

Death of a sanctuary

UNTIL a decade ago, Laokhawa wildlife sanctuary in central Assam was a lush green forest teeming with wildlife. But in 1983 a terrible massacre took place in which 41 rhinos (unofficially 70) were killed there by poachers.

For a few years after that, itinerant animals strayed in from nearby rhino-bearing areas, but never for enough time or in large enough numbers to establish a viable population within the park. Subsequently, even the deer found in the park began to be killed and consumed by local poachers.

Today, there is not a single rhino in Laokhawa, and the sanctuary is one large paddy field with farmers freely moving around in it. Row upon row of *semul* and *koroi* tree stubs are a silent testimony to the glory which was once Laokhawa wildlife sanctuary. And so, an important rhino reserve — once linked to other rhino habitats in Assam, such as Kaziranga, Orang, Pabitora, and Burra Sapor — has vanished into thin air.

Even when members of the Asian rhino specialist group of the IUCN met at Jaldapara in West Bengal in 1993, there was only a cursory mention of this tragic event. The Laokhawa case is not unique. Nor is it only a problem of massive biodiversity loss. It is the case of a healthy rhino preserve that slowly and without resistance vanished from the eyes of conservationists and the public alike.

In the early 1980s, when vested interests were establishing the first immigrant Bangladeshi colonies on the periphery of Laokhawa, not many people raised a hue and cry. The Forest Department did go to court with a case but they repeatedly lost. And in 1983, when the sanctuary lost all its rhinos, (which incidentally constituted nearly five per cent of the one-horned rhino world population), hardly a voice was heard in protest.

Considering that the highly endangered rhino existed only in eight pockets in eastern India,

The Laokhawa Wildlife Sanctuary in Assam was once a haven for wild animals, especially rhinos. But today it has died a tragic death due to human interference, as Vivek Menon

finds out

one of which was Laokhawa, the case deserved a more vociferous public hearing. While NGOs and conservationists in Assam and outside had taken up the issue of rhino being poached in better known sanctuaries such as Kaziranga, the case of Laokhawa, the vanishing sanctuary that lies in the backyard of one of Assam's largest towns, Naogaon, astonishingly received no notice at all.

The sanctuary, which is technically under the Naogaon Wildlife Division, continued to be run from the Range Office at Gorajan, 20 odd kilometres away. Meanwhile, the immigrant population was rapidly increasing, and successive Range Officers who tried to exercise some control, had to face the wrath of local politicians and village hoodlums who ran the timber business.

Only for a year did Laokhawa enjoy a respite, when a Range Officer on his first wildlife posting resisted the colonization efforts. But even Pankaj Sarma, who is now posted at Kaziranga, had to face the wrath of the local populace before he could exert some authority. Once he was assaulted with a rifle butt, leaving him with a cracked skull and a shaken morale. To his credit, however, he returned from hospital determined to strengthen park authority, a resolve he effectively carried out till his transfer from Laokhawa.

My recent visit to the sanctuary culminated a five-year interest in the area. Although the Government continued to record rhinos in the Laokhawa complex, it was well known that no rhino population existed in the area. During my four visits to Assam around that time, I was advised

not to visit Laokhawa — for the area contained no wildlife.

On the first of May 1995, the serving Range Officer, Ojha, and five of his staff ventured out on a task that was long overdue at Laokhawa sanctuary. Their mission was to seize logs that they knew had been felled the day before in the sanctuary. Ever since taking charge a few months earlier, Ojha had systematically patrolled the 70 sq km park on the lookout for illegal timber, smugglers and fishermen.

Range Officer Ojha's task was clear enough. What he had not bargained for, however, was the organized fashion in which the local timber mafia operated inside the sanctuary. For barely had he seized the logs than he and his men were surrounded by a mob of villagers from the northern boundary of the sanctuary. In the resulting assault on the park officials, two of Ojha's guards were critically injured, while four others, including Ojha himself, received injuries that required medical attention.

In May 1995, a day after the assault took place, while driving along ill-maintained dirt tracks that led to it, I saw the burgeoning clusters of new colonies of immigrant Bangladeshis.

Existing alongside the old forest villages that once were the only evidence of human population around Laokhawa, the new settlements were adding pressure on the land.

In an hour's ride through the middle embankment, I counted over 5,000 cattle and more than 500 human beings inside the sanctuary. Thus, the sanctuary must have had about 10,000 heads of livestock and at least 2,000 people. All the large beels or lakes within the park, once an important wintering ground for

migratory waterfowl, were filled with dugout canoes and fishing boats, while the grasslands resembled a pastureland that had once seen far better days.

Although, technically, the villages were outside the periphery of the park, many of them encroached into the sanctuary, and all of them exerted some biotic pressure on it. Guards spoke of lax, even corrupt officers who at some time or the other had allowed the gradual bleeding of the sanctuary. A thin treeline separated the now exhausted pasturelands of Laokhawa from the Burra Sapor Reserve Forest, an area that the Forest Department is now thinking of declaring a wildlife sanctuary. Although the Burra Sapor still has a relatively good habitat, its isolated protection holds little biodiversity value when all existing links are being broken.

Today, Laokhawa has lost all connection with Kaziranga in the south-east as colonization on both sides of the bridge over the Brahmaputra has taken over the reserve forests. Similarly, the Laokhawa-Burra Sapor complex was connected to Orang through the Kochmara Reserve Forests — a connection all but broken now. The highly endangered rhinos started, therefore, to live in small pockets of protected sanctuaries of 'safe deposit lockers' held away from poachers and traders by concerned officials and conservationists. Then came the daylight robbery of 1983 and the Laokhawa rhino population vanished under their very noses.

Laokhawa is a story with a lesson for conservationists. In a State where the forests are probably facing the biggest ever threat in their history, Laokhawa represents the end of a chapter unless immediate action is taken.

The tragedy of Laokhawa is that it was vitally destroyed by human greed with the so-called conservationists and guardians of the wild watching silent spectators. I returned from the sanctuary feeling sad and ashamed and mourning its death.

— WWF