

100 YEARS OF INDIAN FORESTRY

1861



1961

Volume One: SOUVENIR



CHAPTER IV

WILD LIFE THROUGH THE AGES

Introduction

Wild Life is one of the most gracious gifts of nature to this great country, as rich in its variety and colour as in its number. The majestic lion, the graceful but fearsome tiger, the powerful elephant, the nimble deer, the picturesque peafowl, the gorgeous parrots, pheasants and wood-pickers and the elegant swan are some of these of which any country might be proud. It is estimated that there are about 500 species of mammals, more than 2,000 different species of birds (about 1/10th of the different kinds of birds known to inhabit the earth), many species of fish, reptiles and amphibians and more than 30,000 forms of insects, which dwell in the Indian subcontinent. In the absence of human interference, this wild life, which is an important constituent of the natural biotic complex, could exist in a state of equilibrium and in harmony with its environments, governed by the inexorable law of the survival of the fittest. But man, for his selfish ends, has been ceaselessly persecuting wild life, without appreciating its great value and importance, thereby seriously upsetting the balance of Nature and creating serious problems for himself. As a result, several useful species of animals and birds have, of late, dwindled in number. Some have become rare, some are at the threshold of extinction, while quite a few have become totally extinct and are lost to posterity for ever, such as the Great One-horned Rhinoceros, the Lion, the Elephant, the Wild Buffalo, the Musk Deer, the Kashmir Stag, the Indian Wild Ass, the Snow Leopard, the Pigmy Hog and the Cheetah or the Hunting Leopard.

The Rhinoceros has been saved only by special measures, which if relaxed, will inevitably lead to its extinction. In Assam, their number had dwindled to a little more than a dozen about 50 years ago and it is only as a result of intensive efforts of the Forest Department that their number has now increased in the Kaziranga Sanctuary. A close relative of the above, the lesser One-horned Rhinoceros which, not long ago, had been an inhabitant of the Sundarbans of Bengal and other tracts, has completely disappeared from India. The Asiatic Two-horned Rhinoceros also once occurred in parts of Assam.

The Lion, which is reported to have been found in Northern and Central India as late as in the thirties of the last century, has completely disappeared from these parts and is now confined only to the Gir Forests of Saurashtra. Even there, the situation became alarming in about 1913, when Wellinger, the then Divisional Forest Officer, Junagadh State, made a report to the Administrator that there were only 6 to 8 lions left in an area of 700 sq miles. Restrictions were, therefore, imposed on the shooting of lionesses and cubs and a limit was imposed on the number of lions that could be shot. As a result of this timely protection, the 1936 Lion Census of the Gir Forests showed a total count of 287 lions in that region as against about 100 recorded in 1913. From 1936 to 1946 the number again decreased and therefore rigid protective measures had to be imposed in 1946. Subsequent censuses carried out in April 1950 and April 1954 indicated the lion population to be 200 and 290 respectively.

But for the timely promulgation of the Elephant Preservation Act in 1879, this magnificent animal would also have been eradicated by the great ivory hunters. But nothing was done to save the Indian Cheetah or the Hunting Leopard of the Deccan which has now completely vanished some 30 years ago from India.

Certain birds too have met a similar fate. The Great Indian Bustard has become quite rare. This bird wants long stretches of grasslands, which are now being ploughed up. Also, the nomadic tribes are hunting it and destroying its eggs. The pink-headed duck, the white-winged wood duck of Assam and the Red Mynas are some of the other birds which are threatened with extinction.

Historical Account

Wild Life in India has passed through several phases. Starting from its hey-day in the Vedic period, it has steadily diminished.

Vedic Age

Our mythology, ancient art, literature and folk-lore all provide ample proof of the fact that in the days gone by wild life in India enjoyed a privileged and prominent place in the life of the people. Our scriptures enjoined a humane and considerate treatment to all animals and birds,

Our religion would become very much the poorer without the feeling of compassion and loving kindness towards them. There is nothing surprising in this attitude. It has been our tradition, and it is a precious one.

