

# CHEETA

JOURNAL OF

The Wildlife Preservation Society of India

Vol. 23

June, 1982

No. 4



HRH Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, who is the founder President of the World Wildlife Fund (Extreme left), with the Prime Minister, Shrimati Indira Gandhi, after conferring on her the "Order of the Golden Ark—Commander", the highest decoration for her leadership in the field of environmental conservation and her personal commitment to the preservation of flora and fauna, in New Delhi on May 18, 1982.

# CONTENTS

1. The Golden Ark	...	...	3
2. Books	...	...	6
3. Alarm Call by Great Indian Rhino by Kedar N. Baidya	...	...	8
4. A Note on Kaziranga by S.P. Shahi	...	...	10
5. Bird Life in Ghana Bird Sanctuary, Bharatpur (India), Before and After the 1979 Drought by Abraham Verghese, A.K. Chakravarty and R.K. Bhatnagar	...	...	13
6. Mahseer in Danger, Needs Protection by C.V. Kulkarni	...	...	24
7. Convocation Address at the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehra Dun by T.N. Khushoo	...	...	29
8. Further Wild Encounters in Darjeeling Himalaya by Rathin Mukerjee, Suwendu Sekhar Saha and Ranjit Kumar Ghosh	...	...	35
9. The Story of Khairi by S.R. Choudhury	...	...	38

## A Note on Kaziranga

By

S.P. SHAHI\*

On Kaziranga Rhinos, Cheetal's issue of March, 1982: No. 3, states "Recently more than thirty carcasses of rhinos were discovered in Kaziranga. They did not die of any disease as their horns had been chopped off—apparently the work of poachers whom the enforcement staff failed to catch". The magazine goes on to comment ".....as Assam seems to be unable to protect the rhinos in Kaziranga; the translocation would give the species a better chance of survival".

I was in Kaziranga between the period 15.5.1982 to 18.5.1982. Rhino's population based on actual physical count in the years 1966, 1972 and 1978 (at six years interval) stood at 366, 658 and 939 respectively. Next census is due only in 1984. The projected population to date appears to be around 1060 rhinos. Records further show that this great one-horned rhino was abundant in the dynamic habitat carrying the natural mix of riverain woodland, flood plain grasslands and swamps, till the end of the last century. Senseless slaughter by poachers and hunters decimated the population to less than a dozen in 1904. Kaziranga with an area of 433 sq kms was declared a Sanctuary in 1916 with the primary objective of preserving the rhinoceros. It got the status of National Park around 1970, when the Assam National Park Act received the assent of President of India in mid 1969. Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, now applies to the area and rhino is under Schedule 1 of the Act.

During the period 1966-78 for which population figures have been provided above, records reveal that total number of natural deaths (predation, old age, con-specific combat) was 401 and the number of rhinos poached over this twelve-year period was 63. In spite of these deaths the net increase in population has been 573 in 12 years—an annual gain of 48 rhinos in the population. There is, therefore no causes for concern at the moment of rhino population having been decimated either by natural deaths or poaching.

All rhino horns of natural deaths should, it is presumed be collected by the local administration if they are vigilant and honest. Horns collected up to 1978 were disposed off by periodic competitive sales. There has, however, been no sale after 1978. The following figures for the three years 1979, 80 and 81 are relevant:-

Year	Natural deaths	Horns recovered	Calves (dead)
1979	19	16	2
1980	58	44	12
1981	38	23	14
	<u>115</u>	<u>83</u>	<u>28</u>

\*Author is a former Chief Conservator of Forests Bihar A member of the Indian Board for Wildlife, is its Regional Representative for Eastern and North-Eastern India.

Calves do not develop horns until they are 3 years old. Recovery of 83 Numbers of horns out of 87 adults that had natural deaths gives a recovery percentage of 95.4%. This is a commendable achievement by any standards. Two facts emerge undisputedly, namely (a) population has increased from the all-time rhino low of less than a dozen in 1904 to over a thousand now (1982) and that (b) natural deaths are detected and their horns collected and accounted for.

It is also perhaps not fully appreciated that in spite of the burning of grasses from December to February, they (*Arundo donax*, *Phragmites karka*, *Erianthus spp etc*) grow very fast into tall thick mass and rhinos who are great wanderers, have to tunnel their way through them leaving innumerable tracks that they use over and over again. It is on these tracks that poachers dig pits, camouflage them with thin branches and the heavy rhinos fall in the pits and die and the poachers cut away their horns. Such tracks can only be petrolled by means of elephants. In this ideal rhino habitat, the petrolling staff is thrown at a disadvantage due to inadequate number of elephants. It indeed, goes to the credit of the administration that they have succeeded so far in maintaining an increasing population growth.

