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News

If you want to know Kaziranga's history, this book is indispensable

The first record of a rhinoceros in Assam was in 1755.

by **Roopak Goswami**

Guwahati: Kaziranga is today well known for its efforts in rhino conservation and is a premier destination for wildlife enthusiasts and photographers.

But how many of us know when was Kaziranga first mentioned in print, what was it known earlier, when was the first attempt made to census Kaziranga's wildlife from the air or when was the first time that rhino from Kaziranga was sent abroad?

Were there records of rhinoceros in Meghalaya, Nagaland and elsewhere in the Northeast, or curious to know about the rhino hunting expeditions of princely rulers and Britishers?

All these and much more on the history of rhinoceros in South Asia have been vividly captured in a book by L.C. (Kees) Rookmaaker "[The Rhinoceros of South Asia](#)" published by Brill, Netherlands. Rookmaaker is a retired historian of zoology and his various interests are expressed in over 260 publications, including 12 books like *The Zoological Exploration of Southern Africa* (1989), François Levillant and the *Birds of Africa* (2004), and *The Rhinoceros in Captivity* (1998). He is the editor of the comprehensive online [Rhino Resource Center](#).

The primary aim of the book is to provide an accurate assessment of the distribution of the three species of rhinoceros- Great Indian Rhinoceros, the Javan Rhinoceros and the Sumatran Rhinoceros in South Asia in detail. There are 37 new maps, culminating in accurate maps of the occurrence of the three rhino species in the South Asian region. The book was first proposed as a report commissioned by A. Christy Williams on behalf of the WWF Asian Elephant and Rhino Program.

The book has 800+ pages, 67 chapters, 38 new maps, 707 figures, 82 datasets, 75 tables and a bibliography with 3065 references. The book traces the rhino's history

from 1515 and continues straight to the present. Every record of a rhinoceros being seen or caught, hunted, tamed or transported is documented in detail. The hardback will be available on June 12.

"The rhinoceros is an iconic animal. Three species once inhabited South Asia, two of which disappeared over a century ago. The text is supported by over 700 illustrations and 38 maps showing the importance of the rhinoceros in the scientific and cultural fabric of Asia and beyond" Rookmaaker says that rhino research (or rhino passion) has always intruded on every aspect of his personal life.

He says the book traces the interactions of the animals with men to chronicle their historical occurrence and to focus on their significance in the cultures of the region. The research was multi-faceted, documenting traces of the rhinoceros in archaeology, rock art, Mughal art, Rajasthani wall paintings, in past hunting records through the modern conservation efforts in a series of outstanding national parks.

"The rhinoceros was never a common animal in South Asia. Yet it was distinctive on account of its size and armour and horn, perhaps also for its stupidity and belligerence. Although hardly revered, the rhinoceros became part of the cultural fabric of South Asia as few other animals have. Today these animals are challenged by the changes in society and the environment. They will still thrive in jungle areas as long as they can be protected from outside influences, as is done in a spectacularly successful way in Nepal, in Bengal and Assam," he says.

Assam: The Rhino Country

Rookmaaker says budding naturalists in the West immediately think of the rhino when the name Assam is mentioned. "Assam has important national parks protecting them, the pinnacle of which is Kaziranga where every tourist can be sure to have a close encounter with wildlife, and with very little effort. The Assamese people take great pride in being the hosts of a magnificent animal like the rhinoceros and the administration takes special care to support their protection. The rhinoceros forms a quintessential part of the life and culture of Assam. The people are proud to share their land with one of the rarest large mammals on earth," he says.

The first record of a rhinoceros in Assam was in 1755.

The book says the first time that Kaziranga is mentioned in print, as far as this can be ascertained, was by John Peter Wade, who went to the valley of the Brahmaputra in 1792 as Assistant Surgeon. He compiled a geographical sketch of Assam, published posthumously in 1807, which included Casirunga.

“Casirunga”, is found in a general history of India by Robert Montgomery Martin of 1838. The spelling changes in the 1854 gazetteer by Edward Thornton: “Kazuranga. – A town of Assam, in the British district of Nowgong, 42 miles E.N.E. of Nowgong. It is spelt “Kazeeranga” on the map produced by John Butler (1847) of the Bengal Native Infantry.

The first attempt to census Kaziranga’s wildlife from the air was made on March 23 and a six-seater airplane was flown over the reserve but, due to its size, it could not descend below 400 feet. This was too high to identify individual rhinos or other wildlife in the high grass. However, Rustom Phirozsha was able to take the first aerial photographs of the reserve later.

The book says Indian rhinos were rare exhibits in zoos in the early 20th century and were regarded as a great prize by many zoo directors. The first rhino to be sent from Kaziranga to Washington Zoo was in 1939 and he lived there till 1959. After the Second World War, Kaziranga continued to allow the capture of rhinos for exhibits in zoos in America and Europe.

"The rhinoceros of Assam was first recorded in the western parts in Goalpara and Dhubri, then gradually further towards the east along the banks of the Brahmaputra. It must have been more widespread and more common than these observations tell us. Assam was never particularly targeted by the sport hunters in the absence of infrastructure and easier access to hunting grounds in North Bengal. For instance, nobody wrote about encountering a rhino in the area of Kaziranga until it was gazetted as a reserved forest early in the 20th century," the book says.

The number of rhinos in Kaziranga National Park is rising steadily, from 366 recorded during the 1966 census to 2,613 in 2022. "This represents an increase of 4% annually, which is within the limits of expectation. Rising rhino numbers, of course, bring their own set of challenges. Today, Kaziranga is an international park iconic for rhino conservation, as well as a premier destination for wildlife enthusiasts and nature photographers," the book says.

In Manas, there was a major poaching episode in the 1930s when about 40 rhino carcasses were removed, all without horns. The book also talks of the hunting expeditions of Fitzwilliam Thomas Pollok (1832–1909) well-known for his books on game hunting in India and Burma in the middle of the 19th century. The book quotes Pollok who is stated to have killed 44 rhinos in Assam.