



PANDA

WWF-India Newsletter

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Special Issue



Foreword

More than ever before, the web of life is under severe threat.

Tigers - that once roamed freely across Asia - are now confined to very few landscapes in the country. This fate is not restricted to tigers only, but numerous other species such as Gharials, Otters, Dolphins and Lions, as their numbers have drastically reduced in the last few years. The fact that the population of some of these species is below their biological capacity to sustain them, makes the situation grim. Additionally, as most are indicator species, their poor status shows the ill-health of the ecosystems that they belong to.

Increased human settlements, poaching, over-development, strain ecosystems and often bring humans and animals in direct conflict with each other. It is rather ironical that man tends to forget one basic premise - we need the well-being of the environment and the species for the sake of our own survival.

This issue of PANDA newsletter attempts to impress upon our esteemed readers the importance of saving the environment. We attempt to do so by illustrating the plight of some of India's iconic species.

I wish to conclude by reinforcing our message which captures the essence of conservation and the importance of working for the environment - "We shan't save all we should like to, but we shall save a great deal more, than if we had never tried" as remarked by Sir Peter Scott, one of the co-founders of WWF.

With Best Wishes
Ravi Singh
Secretary General & CEO



From the Editor's Desk

Dear Friends,

Thank you for your feedback. It is our sincere effort to put together a newsletter, which would window the conservation work that is being carried across WWF-India. Moving forward, we hope this newsletter will not only give news on WWF-India and International but also on conservation as a cause.

The idea behind having an issue on 'Endangered Species' is to give an understanding of these species and why the survival of each is important. WWF-India's role in ensuring their survival has also been highlighted.

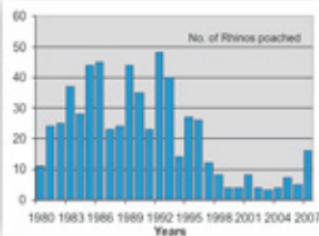
Please continue sending your suggestions. If you do feel strongly on any issue pertaining to conservation you are welcome to write to us at panda@wwfindia.net.

Warm Regards

Moses Pereira
Editor

Rhinos Targeted - Kaziranga National Park

Kaziranga National Park in Assam has one of the most successful rhinoceros conservation histories in the world. Despite numerous problems, the Forest Department has been able to revive the population of the Great Indian Rhinoceros from a handful in the 1920s to about 1850 today. However, this success has been threatened by the sudden spate of poaching in the year 2007. Official records indicate that 16 rhinos have been poached in Kaziranga National Park for their horns during 2007.



Looking at the poaching status over the last two decades, it is clear that its hunting has gone down significantly. However, over the last three years there has been an upward swing in this trend. This can be very damaging for the species, given the circumstances and the history of poaching in the region. A similar situation prevailed in Nepal in the year 2006 where a large number of Rhinos were poached in both Bardia and Chitwan National Parks.

The Great Indian Rhinoceros, *Rhinoceros unicornis* is one of the five species of rhinos found in the world. It is poached for its horn which is used in traditional medicines in China, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan. In Yemen, the horn is also carved into ceremonial dagger handles known as jambiyas. The horns are usually traded as a single piece and can fetch 5-10 times the price of an African rhino horn. The major trade centres for this in India are Siliguri in West Bengal and Dimapur in Nagaland from where the rhino horns are smuggled out to Nepal and Bhutan, and Myanmar respectively. The contraband finally finds its way to south east Asian countries.

Tariq Aziz, Associate Director, Species Conservation Programme, WWF-India says: "The poaching of rhinos in Assam is alarming and a cause of serious concern. Kaziranga may be able to absorb this loss but if a similar spurt of killings takes place in the neighbouring Pobitora or Orang it could be disastrous for the already struggling rhino populations in these areas."

Samir Sinha, Head-TRAFFIC India, said "It is interesting to note the cyclic nature of the poaching trend between India and Nepal. In the year 2006, Nepal lost a large number of rhinos while India faced the brunt in the year 2007. The pattern of killings and the methods used is suggestive that the same nexus of poachers and traders is operating in both India and Nepal. Therefore, there is a need to undertake strong co-ordinated efforts by both countries to curb rhino poaching in this region."

