

POACHING THREATENS RHINO AND ELEPHANT

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The rhinoceros and the elephant, both precious members of the fauna in the North-Eastern region, are being threatened and their survival is now a matter of anxiety. The danger mainly comes from poachers who have made this activity a major source of income. Rhino and elephant poaching have resulted in the trade of rhino horns and ivory. Dr. Anwaruddin Choudhury writes about poaching and how it could be countered.

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The Indian one-horned rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) and its four relatives (Javan, Sumatran, African black and white) are threatened due to poaching for their horns. The poachers pursue the Asiatic or Indian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) and its African cousin mainly for their tusks. The main difference in poaching strategies is that both the sexes in rhinos have horns making the entire population vulnerable whereas in the elephant, especially the Asiatic species, the females and even some males (mucknas) do not have tusks, and hence, are not in the hit list of poachers.

The Indian rhino once roamed over most of the floodplain of the Indo-Gangetic and Brahmaputra plains. Habitat destruction, climate changes and poaching have resulted in the loss of almost the entire population (till the start of the 20th century) save a few in Assam, North Bengal and Nepal. At present, about 1500 rhinos live in the Kaziranga National Park of Assam, which is the largest population in one area anywhere in the world. Other pockets of Assam having rhinos are Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary (about 75 rhinos), Orang (about 60-65) and Manas (a few). Stray rhinos are often reported from different parts of the Brahmaputra valley, including Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat, Golaghat, Nagaon, Morigaon, Kamrup, Darrang and Sonitpur districts.

Outside Assam, the largest population is in the Chitwan National Park of Nepal with about 500 rhinos. In North Bengal, 50 rhinos are found in the Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary with another 21 in Gorumara. With three introduced populations of rhinos in Dudhwa National Park of Uttar Pradesh, Royal Bardia and Sukla Phanta Wildlife Reserves in Nepal, the total world population (excluding captive animals) is less than 2,300.

Poaching of rhinos is mostly done because of the great demand for its horn in East Asia, Yemen, China, Taiwan, Korea, Japan, Singapore, etc. The use is medicinal while it is also used for dagger handles, a symbol of prestige and is called Jambia in local parlance. While its actual medicinal properties are not known, the traditional belief among the Chinese is that it can cure heart trouble, headache, cleanse pancreas and liver and can be used as an ointment for skin disease.

Earlier, poaching was done by the pit method. However, since the eighties, the use of guns and rifles, including automatic ones, have revolutionized it. The number of rhinos killed soared to more than 40 in a year. Since 1989, the poachers have started a new silent method through electrocution. The poachers use the powerlines that pass through the sanctuaries or just outside the boundary.

Between 1980 and 2003 more than 500 rhinos were killed by poachers in Kaziranga National Park alone. During the same period, at least 66 rhinos were poached in Manas (22 in 1993 alone; due to the Bodo agitation poachers took full advantage of the unrest), 100 in Orang, 30 in Pobitora and 35 in Laokhowa (19 in 1993 alone due to AASU agitation). Even outside the protected areas, around 50 rhinos were killed during the period.

Actual poaching is done mostly by engaging locals, such as Misings, Bodos, Paites, Karbis, Nagas, immigrants and Nepalis while arms are mainly provided by the Nagas. The main routes used by traders are through Siliguri–Nepal, Siliguri–Bangladesh and Dimapur–Imphal–Myanmar. Occasional routes are through Shillong–Bangladesh and Silchar–Imphal/Aizawl–Bangladesh/Myanmar.

However, the situation in Kaziranga and Pobitora is better now and is also improving mainly due to the untiring efforts of the authorities and sincere involvement and dedication of the field staff. However, in

Laokhowa and Manas, it is almost a lost case so far as the rhino is concerned. However, Orang is in need of special attention because of increasing pressure from the poachers.

The Rhino Foundation for Nature in North-east India, an NGO, was formed in 1994. The Rhino Foundation extended help to authorities and staff, by providing jackets, hunting boots, raincoats, torchlight batteries, new walkie-talkie sets, motor-boats, motorcycles and guns, to gear up the anti-poaching measures. It also organized veterinary, health and motivation camps in collaboration with other NGOs in the fringe areas.

Around 40% of the total wild elephant population of India is in Assam and other states of the North-east, making it an important elephant area in the world. However, reduction and fragmentation of habitat and poaching for ivory and meat have threatened the survival of the species. In a census carried out in March 1993, more than 11,000 elephants were counted in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya.

Poaching of elephants is severe in Assam-Nagaland, Assam-Mizoram and Assam-Arunachal Pradesh. In fact, poaching has almost exterminated the pachyderm in Mizoram, Southern Assam, and parts of Manipur, Tripura and Nagaland. Fondness for meat is an important factor leading to the decline of the species in these areas. Various tribes such as Mizos, Nagas, Kukis, Chakmas, Dimasas, Kacharis, Dafflas or Nishis and Adis relish elephant meat and whenever an opportunity arises, they kill the animal.

Ivory poachers from Nagaland also operate in Karbi Anglong and Golaghat districts of Assam. In Manas, an unspecified number of elephants were killed during the peak of the Bodo agitation (1989-1992). In Garo Hills of Meghalaya also, poaching is taking place. Even poachers from Mizoram have been found to be active in the area.

Involvement of local villagers including the hill tribes in conservation, strict enforcement of Indian Wildlife Protection Act and creation of more protected areas (especially for elephants) are recommended.

To check poaching of wide ranging species such as elephant, a crack mobile force needs to be set up with operating powers across inter-state boundaries. This should be supplemented by a good intelligence network. However, no state has been successful in taking up effective measures to stop poaching, which continues unabated.

(Note : The author of this article is a highly acclaimed naturalist and conservationist of North East India. He has several well written books on Flora & Fauna of Assam and other parts of North East. He is a civil servant and is posted as DC in the newly created district of BAKSA in Assam.)