

Rewards and incentives help rhino conservation in Assam, North-East India

Lucy Vigne and Esmond Bradley Martin



Rhino poaching has been reduced in Kaziranga National Park in Assam due to the dedication of the field staff

People respond well to being listened to and to being appreciated when they have done a good job. Too often in the thankless task of conservation, with tight budgets and endless work, incentives and rewards are too few. Likewise, villagers on park and reserve boundaries often receive little compensation for their losses or thanks for their tolerance, let alone incentives towards protecting wildlife. Attitudes in the Indian state of Assam are changing, however, and more money is gradually being made available towards rewards and incentives to improve morale and the work ethic of the field staff anti-poaching teams and villagers living on the door step of rhino areas.

The benefits of even small amounts of informant money to villagers as incentives to give information on rhino poachers cannot be overes-

timated. A good informant network is the best way to prevent poaching and to collect evidence to jail poachers. In 1997 NGOs provided much needed funds for intelligence into Kaziranga National Park. This helped to reduce poaching to only 12 rhinos in that year (see Table). These exciting results should encourage donors to put more resources into intelligence, not only in Kaziranga, but also in the other protected areas of Assam inhabited by rhinos, i.e. Pabitora, Orang, Manas and Laokhowa. The government would find it difficult to budget for informant money, as there can be no accountability for money spent without signatures, so this is a valuable way in which NGOs can help.

Most of the staff in these rhino areas are to be commended for their dedicated work, despite worsening economic hardships due to certain

civil unrest in Assam. There are several excellent range officers who manage to keep the numbers of poached rhinos down. One outstanding range officer in Central Kaziranga, Mr. D.D. Boro, has deservedly been recognised for his brave anti-poaching efforts and good leadership. In 1996 he was given the "Tiger Link Bagh Sevak Award" for excellence in tiger conservation along with Rs. 10,000 (R1700). Then in November 1997 he received a \$500 (R3000) reward, the "Fred M. Packard International Parks Merits Award" from IUCN. The Indian Minister of Environment formally handed the certificate and cheque to him, giving greater importance to the event. International NGOs and even individuals can help maintain the motivation of outstanding people in the field by providing similar rewards to other range officers and to members of the anti-poaching staff after successful encounters with poachers. Considering the range officer's salary to be about Rs 6000 (R960) per month, and a patroller's salary about half that amount, a small reward is hugely appreciated and would encourage men to strive harder in their work. A further bonus to outstanding range officers would be for them to be able to attend some national and international rhino conservation meetings. Some have never left the state of Assam, and the prestige to them of attending meetings would be ben-

eficial, apart from the importance of sharing their valuable information first-hand on anti-poaching. Outstanding range officers must be nurtured, and when found to be capable of reducing rhino poaching, should be allowed to stay in their specific parks and sanctuaries if they wish for as long as they are doing a good job, rather than replacing them with often less experienced men. It is disheartening to them to know they may be transferred at any time.