There has, however, been a sudden spurt in poaching incidences in the two years 1980 and 1981. As against 11 animals poached in 1980, as many as 25 animals were poached in 1981. While the poaching percentage in 1978 was a mere 0.6% it has increased to 2.38% (four times) in 1981. This adverse unexpected situation has to be nipped in the bud to prevent the present happy position about population increase taking a negative trend.

Dr. Bradley-Martin's research carried out in China, India, Hongkong, Taiwan and North Yemen and several other Asian countries, has dispelled the long held myth that Asians prize the horn as an aphrodisiac. Instead Dr. Bradley-Martin found that they use it mainly as a fever reducing drug—a vital piece of knowledge that may lead to the provision of alternatives. This Study reveals that "there is a booming market for African rhino horn in North Yemen where it is used to make the handles of traditional daggers. Apparently Yemenis—returning with their savings from neighbouring Saudi Arabia—are prepared to pay top prices for the real thing. One reason why the whole sale price of rhino horn has rocketed twenty-fold over the past five years" source IUCN Bulletin November/December 1980 (Vol. 11, No. 12). While in 1978, the auction price of per kg of rhino horn was Rs. 16,000/- (Rs. sixteen thousand) the highest offer received by the Assam Forest Department, only two years later was Rs. 62,500 per kg in 1980—no sale was done, however. I will not therefore be surprised if this sudden rise in poaching is also connected with demand in North Yemen and may be in other Gulf countries. Temptation to make quick money is too great amongst poachers.

The mighty Brahmaputra river flows along the northern boundary of the Park and the river Mora Diflu along the southern boundary. Poachers come from the northern bank of Brahmaputra in disguise as fishermen. Fishing licences are issued by another Department of Govt, who obviously are not aware of the gravity of the 1981 poaching situation. 50 kms of Brahmaputra forms the northern boundary and it is imperative that no fishing should be permitted over this stretch of the river. The situation is further aggravated by the fact that there are a number of *Chapories* (riverain islets and accretions) permitted to be occupied by Gov't by professional graziers. Rhino poachers find easy shelter in such places—all on the southern bank of Brahmaputra facing the Park. Natural succession of vegetation should be allowed to take its own course in these new islets in the interest of management of large herbivores like rhinos and elephants. Graziers must not be allowed to use these islets which not only disturbs the course of vegetative succession but provides bases for poachers to operate. A political decision at State level is needed on this. For patrolling 50 kms of Brahmaputra that forms the northern boundary, there are only nine posts without any facility of fast boats to negotiate the heavy current of Brahmaputra. At least twenty posts and two jet boats would be required if poachers have to be dealt promptly. Similar inadequacy of staff exists along the south eastern boundary of the Park, from Dhanbari area of Agartali range to Kaziranga beat over a length of 30 kms distance through which poachers entire the Park.

At least forty elephants would be required to be so permanently stationed inside the Park as to facilitate surveillance of the innumerable rhino tracks made by a thousand rhino amidst tall grasses. At present, to cater to the needs of the tourist traffic, forestry personnel and elephants, are in constant heavy demand to the detriment of the required intensity of field duties. A whole time officer of the rank of an Assistant Conservator of Forests exclusively for anti-poaching operations with control over the forty elephants and anti-poaching ground staff will improve matters.

Before putting the wildlife staff on the mat, facilities such as those mentioned above have to be provided to curb this sudden spurt in poaching.

Translocation of rhinos to Dudhwa N.P. is an independent issue—the creation of a second homeland for the Indian Rhino. One need not run down the Kaziranga administration to find additional argument for translocation.



Kaziranga Rhino wallowing in mud. In the background is the thick impenetrable tall grass through which the animal has to tunnel its way to wander about. Poachers make pits on the tracks to kill Rhinos for their horns.



Three horns in the custody of the Assam Forest Department. The one on the extreme right is a fake one. Horn of a domestic cattle mounted on a cement base and suitably coated to resemble the base of a genuine horn is passed on as genuine stuff. Defective coating has peeled off exposing the spurious character. The one in the middle—a genuine one—weighs a little over a kg and its present spot price would be around Rs. 70,000/- (Rs. seventy thousand).

(Reference Article on Page 10)

—Photo Shri S.P. Sahi