—is set in Sundarbans. In a scene where some characters are stuck in a

difficult situation with a tiger, a rhino comes out of nowhere and kills the tiger. Jacques Étienne Victor Arago, a French artist and writer, in his *Souvenirs d'un Aveugle* wrote of a rhinoceros that carried a man on its horn to the fields, another pair that caused a great deal of problems at a plantation and a tamed rhino owned by a family near the Hooghly river. These records can be taken as fictional, but since he was a French writer and the setting is Chandannagar near Sundarbans which had a French factory at the time, it can be argued they were based on or inspired by real events. Another interesting example is *Julius Bath's Malerisch-Romantische Reise nach Calcutta* by the German writer Philipp Wolfgang Körber where the protagonist Julius Bath and his friends are chased atop a tree by a rhino.



Chasse au Rhinocéros (Hunt of a rhinoceros).

Engraved by Nicolas Eustache Maurin (1799–1850) *Souvenirs d'un aveugle*, 1840

The inaccessibility of Sundarbans may have kept the naturalist and the sportsman at a certain distance, at least compared to most wild spaces in India, but the imagination of authors found a treasure in this landscape. Even illustrations that accompanied these books were popular, particularly in Europe, and hence was the rhino.



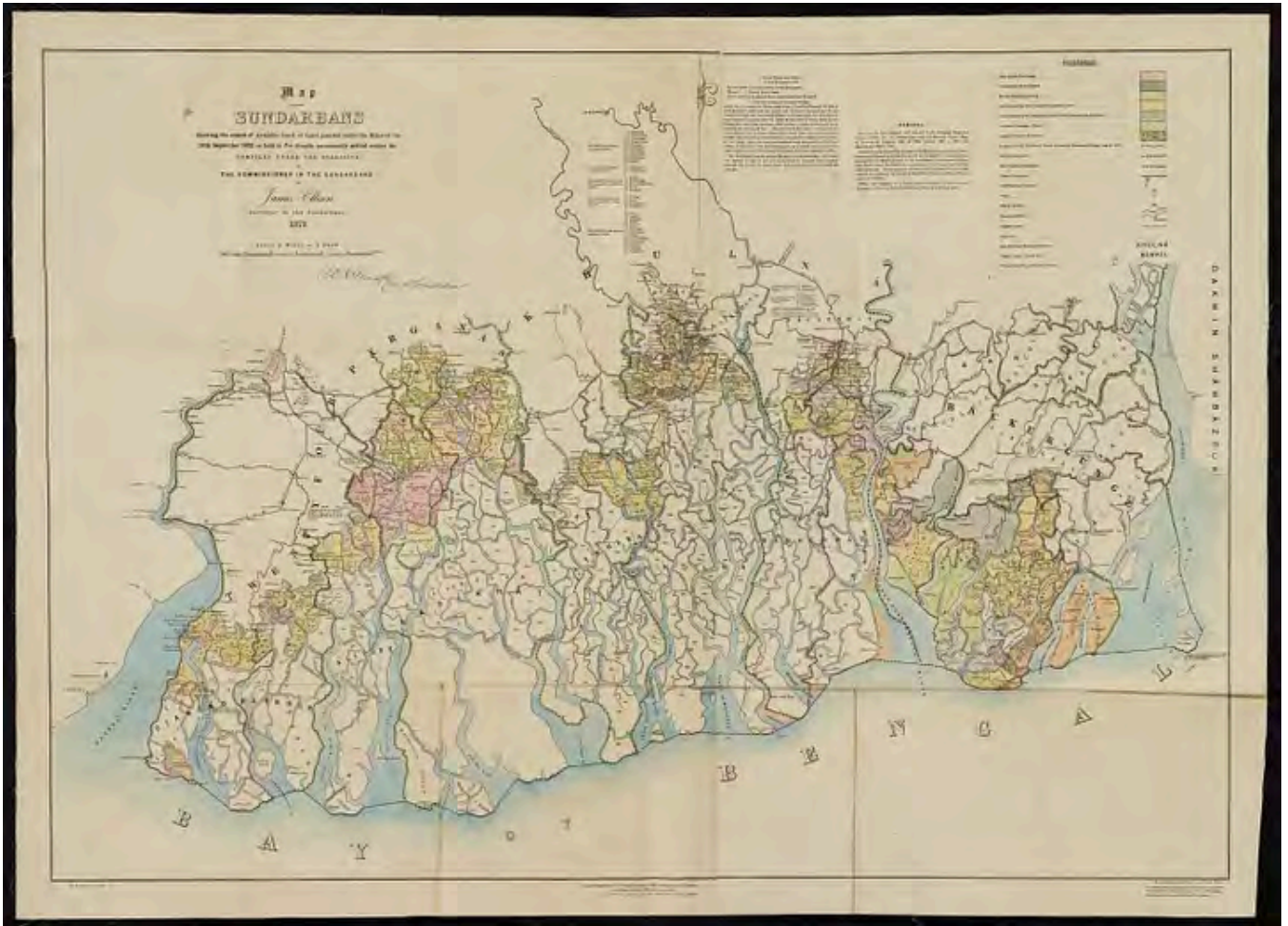
„Noch schlug es sterbend mit dem Horn, und in riesi-
gen Zuckungen bewegten sich seine plumpen Füße.“

Illustration from Julius Bath's *Malerisch-Romantische Reise nach Calcutta*, 1853

Majority of our information on the rhinos of the Sundarbans is from 19th century hunters, naturalists and such. As I explained earlier, these tend to have biases we need to be conscious of.

In 1812, while surveying Sundarbans for the Company, Lt. Hugh Morrieson and his brother Lt. William Elliot Morrieson saw a rhinoceros drinking water, which they failed to shoot. They record that the region between the mouths of Raimangal and Malancha rivers was full of rhinos. The only good water source they could find was surrounded by long grass and thick jungle, where rhinos lived.

Now, this might sound self-contradictory, given I discussed at length the inaccessibility of the Sundarbans and how that kept hunters at a certain distance, which it absolutely did, but we also must realise Kolkata, and Bengal as a whole, was a rising economic hub with a booming population. Slowly but surely, these wild lands were being converted—much more so following the transfer of power from the Company, to the Crown after the Revolt of 1857, we can see it in James Ellison's map too. In the locations nearby then, with recorded rhino presence, at the fringes of the great jungles, you could probably hope of shooting a rhino if luck favoured you. An old newspaper article reads, “sportsmen with leisure and the command of a steam launch can within a day's run from Calcutta secure with ease rhino, tiger and deer.”



Map of the Sundarbans made by James Ellison in 1873

Sometime in the 1820s or 30s, four Englishmen bought a parcel of land in the neighbourhood of Calcutta at the Salt Lakes, an area that has a newly-built suburbs now, and developed a farm estate after clearing the forest. One rhino there killed 14 ryots and a certain Mr. Lewis had to be called from Kolkata to shoot it, which he did and the corpse was recovered nearby from a flock of feasting vultures under a Sundari tree the following day.