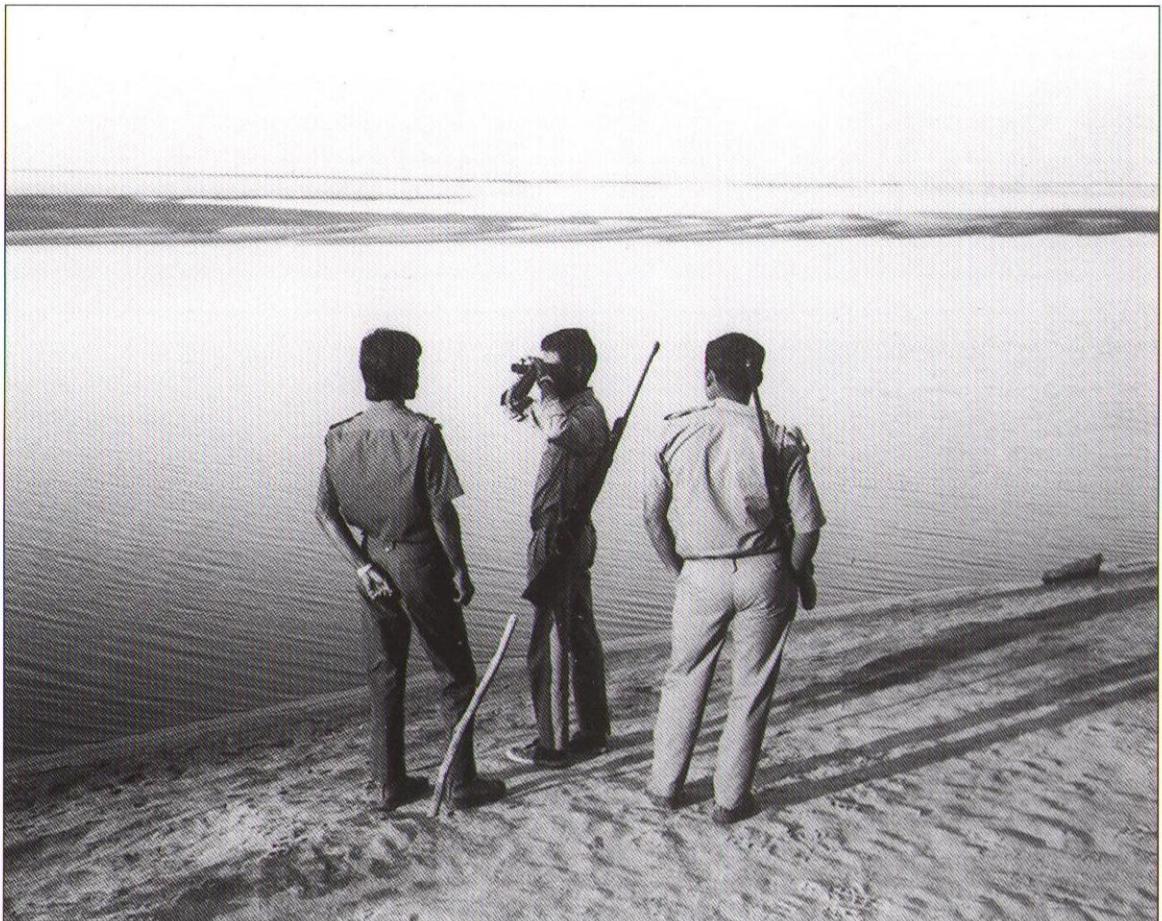
Effective range officers know the importance of sticking up for their staff, which in turn brings dedication. They help boost their staff's morale by listening to their needs and they assist where they can. They know the frustration of not having their own funding requests met, with money being put into one area when it would be more useful in another. These range officers know what incentives and rewards would best increase the morale of their men, and by meeting some of these needs and reducing their suffering, motivation increases. With basic anti-poaching equipment lacking in some areas and with camps very run down, staff morale has been dropping in recent years. NGOs are now increasing their help by providing boots and jackets, giving a much needed incentive to field staff. It is important for NGOs to continue to help provide other basics for the staff, such as torches and mosquito

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Vehicles and forest guards must cross this small river running through central Kaziranga by ferry in order to reach the northern section of the Park.

In December 1997, 315 km² of the Brahmaputra River and its islands were officially added to Kaziranga. More anti-poaching units will thus be necessary for this extended area. The Park now totals 757 km



