

Technical Session

Minutes of Meeting Asian Rhino Specialist Group (AsRSG) and Working Group Result, Kaziranga National Park, Assam India (5-7 March 2007)

I. (9.15-10.50 AM) DAY 2.

A - STATUS OF RHINO AND HORN STOCKPILES IN KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK

Mr. Utpal Bora

Kaziranga National Park (KNP), with an area of 429.93 km², is known worldwide for its success in the conservation of greater one-horned rhino. It harbors the world's largest population of one-horned rhino: 1855 animals in 2006. Utpal Bora briefly explained that the first rhino census in KNP was initiated in 1996 and since then there has been a steady increase in its population. Table 1 shows the successive rhino population in 2006.

Table 1: Successive Rhino Population in 2006.

| Year | Male | Female | Young | Un sex | Total |
|------|------|--------|-------|--------|-------|
| 1966 | 67 | 83 | 44 | 172 | 366 |
| 1972 | 203 | 188 | 148 | 119 | 658 |
| 1978 | 331 | 332 | 243 | 43 | 939 |
| 1984 | 283 | 296 | 201 | 166 | 946 |
| 1991 | 338 | 357 | 190 | 184 | 1069 |
| 1993 | 387 | 379 | 176 | 222 | 1164 |
| 1999 | 556 | 586 | 257 | 153 | 1552 |
| 2006 | 545 | 693 | 409 | 208 | 1855 |

Mr. Bora further stated the success behind the increase in population in KNP was the commendable motivation and dedication of staff officers along with the teamwork and help from the local people who have good awareness of the wildlife and wilderness. Increasing infrastructure such as roads, wireless vehicle network, and an increased level of intelligence have been an added advantage. To continue current high standards, it is necessary to utilize modern scientific management, including checking the straying of rhino which is one of the biggest problems. A united, cost-effective approach, including increasing facilities for staff officers, will further enhance and strengthen the conservation and population of rhinos in Kaziranga.

B - STATUS OF RHINO AND HORN STOCKPILES IN JALDAPARA AND GORUMARA NATIONAL PARKS

Dr. P. T Bhutia

Dr. P.T Bhutia commenced his presentation with a brief introduction on Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary and Gorumara National Park and said that West Bengal is not significant compared to Kaziranga and Chitwan National Parks. He informed that the greater one-horned rhino was distributed in Sundarbans, Malda districts and over areas of the Gangetic Plains about 160 years ago. Javan rhinos once was inhabited Bengal's dense forests, but have become extinct. The only surviving species of Asiatic rhino in [WB??] western Bengal is Rhinoceros unicornis which are presently confined only in two ranges in protected areas of state (Gorumara and Jaldapara) located in the flood plains of northern west Bengal, Duars. The rhino populations in Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary and Gorumara National Park are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: Rhino Population Structure in Jaldapara WLS

| Year | Adult | | | Calves | Total |
|------|-------|--------|---------|--------|-------|
| | Male | Female | Unsexed | | |
| 2002 | 33 | 30 | 4 | 17 | 84 |
| 2004 | 37 | 31 | 5 | 23 | 96 |
| 2005 | 39 | 36 | 7 | 26 | 108 |

Table 3. Rhino Population Structure in Gorumara NP

| Year | Adult | | | Calves | Total |
|------|-------|--------|---------|--------|-------|
| | Male | Female | Unsexed | | |
| 2002 | 6 | 11 | - | 5 | 22 |
| 2004 | 9 | 11 | - | 5 | 25 |
| 2005 | 13 | 9 | 2 | 3 | 27 |

The major drawbacks for rhino conservation in both these parks were large interfaces between the forest and villages, lack of awareness among people living in the forest, insufficient trained and patrolling staff. The threat of poaching also exists. Another limiting factor for conservation of rhinos in Gorumara is a limited amount of suitable grassland habitat. The presence of a large, exposed, forest village border has also compounded the problem. A lack of research, monitoring and a database system for the purpose of assessing their impacts in the sanctuary is being felt. The cattle in the local villages are generally in poor health as well, so spreading of cattle-borne diseases to wild animals, and competition for fodder between the wild and the domestic cattle are the major problems in West Bengal. This results in soil desecration, destruction of organic matter, which compounds the problem.

Mr. Bhutia noted that the Action plan for conservation of rhino in Jaldapara and Gorumara is being revised for the next 10 years. Some of the strategies highlighted in the presentation were Zonation and Zone plans where protected areas have been divided into three management zones:

- 1) Wilderness zone which is intended for the conservation of biodiversity
- 2) Habitat improvement zone where managerial intervention, including habitat implementation, is carried out for improving rhino habitat
- 3) Eco-tourism zone, which partially overlaps other zones and wilderness tourism is developed.
- 4) Control of poaching of rhino and other species and illicit selling of timber by establishing anti-poaching towers, camps at strategic locations manned by protection staff, and maintaining a fleet of patrolling elephants and staff over the sanctuary. A strong law enforcement mechanism is needed to apprehend poachers/smugglers, etc.
- 5) Strengthening wireless network and extending the Park area.
- 6) Ecotourism in the protected areas included promoting conservation awareness among tourists, dispersing tourism pressure on the protected areas, and regulating and reorienting tourism to make it more educative and compatible with the goal of conservation and involving local people in tourism activities. Ecotourism as a tool for conservation has bright prospects - the challenge lies in implementing it in its truest sense.

By taking up all these measures the area will be developed with more inputs and infrastructure and holds great promise as habitat for the rhinos.