THE SAUGOR ISLAND RHINOCEROS.

Dear Sir,—Being out a week at the Saugor Island, I was informed that a rhinoceros had been seen near the village of Sagar Island, in the Saugor Islands, in the month of October last, and that it was seen by a Mr. Lewis, a British Officer, who was on duty at the time. I was much interested in the report, and I immediately set out on the 10th inst. to visit the place, and to see the animal if it was still there.

That it was so, I found, by the report of the British Officer, who was on duty at the time. I was much interested in the report, and I immediately set out on the 10th inst. to visit the place, and to see the animal if it was still there.

animal in my neighbourhood, it was on the 10th inst. I was much interested in the report, and I immediately set out on the 10th inst. to visit the place, and to see the animal if it was still there.

ready fifty yards, and there he lay on the ground, and I immediately set out on the 10th inst. to visit the place, and to see the animal if it was still there.



- 1) The Saugor Island Rhinoceros, a letter to the editor of Bengal and Hurkara Chronicle by A. Shekarea, (1832) published in Oriental Sporting Magazine: From June 1828 to June 1833 2) Destruction of a Rhinoceros in the Sunderbunds, Sydney Morning Herald (12th of May, 1854)

Another interesting location, south of Kolkata at a fairly close distance is Sagar Island (then spelled as Saugor), where the village Gangasagar—famous for the pilgrimage of Kapila Muni Ashram—is located. In 1831, a christian missionary George Gogorly saw footprints of rhinos here.

Someone writing under the pseudonym A. Shekarea, on a visit to Middleton Point near the lighthouse at Sagar Island, was informed of a rhinoceros being seen nearby recently. He set out to try his luck with the gun. Joined by a friend, he waited atop a tree. When the rhino came, they fired two volleys but he snorted and moved into the forest, merely disturbed. After about ten minutes, he came out again. However, this time, the gun of Shekarea's companion burst and he lost two fingers. They could do nothing but wait and leave. A month and a half later, they came back, shot the rhino and took the body parts as trophies with them.

Mr. Lewis and Lt. Souter in 1838 received the news on board while passing by the island, a rhino had killed several ryots. They went and shot the animal. Next morning, they found it lying under a Sundari tree and shot it again to make sure he was dead.

A beast of this kind is seldom seen in this quarter, though it is impossible to ascertain how numerous they may be in the interior of the Island, or in the sunderbunds contiguous to it.

— Destruction of a Rhinoceros, Parley's Magazine (1838)

Later, some tiger-hunters remarked that they had seen rhino footmarks. Not many animals except tigers and deer were found in Sagar, rhino was seen very rarely, I. Everett wrote in 1853.



DESTRUCTION OF A RHINOCEROS IN INDIA.

SOME short time ago intelligence was received on board one of the Company's pilot schooners, cruising off Saugor Island, at the mouth of the river Hoogly, that a rhinoceros has lately infested the neighboring villages, and that the animal had destroyed several of the native ryots. A beast of this kind is seldom seen in this quarter, though it is impossible to ascertain how numerous they may be in the interior of the Island, or in the sundarbans contiguous to it. In consequence of this information, Lieut. Souter, and a Mr. Lewis, an officer in the pilot service, agreed to put, if possible, a stop to any further mischief there might arise from so formidable an enemy being suffered to remain at large; and, as they were aware that neither muskets nor rifles would have any immediate effect on the horny mail of the animal, they provided themselves with two six pound carronades, which they contrived to convey into an adjacent portion of the jungle, close to a large tank, which the beast was in the habit of nightly frequenting, in