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nets, and for the government to give at least two sets of uniforms and shoes to each person. This will increase motivation for their important patrol work. When excellent work is performed, financial rewards such as travel allowances should be given. Some field staff go for months without seeing their families who usually live far away. And funding some of them to visit home when they have done a very good job would be of huge benefit as at present there is no travel allowance at all. If staff have worked harder than usual carrying out work not designed for them, some range officers try to reward them out of their meagre provisions. For example, an excellent range officer in Kaziranga used to provide a picnic for his men after they had cleared the patrol paths, when there was no money for daily labourers to do it. At the moment, not even hospital bills are paid, which obviously reduces the risks patrol staff are prepared to take. Two Kaziranga staff were in hospital for several months from late 1997 with leg injuries from rhino bites, with bills mounting, and no guaran-

tee who would pay them. Moreover, there should be a supply of free food rations for the field staff for entrusting them with rhino anti-poaching work. There is a provision in the Forest Department for giving free rations to the Assam Forest Protection Force (AFPF) personnel as they are armed personnel protecting the forests. The same rule exists in the Police and Para-Military force. Many people refuse to take jobs inside parks and sanctuaries as these are considered some of the worst hardship posts, being dangerous, expensive and lonely with their families far away. In Manas, 177 Forest Department positions were unfilled in 1997 and 100 in Kaziranga, when the sanctioned staff numbers were 472 and 541 respectively. With just a few incentives, the positions could be filled. A further incentive would be to give all junior field staff a set number of years, say five, in one position. At present, some field staff must remain in the same job for 15 years and become demoralised at being left in hardship posts when others are transferred quickly. It is extremely important

not to neglect the needs of the junior staff if one wishes to have patrollers ready to risk their lives to save rhinos.

A much needed incentive to all the field staff would be better co-operation with the army, police, and magistrates. The army should assist the staff in bush warfare training and in the handling of arms to improve their patrolling. After the staff have worked hard tracking poachers or even tracing them to their villages, the range officers often get very little support or follow-up from the police to find and arrest the culprits. And rarely is a poacher jailed for long by the magistrates; usually the poachers are let out on bail after a few days. Efforts for more assistance from the police, army and law courts must be given. Police assistance improved around Kaziranga in 1997 and the results were noticeable; in July 1997 a raid occurred south of Kaziranga by field staff and police together, and two rhino horns and arms were recovered from poachers, one of the best captures in the history of the Park.

It is important also not to ignore the problems of the villagers bordering the parks and sanctuaries as this will only encourage them to harbour

poachers. Mr Boro's motto towards his staff and the villagers is "if you help me, I will help you." It is necessary to learn about the villagers' needs, working from the grass roots up. Kaziranga staff now show videos and hold meetings in the nearby villages. In these "Participatory Rural Appraisal" meetings, they discuss issues with the villagers and motivate them to protect Kaziranga. In 1997, wells for drinking water were built with money from the government and sports equipment given to improve relations. This is much needed as some farmers suffer serious damage from crop raiding rhinos (and other animals) with no compensation. In November 1997, only Rs 5000 (R830) was paid as compensation after one villager was killed by a rhino outside Kaziranga, a very small sum. More compensation should be given to people killed or injured by rhinos. This would reduce negative feelings towards this threatened species. But eco-development projects are increasing for the villagers, with extra funds from the government and NGOs being provided.

Manas is the best-financed rhino area for eco-development projects, with Rs 1,400,000 (R225,000) given in 1996/97 for 60 villages (about

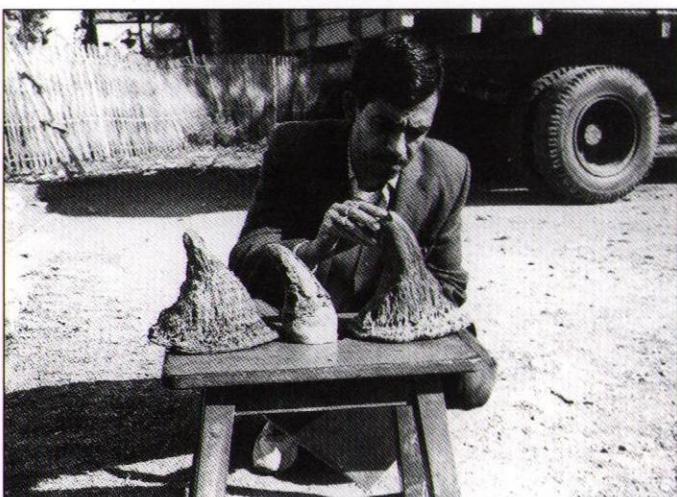
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About 95% of the 15,692 visitors to Kaziranga in the financial year 1996/97 were Indians. Many of them go for elephant rides, but field staff consider tourist rides a strain on their underfed elephants which should be used primarily for patrolling.



