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Sentinel

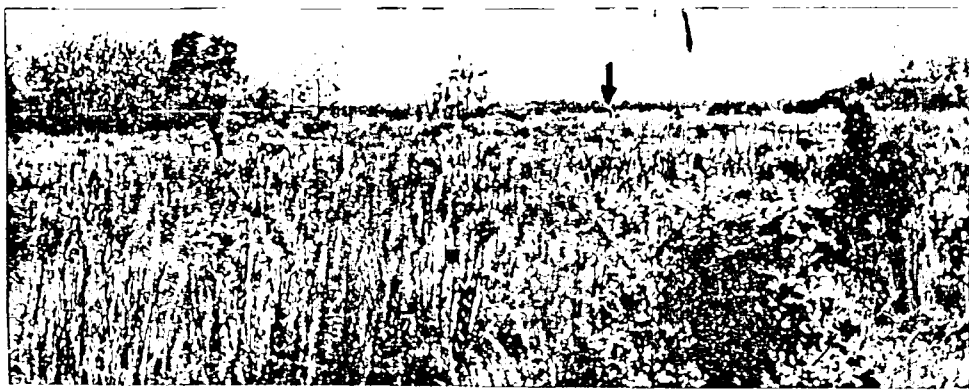
Deer challenges rhino in Pabitara

Sometime in June last, while approaching Tuplung *jan*, some blackish objects caught my attention. When I approached close, I was delighted. It was a rare sight of eight adult rhinos wallowing in the *jan*. However, in the small reserve of Pabitara such sights are not uncommon. But for how long? the ultra concerned conservationists are up with arms to destroy the reserve. The introduction of *sangai* or Manipur's brow antlered deer by fencing off a chunk from this tiny reserve is one such step.

Pabitara is a small wildlife sanctuary of only 16 sq km located in the Morigaon District, just east of Kamrup border. This little known reserve has the distinction of having the highest density of Indian one horned rhinoceros anywhere in the world. Originally a grazing reserve, it was declared a reserved forest in 1971 and then a wildlife sanctuary in 1987.

A further 23 square km including the Raja Mayong reserve forest have been proposed as additions to the reserve. Ninety per cent of the sanctuary is covered by grassland, the remaining areas are either woodland or wetland.

Every year the bulk of the sanctuary reels under flood waters forcing the rhinos to take refuge on the highest grounds like paths and roads. The forest department has built two earthen platforms inside the sanctuary and also raised the existing path (not motorable) between Haduk and Tuplung. So that even if the flood level rise, the animals can be safe. Apart from rhino, the sanctuary homes a few animals like fishing cat, jungle cat, jackal, wild pig and otter. It is feared that all the hog deer and barking deer had perished



Fencing for Sangai enclosure inside Pabitara

during the high floods of 1988. It may be mentioned here that a small population of these deer existed in Pabitara. Stray leopards and occasional rhesus monkeys are the other main animals of Pabitara. Although wild buffaloes are not found in the sanctuary, some feral buffaloes are there. These feral buffaloes are often mistaken for wild ones by the visitors.

During winter a large number of migratory water fowls throng the beels and *jan*s throughout the reserve. The Pagladoba beel in the heart of the sanctuary is such a spot. During winter this small beel, of only about twenty hectares, virtually remains covered with ducks. Some birds frequently seen at Pabitara includes grey and purple herons, openbill and black-necked storks, pintail and spot-bill ducks, common teal, mallard, shoveller, black or king vulture, stork-billed kingfisher, etc. Besides the other commoner and familiar birds, the rare Bengal florican is also found in the reserve. Locally called *Ulu mora*, this bird is facing problem from annual burning of grassland and the grazing cattle.

Like most other Rhino reserves, here also poaching of rhino for its horn has become a problem. In 1984 and 1985 four and two rhinos were killed by the poachers. No poaching was reported prior to that. Fresh killings occurred again in 1988 when four rhinos were killed. This year till 10th of June the tally is one. Poachers use two

methods, gun as well as poison. Because of its comparatively small area in relation to the large rhino population, the rhinos of Pabitara regularly stray outside the sanctuary area, especially after sunset, thus making it difficult for the forest staff to prevent poaching. It may be mentioned here that in 1986 as many as 58 rhinos have been counted in the sanctuary. The present estimate is 70, with at least five calves. The density being 4.3 per kmas against 2.8 at Kaziranga.

During winter the sanctuary faces another problem, a new one for the area. This is the large number of domestic tourists who are mainly just picknickers and have become a nuisance rather than of some utility.

This is mainly because of its close proximity to Guwahati, only 52 km. When the bridge over Kolong at Kajali-chaki at Chandrapur is completed the distance will be shortened by 20 km. Pabitara offers excellent opportunity for the development of tourism. It can be successfully covered by a day's trip from Guwahati as well as Nagaon. However, it should be a regulated one.

The biggest threat to Pabitara, however, is the proposed introduction of the very rare *sangai* or the Manipur race of brow antlered deer (*Cervus eldi eldi*) by fencing off about one km² in the heart of the sanctuary. Because of scarcity of space many rhinos stray outside almost regularly and this enclosure is going to disturb them greatly. A sum of rupees nine lakhs has already been sanctioned for chaining fencing (with a string of electric wire) around the selected site. The deer will be brought from the captive bred stock of Delhi and some other zoos. Initially about seven animals having a sex ratio of 2:5 will be released. The work on fencing is nearing completion.

The main idea behind this introduction are two — firstly, to create a second wild home for this very rare deer after the Keibul Lamjao National Park of Manipur, and secondly, Pabitora is free from any major predator.

We very much agree to the first point, that a second wild home for the rare sangai be created, in fact it is long overdue. But so far as the second point is concerned, why choose Pabitora? There are many wet grassland pockets throughout, free from any major predators which could easily have been one or two square kilometres home of this rare deer. Besides disturbing the rhinos, the introduction has another

important question from the ecological point of view. In its natural habitat the sangai has never met a rhino, so this will go against all ethics. Since introduction of an alien species in wild is objected throughout the world by the environmentalists. Rhino in Dudhwa (UP) is not an alien, but sangai in Pabitora is an alien species. Since the main motto is to create an alternative 'wild home', the site should have been somewhere in southern Assam (from the latitudinal point of view).

The government may still consider some alternative sites which includes

areas like the Bodiahicha beel of Darrang district, Deepor beel sanctuary near Guwahati, Challa and Bakrhaors in Cachar and Hailakand

districts respectively. Sonbeel in Karimganj district etc. Instead of wasting nine lakhs in fencing the government may well utilize the same for developing a small reserve elsewhere if necessary by purchasing the land from the owners.

There is also another point, i.e. how the rhinos of Pabitora will be affected by fencing inside their

heartland. A pigmy hog enclosure in Orang wildlife sanctuary in 1976 proved to be a failure and rhinos broke open the fencing. The programme was then abandoned. And very recently another sangai rehabilitation project failed in the Jaldapara wildlife sanctuary of northern West Bengal.

The following remedial measures are suggested for better conservation in Pabitora. Firstly, the sangai introduction project should be shifted elsewhere without a second thought.



Surveying Pabitora

Secondly, the proposed additions should be materialised immediately if necessary by giving adequate compensation to the settlers. Thirdly, grazing, thatch collection and picnic should be controlled and shifted to the proposed additions. The existing 16km² should be treated as *sanctum sanctorum* with no such activities. Finally, Pabitora should be upgraded to a national park for better management.

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A rhino in the grassland of Pabitora