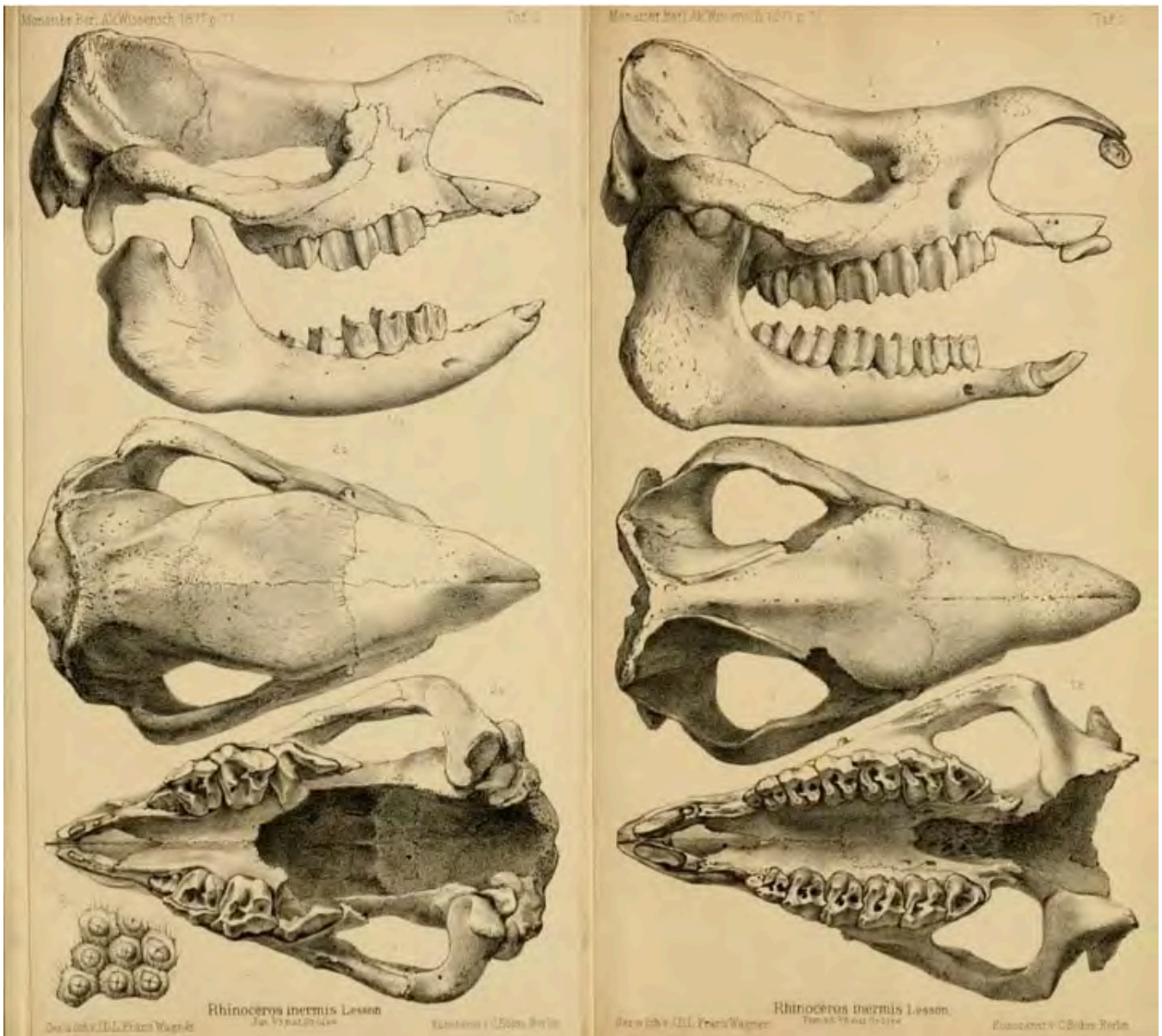
Vol. VI. X

order to slake his thirst. There was one track which he favored, leading down to one of the sides of the tank. Having directed the guns to a particular spot in this path, loaded with grape, they, by means of a rope ladder, ascended a soondree tree, situated on the opposite side, from which position they could conveniently command an opportunity of discovering, by the aid of the moon's light, any animal that might pass that way. Having waited patiently for more than two hours, they beheld a huge beast coming down the defile, when Lieut. Souter descended by the ladder, and, waiting a favorable opportunity of bringing one of the guns to bear upon the beast, applied the fuse to it, and discharged the contents in a volley at the object. After some moments they cautiously reconnoitered the spot, but could discover no signs of their having done execution, and consequently returned that night to the vessel. In the morning, however, attended by a company of Lascars, and some natives of the neighborhood, they

repaired to the scene of the last night's excursion, and on advancing some little way into the jungle they detected the beast apparently reclining at the base of a soondree tree. Not quite satisfied that he was dead, they ascended an adjacent tree, and discharged their rifles at him, but finding that he remained motionless the Lascars ventured to approach nearer to him, when they pronounced him lifeless. On examination it was found that three of the shot had penetrated deeply into his body. Being too cumbersome to move, they cut a few strips or thongs from the hide, which they brought away, and took to Calcutta as trophies of their success in ridding the villages of so for midable an enemy.

Destruction of a Rhinoceros in India, Parley's Magazine (1838)

French explorer Christophe-Augustin Lamare-Picquot on 17th of November, 1828 ventured somewhere in the Sundarbans islands south of Khulna, some 60 miles from Kolkata. There, they found a mother with her calf. His headhunter shot the mother and was rewarded Rs. 30. Failing to capture the calf, they ultimately ended up shooting it as well. Picquot says that he had the opportunity to taste rhino milk and the meat of a calf, a female as well. Both of which he found delicious—the milk was actually sweeter than a cow's. Upon examination, it was found they were hornless, which is why they were later described as an entirely new species *Rhinoceros inermis* by French zoologist René-Primevère Lesson in 1835. We can still see this in the mounted hides and skulls of these individuals preserved in the Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin today.



Plates based on Lamare-Piquot's hornless rhinos drawn by Johann Daniel Leberecht Franz Wagner for Lesson's description of *Rhinoceros inermis*. Calf (left), Mother (right)

Source: Monatsberichte der Königlich Preussische Akademie des Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Berlin

Edward Biscay Marinatus Baker, father of the famous ornithologist Edward Charles Stuart Baker, in his book *Sport in Bengal: How, When, and Where to seek it* gives an account from his days with Calcutta Tent Club, an association of hunters based in Kolkata that regularly went out hunting. Once, after a day's hunting, they heard of a rhino being seen by some villagers. A member stayed back to investigate. He was taken to the near the Piyali river and shown fresh footprints of a large rhinoceros. So struck by them, he ordered some elephants to be kept ready at a village nearby, immediately headed to Kolkata, gathered a party of five members and returned. When they finally reached the spot, the news of the rhino still being present was waiting for them. The patch they were exploring at the bank of the river was not very dense, consisting of dwarf palm, tamarisk bushes and high grasses. The plan was to conduct a beat, driving it out to where all of them waited with rifles in hand.

Soon enough, the rhino came running and everyone began to fire. After a bit of a struggle, where he took some bullets, he ran off. When they found him again, he was sleeping. The rhino suddenly woke up to their presence which made elephants react strongly, and thus, once again, through a struggle involving multiple bullets, the rhino managed to run away, not to be seen again. Going back to the location they had initially found him at, they found evidence of its long residence, proving the villagers' story to be true. It was a strange place for a generally shy animal, fairly open on three sides and bound by a river on the fourth. Following more inquiry, it was found that people occasionally saw rhinos further south, and this individual was the only one that ever got here, in the mostly open and cultivated area.

