

CONSERVATION

Increasing Threats to Assam's Rhinos

by Lucy Vigne and Esmond Bradley Martin

The year 1989 was one of turmoil for Assam's greater one-horned rhinos (*Rhinoceros unicornis*). The crisis started in Manas Wildlife Sanctuary, an area classified as a World Heritage Site, being home to 80 rhinos and many other endangered species. Bodo tribal extremists, who want a separate state within India, started to create havoc in and around Manas, causing a breakdown in law and order. Over 100 people were killed, including several wildlife employees, and the sanctuary was closed to all visitors. Many trees were felled and animals poached. At least five rhinos were killed, including one which was strangled in a noose. The horns vanished without a trace, and were no doubt smuggled to eastern Asia.

The price of rhino horn has increased to over \$15,000 a kilo wholesale in Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan, encouraging middlemen to finance more sophisticated poaching operations in Assam. In

1989 they were offering poachers \$6,250 a kilo for rhino horn, a two-and-a-half times increase compared with 1985. In Kaziranga National Park, an area of 430 sq. km. with over 1,200 rhinos (64% of the world's population), well-armed poaching gangs carrying modern automatic rifles began to use hit-and-run tactics, sneaking into the park at night, shooting two or three rhinos, and escaping quickly with the horns. Tribals from neighbouring states are thought to be involved. Of the 36 rhinos poached in Kaziranga in 1989, the majority were killed this way.

Another lethal poaching tactic started in September 1989, when a rhino was electrocuted to death in Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary by a wire attached to a high-tensile power line traversing the sanctuary. A second electrocution occurred there shortly afterwards. Power lines carrying 11,000 volts cross a section of Kaziranga, and five rhinos were electrocuted there during four months and their horns taken.

Assam wildlife officials are doing their best to counteract this new spate of



Indian rhinos in Kaziranga National Park can be safely approached on elephant-back in order to photograph and watch them.

(Photo: Lucy Vigne)

poaching. In January 1990 some of the forest guards, who had been removed from Manas during the tribal agitations, were re-instated along with new equipment for the looted and burnt-down camps. Ways to protect Kaziranga from hit-and-run poachers are being discussed, such as the use of informant money and an intelligence-gathering network, as well as the need for modern guns and more patrol camps on the park border. In order to stop further electrocutions, undergrowth has been cleared near the pylons in Pobitora and Kaziranga, and guards patrol near the power lines day and night.

There are greater problems, however, facing the long-term security of the rhinos: human population growth and the need for more farmland. Habitat is fast being deforested and degraded, and there is increasing encroachment into wildlife areas for timber, cattle grazing and fishing. Yet some of the protected

areas are not even large enough for the animals. Rhinos, in particular, roam out of the parks to feed in the rural people's rice fields. So plans are under way to enlarge Kaziranga and Pobitora. When this happens, the local people will be antagonized further, and no doubt will have few qualms about helping poachers.

The key to the rhinos' future surely must be gaining the support of the rural people, and this can best be done by increasing understanding between local farmers and wildlife officials. The farmers undergo terrible economic hardship, not only from rhinos trampling their crops, but also from annual floods which can destroy their houses and shelters. If the people living near the parks and sanctuaries could economically benefit from them, obviously they would soon appreciate their existence. For example, permission could be given for thatch collection, as occurs in Nepal's Chitwan National Park; at present, the tall grass is simply burnt. Community benefits, such as dispensaries, schools and temples, could be funded by the Forestry Department. Households could receive monthly compensation for crop damage, and if a rhino were poached nearby, the benefit could be stopped for, say, a year, so promoting a rationale for the local people to want the rhinos alive.

The Government would have to find more money for these benefits. One way would be for the Forestry Department to consider auctioning a pair of rhinos to a zoo abroad, which would fetch well over \$100,000. Guwahati Zoo has 11 rhinos: three pairs (mostly zoo-born) and five males, three of which are babies rescued from recent floods in Kaziranga. The zoo has not exported a rhino for over a decade. But they could sell a pair to a zoo abroad quite easily.

Tourism is another way to earn more money, as rhinos provide a huge tourist attraction. At present park entrance



This large rhino horn weighs 875 g and is one of 820 horns locked up in strongrooms in Assam.

(Photo: Lucy Vigne)

fees and elephant ride prices are ridiculously low. To enter Kaziranga and have a morning elephant ride costs less than one dollar per person. Despite inflation, the prices have remained the same for several years. Tourist revenue mostly goes to the State treasury, so there is currently no incentive for wildlife officials either to increase park charges or to improve tourist facilities. Tourists in their eyes are a nuisance, bringing rubbish into the park, creating noise, and demanding elephant rides when these few elephants are needed for important patrol work. To maintain one elephant costs around \$4,000 per year. The price of elephant rides should be raised, if only to cover the expenses of the

elephant. Although the tourist season is only November to April, in the late 1980s an average of 56,500 Indian tourists visited Kaziranga alone each year (but only 500 foreign tourists annually, because of difficulties obtaining permits for Assam from the national government). If a surcharge were added to the entrance fee and earmarked for a benefit fund, enough money could be raised purely by this means to make a significant difference to the local residents' livelihood.

By gaining the support of the local people in these ways, Assam's rhinos would be given greater protection for many years to come, negating any need to translocate them long distances to inferior areas elsewhere in India.



Guwahati Zoo in Assam has the largest number of greater one-horned rhinos in India – eleven.

(Photo: Lucy Vigne)