The 39 domesticated elephants (including calves) in Kaziranga must have forage to eat through the night



Horns collected from rhinos that die of natural causes or from poachers in Assam are recorded and stored away as it is illegal to sell them. Thanks to the integrity of the staff, these horns in Kaziranga are well secured

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25,000 people) on the south boundary. The money is going towards constructing water facilities such as wells, helping with irrigation, providing and developing pasture land for fodder, producing fuel plantations, distributing plants, and giving vaccinations to livestock. Such help will relieve the pressure on the Park's resources. As 60% of the people living next to Manas are from the Bodo tribe who traditionally were hunters, eco-development projects are important to teach them new skills such as how to farm pigs and poultry in order to resist hunting. In 1997, twenty Bodos were arrested in Manas, for shooting deer, for cutting wood and other offences; but poaching should reduce, with the growing incentive of eco-development schemes. The staff also need training so that they can see the benefits of such projects around Manas, and improve their attitudes towards the villagers.

The present range officer for Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary, Mr M. Barua, realises the need to assist the villagers so they do not feel they are getting nothing from the Sanctuary. Presently, rhinos wander out of this small area to graze at night in the nearby rice fields, but villagers compensate themselves by bringing illegally thousands of cattle into the Sanctuary every day to graze. If the cattle are to be kept out, alternatives should be given to the villagers. A boundary trench could be dug to help keep the rhinos in, and the trench could be used by the villagers as a fishery and could also have trees planted beside it to provide much needed fuel. This would reduce their requirement to poach inside the Sanctuary for such items. Furthermore, unused land nearby could be converted to proper grazing land for the cattle. In order to improve relations, sports materials were given to seven schools in 1997 and sixteen more schools are soon to receive this equipment. Certain local NGOs are helping to educate the children about wildlife conservation.

Before this programme started, when nine-year old children were asked about rhinos, they admitted to know that rhino horn was worth a lot of money in Assam and that rhinos were a pest as they destroyed the rice fields. Now they understand that the rhino is endangered and needs to be helped. Before the programme, some of these children would actually assist the poachers. NGOs also give vaccinations to livestock as well as medical support for the villagers as there is no doctor in the area. These efforts help to win the support of the local people.

The villagers around Orang Wildlife Sanctuary receive virtually no legal material benefits from the Sanctuary. This rhino area has been the least funded in recent years in Assam, with even salaries sometimes paid months late. A lack of arms and radios (ever since the headquarters and six out of the 23 camps were heavily looted in 1994) meant that some staff could not patrol effectively in the mid-1990s due to their fear of being killed or

Estimated numbers of rhinos in Assam, and known numbers of rhinos poached from 1993 to 1997

	Total Numbers			Total Poached		
	1993	1995	1997	1993	1995	1997
Kaziranga	1164	1200	1250	40	27	12
Pabitora	56	68	76	4	2	3
Orang	100	90	45	1	9	11
Manas	60	20	5	22	1	0
Laokhowa	0	0	5	0	0	0
Other areas	25	20	25	3	2	2
Total	1405	1398	1406	70	41	28

injured by rhino poachers. As a result numbers have fallen dramatically (see Table). The area around Orang is heavily populated mostly with immigrant Moslems, who do not feel pride towards the rhinos, having originated from what is today Bangladesh. Not until the field staff are well motivated with rewards and incentives can one expect them to assist the masses of villagers who at the moment pose a serious threat to the security of the staff. In November 1997 a camp was again looted. Not until the staff are in control over the poachers once more, with enough arms and radio sets provided, allowing rhino

numbers to recover, can any eco-development projects be considered. The scarce resources must go into protecting the Sanctuary and saving the rhinos first, being of the highest priority.