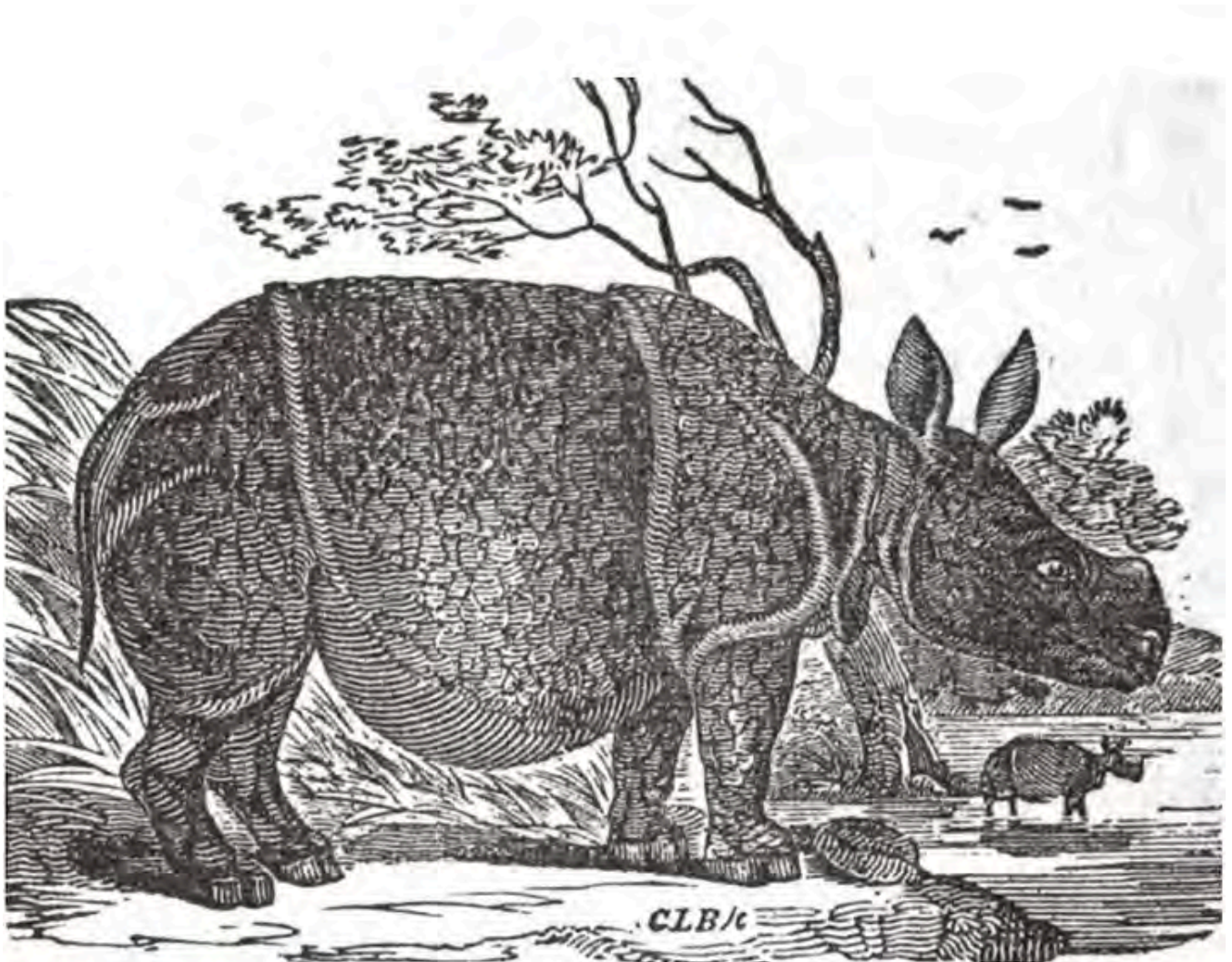


Illustration from Destruction of a Rhinoceros in India

Source: Merry's Museum and Parley's Magazine (1st of December, 1854)

We also have historical evidence of these rhinos in captivity and in museums. Lord Wellesley in 1799 had a rhinoceros in Fort William, Kolkata. So did Matthew Day in Dhaka a few decades earlier. Jerdon in 1867 wrote of travelling shows with parties carrying rhinos from Sundarbans.

India's first zoological garden, Alipore Zoo of Kolkata, was opened in 1876. Being so close to Sundarbans, it has quite a few records. In 1881, it was reported, the dead body of their rhino was found floating in the enclosure's water tank. Suicide was thought of as one of the probable causes until post-mortem examination found it was chronic pleurisy. This animal was so tame that he would come, lie down near the veterinary surgeon, and get his ear syringed. The rhino had learnt to recognise him.

Charles Thomas Buckland, the first president of Alipore Zoo, shares an interesting account about two rhinos living in the same enclosure as crocodiles, at the royal menagerie of Burdwan. Once, a pig was released for the crocodiles to hunt but after getting chased for a while, the pig stopped between a rhino's legs and the rhino drove the crocodile away. Probably an evidence of the smartness of pigs, he never associated with any other released pig and stayed in such protection for several months. When the rhino protecting him died, unfortunately for him, the other one didn't afford him similar protection. Thus, one day, while walking through some high grass around the pond, crocodiles finally got him. Poor piggy.

Buckland had written to all princes and magistrates he knew to help the zoo with a specimen but no one could. Then, he contacted an old friend and a magistrate in Sundarbans, Tyjunal Ali. We have the exact words of this exchange which I find quite interesting.

My dear sir,

When I was a magistrate and you were a policeman, if I ordered you to catch a thief, you caught it. Now, you are a magistrate in the Sunderbunds I want you to catch a rhinoceros for the Zoo, and am sure you will not fail!

Honoured Sir,

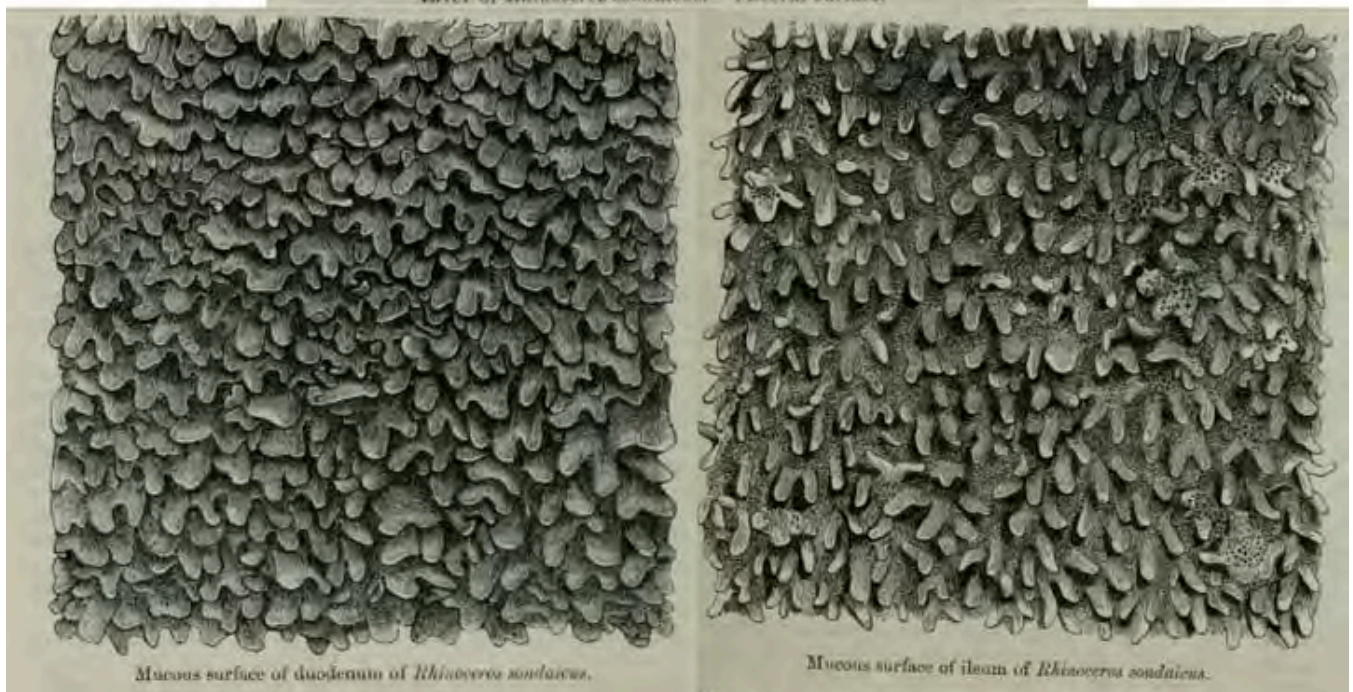
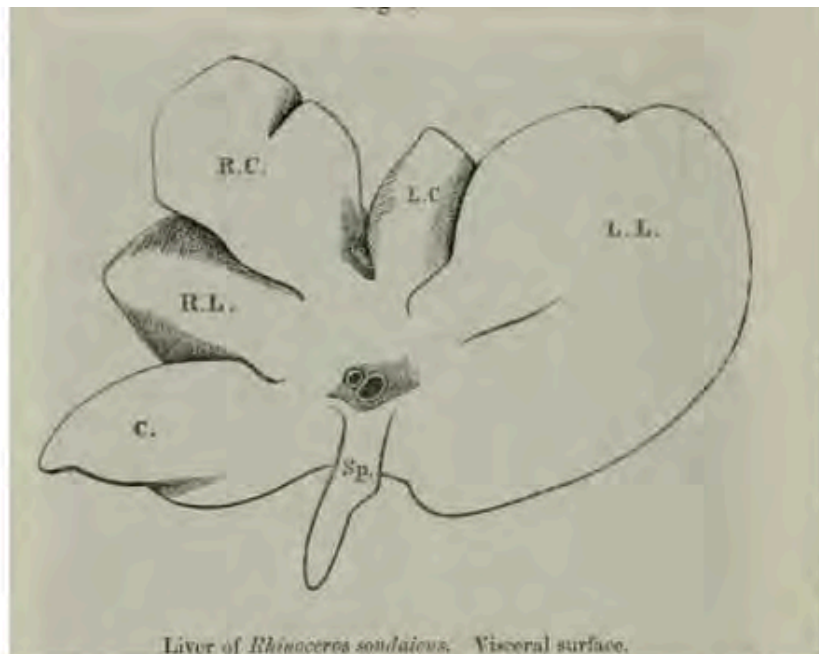
Herewith I send you a rhinoceros, which my shikaris have caught after much labour. They shot the mother and then secured the young one. Please forgive me for sending such a small one but it will soon get bigger. I am your obedient servant, Tyjunal Ali.