TRAFFIC India has committed its support to curb rhino poaching in this region and is working with the Assam Forest Department on this.



Dr. George Mathew/Orca

A Rhino after it has been poached



Wolfgang Kaehler/LightRocket via Getty Images

Great Asian One-Horned Rhino

Estimated Population: About 2500

Habitat and Distribution

The preferred habitat of an Indian Rhinoceros is alluvial flood plains and areas containing tall grasslands along the foothills of the Himalayas. Formerly, extensively distributed in the Gangetic plains, today the species is restricted to small habitats in Indo-Nepal terai and North Bengal, and Assam. In India rhinos are found in Kaziranga, Orang, Pobitora, Jaldapara, Dudhwa.

Unique Characteristics

The largest of the Asian Rhinos is the Indian Rhinoceros. Considered to be the most amphibious of all the rhino species, the Indian Rhino is an excellent swimmer. It can run at speeds of up to 55km/hr for short periods of time. Blessed with an excellent sense of hearing and smell, the animal has relatively poor eyesight. The average height is about 5ft. 8 in. (170cm) with a girth of 11ft (335cm). While a fully grown male rhino weighs around 2000 – 2500kg, a female weighs around 1600kg. Also referred to the Great One-Horned Rhino, the Indian rhino has a single horn, which is present in both males as well as females. The animal is solitary as a rule, though several may occupy the same patch of forest or water hole. Breeding takes place at all times of the year. The period of gestation is about 16 months and the young at birth in length is around 105 cm and weighs up to 60kg. The female attains sexual maturity in 5 years and the male between 7-10 years old.

Scientific Name: *Rhinoceros unicornis*

Conservation Challenges

For years, rhinos have been widely slaughtered for their horn, a prized ingredient in traditional Asian medicines. Destruction of their habitat over the years, has brought the rhinos to the brink of extinction. These animals are among the worlds' most endangered species. The great one-horned rhino could once be found from Pakistan all the way through India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar. By the turn of the century, this species had vanished from much of its range, and today only about 2500 survive in India and Nepal. Throughout their range, their habitat continues to dwindle fast due to conversion of grassland habitats into agricultural fields and other human pressures. The threat of poaching continues to be ever-present.

WWF-India's Involvement

Conserving the rhinos and their habitat is imperative. WWF has been working on rhino conservation for over four decades. The big programme initiated by WWF is the Indian Rhino Vision 2020 (IRV 2020). The vision of the programme is to increase the total rhino population in Assam to about 3000 by the year 2020 and just as significantly ensure that these rhinos are distributed over at least seven protected areas to provide long-term viability of an Assam metapopulation of the species. This will be achieved by translocating the rhinos from two-source populations (Kaziranga and Pobitora) into 3 or 4 target Protected Areas (Manas, Laokhowa, Burachapori, Kochpura, Dibrusalkhowa and, possibly, Orang).

Other Challenges

The Forest Department faces a major challenge as lack of equipment, finance, political will and shortage of staff makes it difficult to implement conservation work at the grassroots level. Two serious on the ground problems include, containing poaching and loss of habitat to encroachments.

By Ginni Suri

Tariq Aziz is a well-known persona in the field of conservation. He joined WWF-India in 1992. An M.Phil holder under the Junior Research Fellowship of Wildlife Institute of India, Tariq has continued to actively use his domain knowledge for furthering the cause of wildlife. He is greatly admired for his knowledge of fieldwork, capacity to develop a project and give the project a shape to address all issues easily. As Associate Director Species, with WWF-India, Tariq is handling the project AREAS (Asian Rhino and Elephant Action Strategy). For his dedicated work, Tariq received an award for outstanding service from WWF International in the year 2005. taziz@wwfindia.net



Wolfgang Kaehler/LightRocket via Getty Images



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