

Wildlife Times



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Assam Rhino Horn: Controversy Burning Bright

By Nava Thakuria

It was a historic decision of Assam State Forest Department (of Northeast India) to burn down the stored rhino horns in its custody as the department wanted to spread the message that horns of endangered rhinoceros do not have any aphrodisiac value. The proper awareness is expected to help the mission to save the one-horn rhinos from the clutches of notorious poachers.

But it simply did not sail, rather opened a Pandora's Box as the environment activists demanded more transparency in the process. A recent Citizen's Meet by a journalist's body in Guwahati urged for a transparent forensic test before disposing off those rhino horns. More over, the meeting reiterated the demand for a high-level probe into rhino poaching in Assam.

Organized by Journalists' Forum, Assam (JFA) on June 19 at Guwahati Press Club, the meeting was attended by various environmental organizations and conscious individuals of the State. The meeting unanimously resolved three decisions for greater interest of wildlife protection



initiatives in Assam.

In its first resolution, the meeting demanded that the forest authority must ensure a transparent forensic test of the 'to be burn' over 1500 endangered rhino horns by the forest department of Assam.

The department has already formed a committee under the chairmanship of Principal Chief Conservator of Forest and Head of Forest Force of Assam to monitor the matter.

In the second resolution, the meeting reiterated its demand for a CBI enquiry to probe

against the rhino poaching and various anomalies alleged against the forest department of Assam. Mentionable that Journalists' Forum, Assam along with All Assam Students' Union and Nature's Beckon had raised voices for a high-level probe against rhino poaching in various forest reserves of Assam. Even the Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi and State Forest Minister Rockybul Hussain declared two years back that the government was ready for a CBI probe. However, no steps have been taken so far.

In the third resolution, the meeting appreciated the forest



• Assam Citizen Meeting

department's decision to organize the public hearings before burning the rhino horns. But at the same time the meeting appealed the district-wise observation committee to make ensure that the forensic test takes place in order to maintain its transparency.

The meeting was presided over by Rupam Barua, president JFA where environment activists Somyadeep Datta of Nature's Beckon, Malay Barua of Early Birds, Bibhuti Prasad Lahkar of Aranyak, Sanjay Sonowal of Assam Forest Protection Group, Utpal Nath of Pabitora Conservation Society, Bedabrat Lahkar of JUA, Pulin Kalita of AUWJ, Biraj Choudhury, Bhaimon Hazarika, Jagadindra Raichoudhury, Mukul Kalita, Mubina Akhter, Sabita Lahkar, Jayanta Gogoi, Nirab Barman, Buljit Buragohain, Namita Bora, Mohidhar Barman and others expressed their views.

The meeting also condoled the murder of a forest guard (of

Orang National Park) named Hasan Ali, 50 on June 12 last by the miscreants with one minute silence.

Earlier the issue came alive in a recent public consultation in Guwahati, where the Union minister of state for environment and forests Jairam Ramesh was also present. Raising the issue of rhino horns in the meeting, Soumyadeep Datta demanded that the horns, readied for disposing off, should be probed with a transparent forensic test. He pointed out that without the precaution, some corrupt officials might take the opportunity to replace few real horns with fake items and then smuggle those in to the illegal international market.

The forest department made its decision to destroy all stored rhino horns public in April. The department informed the media that it has 1,571 rhino horns lying in the lockers of various treasury offices in Assam. It argued that those

horns couldn't be sold in the market as India adopted the Wildlife Protection Act in 1972. The State chief wildlife conservator S. Chand confirmed the news adding that they have taken all precautions regarding the process in respect of wildlife laws of India and international guidelines.

Called black ivory, the rhino horn is prized as an aphrodisiac, selling for thousands of dollars per kilogram. A single horn can fetch as much as \$40,000. The heavy animal enjoys great sexual power, as its mating time is not less than 45 minutes (quite higher than any other animal). Many people believe that one can achieve the sexual power with the help of rhino horns. They consider the rhino horns as another kind of traditional Viagra.