— Some Indian Wild Beasts by Charles Thomas Buckland, Longman's Magazine vol. 16 (1890)

And so it did. The animal grew up beautifully. So tame that people could even ride on it. Later, unfortunately, he got a fever and died.

In 1887, Alipore Zoo got another rhino from the Kolkata-based dealer William Rutledge, who used to extensively deal in animals and birds, including rhinos of the Sundarbans. Most of his deals with them date to the 1870s. He had sent a lot of skulls and skins to the Indian Museum over the years. Members of the Asiatic Society of Bengal were expecting to see a live rhinoceros sent by him in 1875, but they only saw a few photographs because the animal had died while it was with Rutledge. The 1887 deal with the Alipore Zoo I mentioned earlier was actually at an auction for the animals from a menagerie at Kolkata owned by the exiled Nawab of Oudh, Wajid Ali Shah, after his death earlier that year. Interestingly, it was Rutledge who had sold this animal to the Nawab too, eleven years earlier.

Rutledge had two rhinos in 1874. One was received by William Jamrach, an animal dealer based in London. This animal was apparently sold to the Berlin Zoo later and even became the type specimen for the description of *Rhinoceros jamrachi*. Jamrach tried to get another rhino from the Sundarbans in 1876, but she died within 24 hours of reaching Kolkata and a skin was sent to London which P. L. Sclater exhibited in the meeting of the Zoological Society of London in 1876. Next year, Jamrach was able to get a young female but she died after being in London for six months. Alfred Henry Garrod of ZSL dissected and wrote about it.



Illustrations from Alfred Henry Garrod's writing on the dissection of a female rhino
 Source: Proceedings of the Zoological Society of London (6th of November, 1877)

Indian Museum also had these rhinos in their collection, a lot of them from Sundarbans. An interesting example, O. L. Fraser once donated a female specimen which he himself had shot. When taxidermists were working on it, they found a foetus in the body!

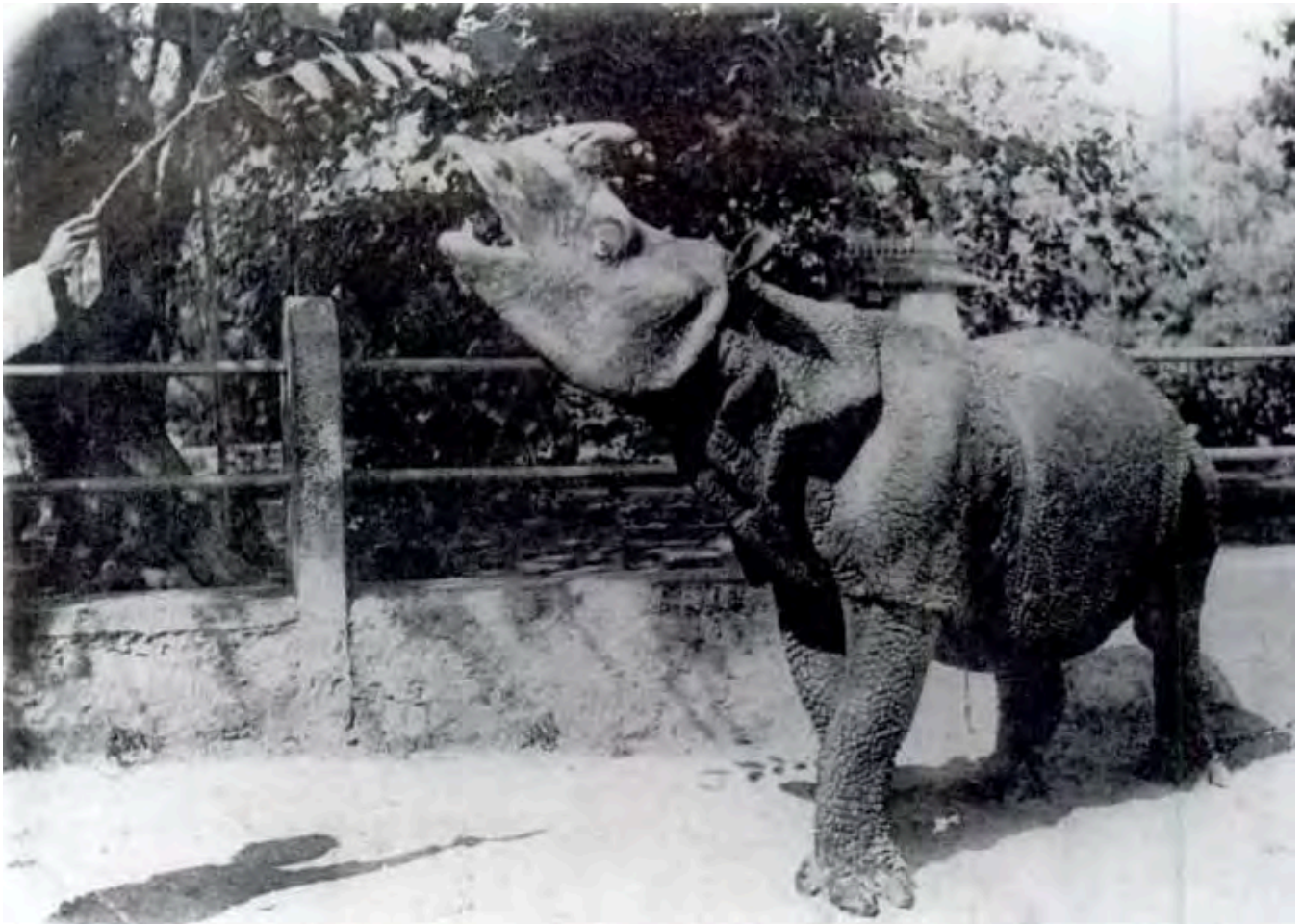
a. Stuffed, ske- ♀ Sunderbunds leton.	O. L. Fraser and J. F. Barck- ley, 1874.
b. Stuffed, ♀ juv. Sunderbunds skeleton.	J. F. Barckley, 1872.
c. Skeleton ♀ Jessore dist.	J. H. Barlow, 1834, A.S.B.
d. Skeleton ♂	Babu H. M. Roy, 1884.
e. Skeleton, ♂ juv. skin,	Purchased, 1880.
f. Skeleton, ♀ juv. skin,	W. Rutledge, 1881.
g. Skeleton, ♂ juv. skin,	W. Rutledge, 1879.
h. Skeleton, ♀ juv. skin,	W. Rutledge, 1880.
j. Skull ♂ juv.	W. Rutledge, 1875.
k. Skin ♂ juv.	No history.
l. Skull	N. Wallich, A.S.B.
m. Skull Tenasserim	Sir T. H. Maddock, 1842, A.S.B.
n. Skull Tavoy Point	Genl. Fytche, 1861, A.S.B.
o. Skull	A.S.B.
p. Skull Java	Batavian Soc., 1846, A.S.B.
q. Skull Sunderbunds	W. W. Shepperd, 1867.
r. Skull ♂ juv.	Zoological Gardens.
s. Skull and ♂ Matabangah R., Sunder- Purchased, 1875. feet bones, bunds.	
t. Skull ♀ Chillichang Creek, Sun- Capt. Charling. derbunds.	
u. Skeleton	No history (1869).
v. Lower jaw	No history.
w. Lower jaw	No history.