The Central and State government funding can barely cover salaries and maintenance of Assam's rhino areas. Camps, anti-poaching equipment, roads and bridges are in disrepair, and staff morale is likely to keep sinking without some more outside help. NGO assistance is more vital than ever to help with extra rewards and incentives for the field staff. NGOs should be shown

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A new road through the centre of Manas National Park across the border into Bhutan has put more pressure on the Park's resources. Forest guards must be even more vigilant to prevent poaching, but are reluctant to patrol except in large numbers due to the civil unrest in Manas

Left: In January 1998, the Assam Police had to accompany foreign visitors on elephant back in Manas National Park due to the insecurity of the area

Right: Mr. D.D. Borro, range officer in Central Kaziranga, has been recently rewarded for his efforts to reduce rhino poaching



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a priority list and liaise through a central body such as the Wildlife Areas Development and Welfare Trust in Assam. Founded in September 1996, many knowledgeable officials are on its board who could direct outside funding into areas that are largely ignored by government funds such as rewards and incentives.

Despite the severe economic problems in Assam, rhino numbers have overall remained stable in the last few years. The main reasons include improved intelligence brought about by economic incentives to villagers, and better patrolling by field staff, with the help of NGO assistance towards some clothes and equipment.

A small amount of money can go a long way towards intelligence and improved relations with local villagers, as well as motivating the field staff to patrol well, through incentives and rewards. Local NGOs are playing an increasingly important role, and it is time for international NGOs to assist much more. It is imperative to motivate those men trying to protect rhinos, at a time when morale has been falling in the Forest Department due to lack of funds. It is only the continued bravery and dedication of the field staff that will save the rhinos from poachers.

Thanks are due to the International Rhino Foundation, especially Tom Foose, and to The

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Villagers in the hills to the south of Kaziranga need incentives to protect rhinos rather than to barbour poachers

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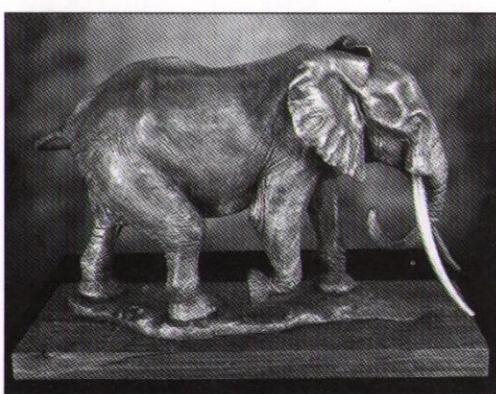
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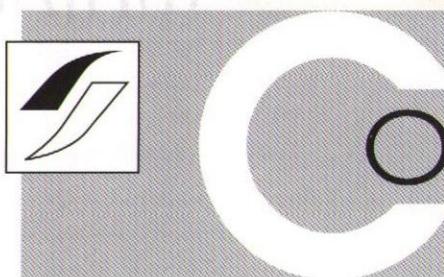
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Cover Story: "Mafunyane"

Alan Ainslie, South African wildlife painter and sculptor, was born in Port Elizabeth and grew up on a farm near Graaff-Reinet in the Eastern Cape. His works rank amongst the finest in the world and today, his sculptures, paintings and drawings grace the homes of art collectors worldwide. Committed to the conservation of wildlife in South Africa and elsewhere in the world, Ainslie has donated part of the proceeds from his work to numerous wildlife organisations, including REF.

Details on the raffle of this magnificent bronze of Mafunyane can be obtained through www.ref.org.za or tel: 453-9829



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