The horns are also believed to have medicinal values. The traditional Chinese medicine demands rhino horns, which is believed to cure fever and stomach ailments fast. China, Taiwan, Thailand, South Korea and the Middle East are known to be huge markets for illegal trading of rhino horns. Rising incomes across Asia mean that demand for powdered rhino horn is on the increase. But Ranjan Talukder, a Guwahati-based veterinarian, says that's nonsense. "It is nothing but superstition," he said in an interview.

"The horns are nothing but compact masses of agglutinated hair and rhinos use them for defense against other animals. There is no scientific analysis that the rhino horn powder could stimulate human sex."

A census in 1984 showed that Kaziranga National Park had 1,080 rhinos. The number was found increasing up to 1069 in another census during 1991. The census in 1999 provided more optimistic result as the number of rhinos soared to 1,552. The 2006 census revealed the number of rhinos as 1,855 in the park. The last census of 2009 showed that Kaziranga gives shelter to over 2000 rhinos.

The voice for a high-level enquiry on rhino poaching was raised by many pressure groups since 2007. The influential students' body All Assam Students Union took out various protest programmes on the issue during the last few years. The AASU was followed by Nature's Beckon and Journalists' Forum, Assam to raise voices against the corrupt forest officials.

The activists of both the organizations insisted that the Assam government should go for a CBI probe on the stock of wildlife parts in the custody of the forest department as well as about the poaching of rhinos, elephants, tigers and leopards in Assam. They argue that some wildlife organs (like rhino horn, ivory, skin of tiger and leopard) had already made way to the illegal international

market from the custody of forest authority itself.

Talking to this writer Soumyadeep Datta also claimed that the State forest department was itself involved with the illegal trade of rhino horns till eighties. "We have authentic information that Assam forest department had sold more than 300 rhino horns even after India adopted the wildlife protection act in 1972. We can give the relevant statistics of the sold rhino horns in details as 29 (during 1971-72), 13 (1972-73), 19 (1973-74), 40 (1974-75), 18 (1975-76), 27 (1976-78), 42 (1977-78), 63 (1978-79), 63 (1978-79), 61 (1979-80)," Datta disclosed.

He added, "We suspect that a large share of the wildlife parts, which are being sold in the international markets, made way from the forest department's stock due to the manipulation and corrupt practices of some dishonest forest officials. So we demanded the CBI probe on the stock of animal parts in the custody of Assam forest department, as it is assumed that some precious parts of rhinos, elephants, tigers and leopards had gone for international markets from the official stock of the department."

The demand for a CBI probe into the killings of rhinos was also highlighted during a Nagorik Sobha (citizens' meet) on February 13, 2008, which was organized by Journalists' Forum, Assam. A group of non-resident Assamese (Indian),

who joined the chorus to save the rhinos also expressed even concern for the rhinos. The Friends of Assam & Seven Sisters (FASS) supported the demand for a credible and high-level enquiry into the ongoing killings of the precious animals.

But even after the escalating public resentments, the state government remained silent on the issue till date. The chief minister Gogoi, who is otherwise outspoken, continued to avoid the issue of CBI enquiry while talking to media. The state forest minister has also covered up his face. The Journalists' Forum again raised the issue in the public consultation meeting on June 11 in front of the central minister Jairam Ramesh.

The forum has recently sent a memorandum to the central minister urging for the probe once again. The letter dated June 24, argues that Assam chief minister Gogoi had publicly declared on May 2, 2008 that his government was asking for a CBI enquiry in to the matter, but it did not turn into reality.

The letter, which was made available for local media, also added, "We are really concerned at the ongoing trend of rhino poaching in the high profile Kaziranga National Park, which has lost over 50 rhinos to poachers in the last four years. A section of corrupt officials of the UNESCO's world heritage site, Kaziranga are allegedly maintaining a nexus with the poaching gangs for their selfish interest."