Sclater's list of *Rhinoceros sondaicus* in the collection of Indian Museum, Kolkata

Source: Catalogue of Mammalia in the Indian Museum, Calcutta, Part 2 by W. L. Sclater (1891)

In the Junagarh State of Saurashtra, Lord Curzon and his wife were welcomed by the Nawab using his two harnessed rhinos ridden by postillions as processional steeds. We even have a photograph of Lady Mary Victoria Curzon sitting on one. Though we don't know where they were captured from, Sundarbans being the biggest and most famous stronghold of this species in south Asia, it is the most likely possibility.

Towards the end of the 19th century, such references began to decrease, the legendary and elusive rhinoceros of the Sundarbans had become very rare indeed.



This photo of a Javan rhinoceros tied with a chain and being fed leaves was published on a postcard in 1900. We know this is somewhere in India, but not the exact facility it is from.

French Aristocrat Prince Henri d'Orléans with his two officers came to Kolkata in 1888. Wife of one of his officers, Medora, who had spent a lot of time in the American Far West, where she apparently became one of the best hunters, had come with the ambition to be the first woman to hunt a rhinoceros. This party was able to get within ten steps of a rhino once and had observed six rhinos on another day. Their trip, however, ended without them being able to shoot one.

As late as 1892, a newspaper article reads,

Butcherry and Halliday Islands, off the mouth of Mutlah river, swarm with rhinoceros, and though the jungle is heavy, it can be penetrated in many places.

— Englishman's Overland Mail (25th of November, 1891)

At the former, a hunting party had injured one and another hunter was able to hunt two rhinos near the Mutlah (now called Matla) river that year.

One of the last, if not the last, hunters to enter the Sundarbans for hunting a rhinoceros was the French aristocrat Edmond de Montaigne, Viscount of Poncins in 1892. He gives a detailed description of his long hunting trip, talking about the animals he saw there, the animals he was able to shoot, so on and so forth in his article published in JBNHS vol. 37 (1935).

He booked two boats, paid several men to come with him and brought a lot of supplies. His is the most detailed firsthand account of the Sundarbans rhinoceros I have come across, very special indeed, especially given how late in the rhino story he came.



Sunderbunds, 1892. My house-boat.



Sunderbunds, 1892. My boat under sail.

Source: Journal of Bombay Natural History Society, vol. 37 (1935)

In his knowledge, during the months of January and February of 1892 in Sundarbans, there were only five locations where rhinos were known. Upon crossing the Pizon Khalee river, he saw the first footmarks. After an hour's tracking, he deduced this animal would be tough to deal with. Deciding it'd give him a lot of work and could be on the move at any time of the day, he started trying to learn about the food selection of rhinos, difference in male and female tracks, number of rhinos in this area of the jungle etc.

“ . . . an intensely interesting area of study . . . Everything is written for a patient tracker in the footprints of an animal.”



He was using James Ellison's map of Sundarbans (1873)

Left: Islands 165, 169, 170, 171 and 172 were the only five locations rhinos were known from, according to Edmond de Montaigne

Right: James Ellison wrote the word "Rhino" near Chandesar

He came close to them several times but in the dense jungle, it was impossible to see them clearly. Once after a tiring day, he saw it at last, between branches and leaves, a long grey head only a few yards away. That is when it finally hit him.

It had no horn-no trophy. Why shoot for the lust of killing only? The rifle just touching the shoulder came slowly down, the rhino went off unscathed; as I had suspected it was the Lesser one-horned Rhino . . . exceedingly rare!

While it is true that a trophy probably was justification enough for killing rare animals to this 19th century hunter, his restraint is still worthy of note.

After spending a long time tracking the rhinos, he found Pizum Khalee river to be the centre of their wanderings. He even saw a rhino swim up the river and eat the leaves from hanging branches. Vertical muddy banks for over four hundred yards confirmed to him this animal had swam for that distance along the bank. He also claimed to have found more evidence of them swimming for long distances.



Sunderbunds, 1892. Half tide mud bank with fringe of big palms.

Source: Journal of Bombay Natural History Society vol. 37 (1935)

Eventually, he became sure, these rhinos were aware of specific spots favouring them where they walked to, in straight lines for several miles. He had tracked them for five-six miles, in an almost straight line many times but because of the nature of Sundarbans, he had to return to the boats while the tide was right. He could never follow them all the way to the destination. Yet, he was sure they had specific places in mind because he only saw them walk in an east-west direction, never north-south.

He heard them browsing, pulling their feet out of mud, breaking branches — quietly and slowly. Once he saw a rhino's leg very close, the other time one shook the branches near his head. He didn't find these rhinos aggressive like the black rhinos of Africa or Indian rhinos. They would just freeze in a position and stay like that when they sensed him, once for well over ten minutes — he saw this animal rush into the jungle, wait and continue running in the same direction in a straight line. To some distant unknown patch, he decided. Some other day, he heard a branch break

and found a rhino walking along the bank. A similar course of events played out as earlier when the rhino noticed him.

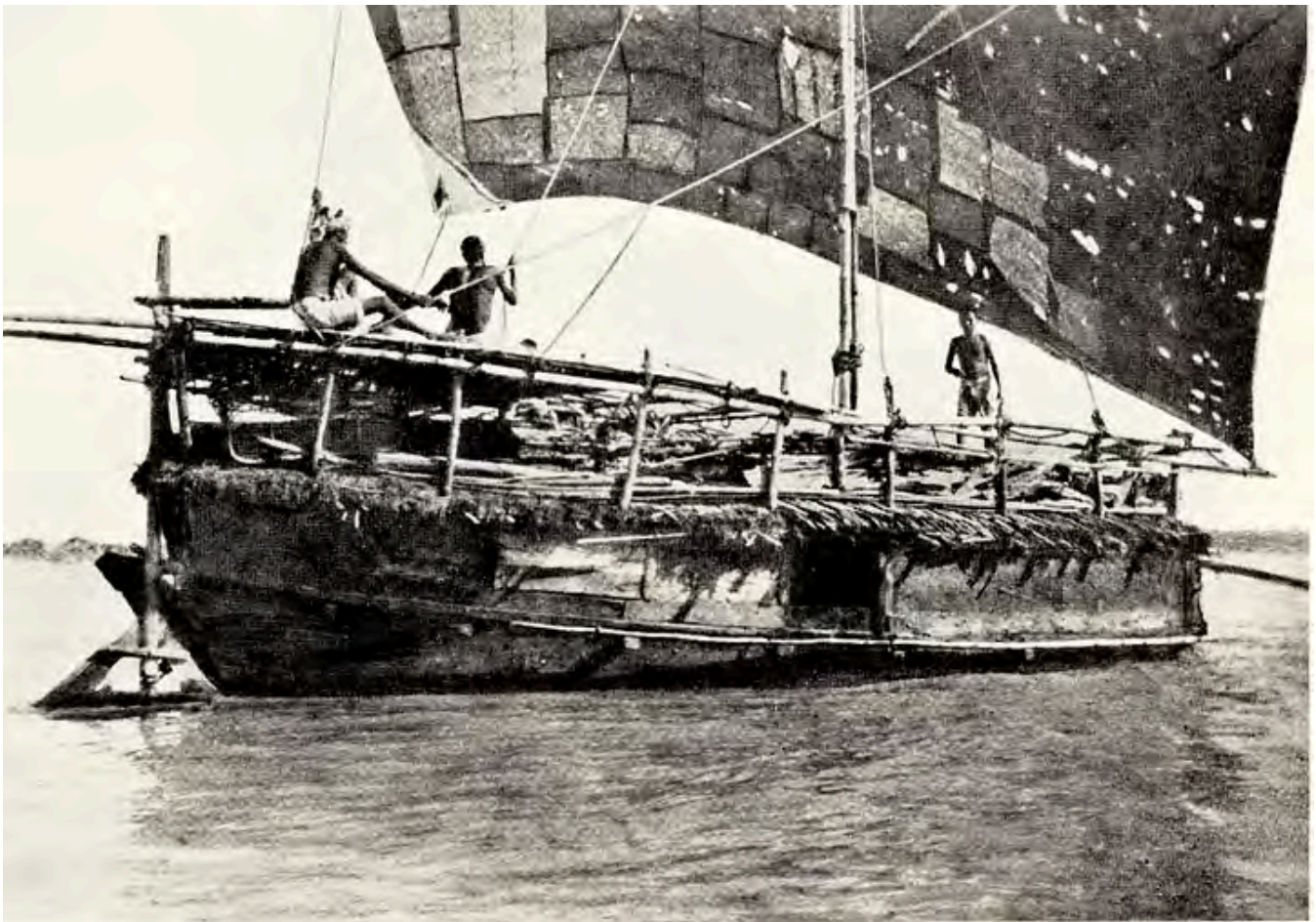
So far, all these happened when either he was too far from the animal, or vegetation blocked his view. He had not been able to see them fully yet. Then, one day, it happened.

And finally . . . I got a glimpse of a strange profile at a very short distance. For the first and, I am sorry to say, the last time in my life I saw that long, grey, hornless head and everything was explained: these rhinos were R. sondaicus, they had no trophy worth having and shooting them was without excuse.

Hit by the same thought again.

The account ends with his opinion on the number of rhinos in the Sundarbans. He thought there were three, four or at most six left. The reason, he argued, was poaching. For meat, as the boats for firewood regularly came to Sundarbans and people needed food. He claimed to have heard one shot every two-three days. This was also a time when bounty hunting of a great many wild animals had begun in the British Raj. Every tiger of the Sundarbans was valued at Rs. 50, encouraging people to go and kill. While the rhino itself didn't have a bounty, a party out for tigers wouldn't mind shooting one — hide, horn, meat, trophy, aphrodisiac . . . there were enough reasons to.

Is it a fair assessment? There's certainly an argument to be made. European trophy hunters seldom went there. Given the sheer expanse of the Sundarbans and the inaccessibility, how far could Indians have ventured either? There weren't many native shikaris. It's complicated.



Sunderbunds, 1892. A native boat under sail carrying firewood to Calcutta—note the water line.

Source: Journal of Bombay Natural History Society, vol. 37 (1935)

As 19th century ended, so did most of the rhinos in Sundarbans. An officer in 1900 is said to have seen some tracks. A news article from 1902 says the animal had become so rare that whenever one showed up at villages, people far from having a name, didn't even recognise it. One such event happened at Diamond Harbour that year. They thought it was a monster, the likes of which no mortal had ever seen.

We can never be sure when the last rhino died in Sundarbans. Probably a little after the 20th century began. A decade or two perhaps? One thing is clear, India and Bangladesh today are poorer, having lost this animal. It is also quite sad that most people in these countries don't know it ever lived there. It has gone nearly extinct from people's memories as well, another tragedy. Given the global population of Javan rhinoceros today, we'll never get them back, though I hope Indonesia succeeds in saving them. They still face huge threats, having been driven to extinction from most of their range. Even in their last home, Ujung Kulon National Park of Java, they aren't safe. Just this year, some poachers confessed to killing 26, destroying probably one-third of the population and decades of conservation

efforts. In such times, it is important to know this history, a constant reminder of the bloody trail human beings leave behind in their relentless destruction of nature.

. . . wounded or killed it is one less, and there were none to spare. Nobody took the slightest notice . . . What does it matter if one more of the rare animals of the old world is extinct?

— Edmond de Montaigne, 1935



“SPECIMEN FROM THE SUNDARBANS OF BENGAL, IN THE INDIAN MUSEUM, CALCUTTA; THE LAST EXAMPLE KNOWN TO HAVE BEEN TAKEN IN THAT REGION,” Barbour & Allen, *Journal of Mammalogy*, 1932.

Sundarbans itself is as much a part of this story as is the rhinoceros. It is not the same without its unicorns. Hence, I find it important to mention that unfortunately Javan rhinoceros is not the only beauty these wilds have lost. Wild water buffalo, hog deer, barasingha . . . all used to call Sundarbans home. As it once was.



1892. A small river giving access to the interior of the jungle—low tide—big palms growing out of the mud.

Source: Journal of Bombay Natural History Society, vol. 37 (1935)

I'd like to end on a curious note. We talked at length about extinct Javan rhinos of the Sundarbans. But some historical records, including T. C. Jerdon's famous *Mammals of India*, talk about another population of Javan rhinos southwest of Sundarbans in the wilderness along the Mahanadi river, northern Odisha. Who saw these rhinos? When did they go extinct? Well, that's a story for another day.

I hope you liked reading this. Thank you!

— Krish Bohra

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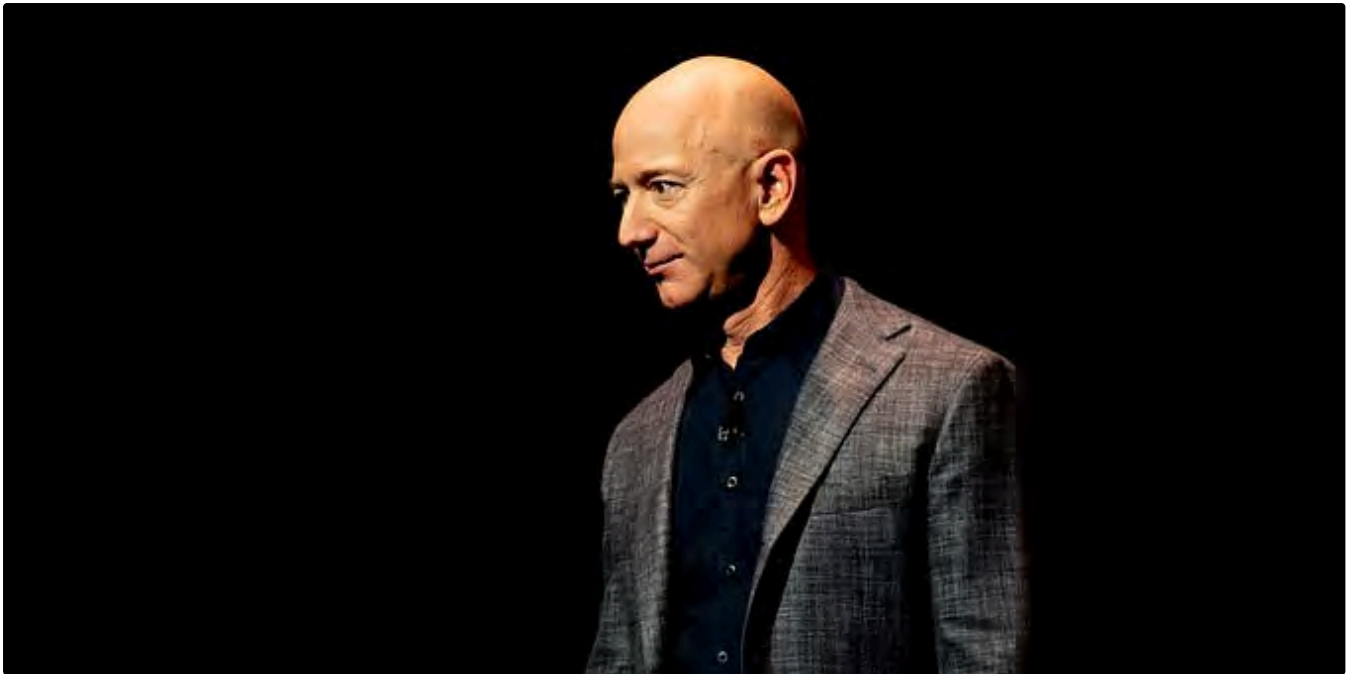
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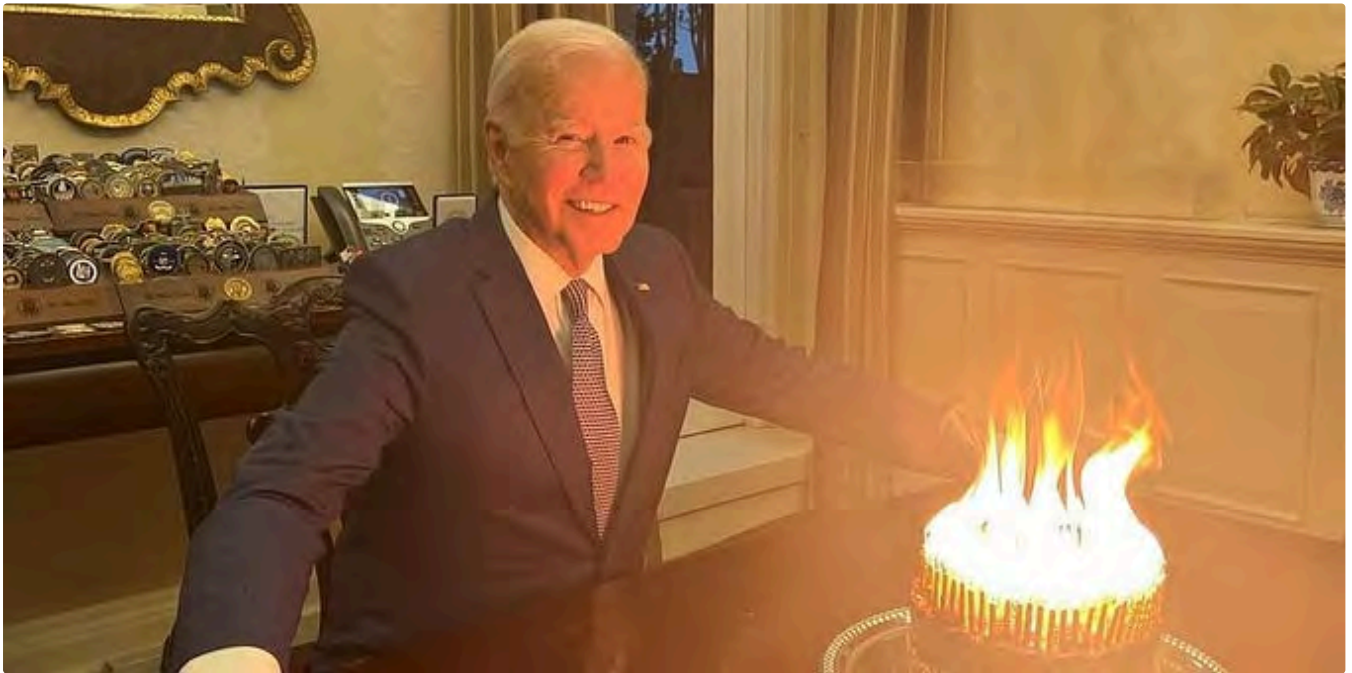


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