"*Ahimsa Paramo Dharmah*" has been a cardinal guiding principle of our way of life. The Purusha Sukta invokes peace and happiness to all men and animals. In Kautilya's *Artha Shashtra*, there are significant passages which indicate the recognition given by the statesmen in those days to the problem of wild life preservation. Certain forests were declared as protected and called *Abhayaranya*—what we now term as Sanctuaries and National Parks. Forest Superintendents were appointed for their maintenance and guards were posted to prevent poaching. Heavy penalties were prescribed for offenders who entrapped, killed or molested deer, bison, birds or fish in an area declared as protected. Certain animals and birds were completely protected such as elephant, horse, animals with human form, peacock, partridge, swan, cuckoo, fish in tanks, etc. Animals which became vicious were to be trapped and killed outside the sanctuary so as not to disturb the others. The extraction of timber, burning of charcoal, collection of grass, leaves and fuel, cutting of canes and bamboos and trapping for fur skins, teeth and bones, were all totally prohibited in these protected areas.

The most effective means of protection and conservation of wild life, in those early days, was however provided through religion. The protection of animals and birds was considered a sacred duty. The Indian sages lived in forests and their *ashrams* were seats of learning, where the best in our ancient culture was born. Here also lived animals and birds, more or less as their kith and kin and roamed about freely without any fear of molestation.

In scriptures, wild animals and birds occupy as important a position as man himself or even higher. In the *Ramayana*, we read about the monkey-god, Hanuman, the wise bear, Jamvant, and the loyal eagle, Jatayu, who helped Rama to fight the evil perpetuated by the demon king Ravana and restore peace and tranquility on the land.

The various incarnations of the Lord, such as *Meen* (fish), *Kurma* (tortoise), *Varaha* (boar) and *Naras* (human form with a lion's head) all go to show how the ancient inhabitants of this country stretched their imagination in identifying the Creator of the Universe with the various forms

of Wild Life. Ganesha—the elephant-headed god—occupies a distinct and unique place in the pantheon. The elephant has been described as the favourite of god Indra and its sanctity has been further enhanced by the belief that elephants guard the eight celestial points of the compass. Similar veneration has been attached to the various forms of wild life by associating them with gods and goddesses and thus affording protection and preservation to their community. Nandi (bullock) as the mount of Shiva, Garuda (Brahminy kite) of Vishnu, Swan of goddess Saraswati and a host of others. Goddess Durga took the lion as her charger in the fight against the forces of darkness and evil. It is because of this association that the lion has become the symbol of *dharma* (righteousness). In the days of yore kings, when dispensing justice, sat on *Simhasana*, the seat of the lion. The lions' heads adorn the Ashoka Pillar, which is now the motif of the emblem of the Republic of India.

Wild animals and birds have also been a great favourite with writers, poets and artists. In the well-known *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesh*, a variety of animals and birds have been mentioned, such as lion, bull, jackal, tortoise, crow, mouse, monkey, crocodile, camel, elephant, crane, cat, serpent, owl and sparrow. Children still love to listen to these tales of birds and beasts, and derive much inspiration to build up their character. Much has been written about the melodious songs of Indian birds by our poets. Animals shown on the Sanchi stupas, the Ajanta cave frescoes and at the Khajuraho temples are a proof of the hold they had on the imagination and the affections of the people. In short in ancient India, much attention was paid to the preservation and conservation of wild life and the object was achieved by attaching sanctity, veneration and importance to the individual forms according to the beneficial role played by them for the human society. It, however, does not mean that there was a complete ban on the killing of wild life. Harmful animals and birds were destroyed for the protection of crops, human life and property. Hunting was also indulged in by the kings and nobles but they tracked and shot only the selected trophies, and not indiscriminately.

Hindu Period

In the early Jain and Buddhist period (800, BC) also, we find considerable stress on the religious sanctity of various animals and birds. With the passage of time, however, conditions changed and forests also started receding, as more land

was brought under cultivation. The forests which provided timber for the first Indus Flotilla constructed by Alexander the Great in 325 B.C. were no longer there. Gone with them were the rhinoceros and the elephant, tiger and the swamp deer. Other animals commonly found in the valley also became increasingly rare. To check this depredation, the first practical step, which incidentally is the earliest known record of measures taken for the protection of Wild Life in the world, was the proclamation of King Ashoka in the third century B.C. for the protection of fish, game and forests. The rock inscriptions give a list of birds, beasts, fishes which were to be preserved. The Edict further ordained that the forests must not be burnt, either for mischief or to destroy living creatures.

Moghul Period

For the period, 1526 to 1707, much interesting information concerning wild life is available in the memoirs of the Moghul Emperors and the chronicles of European travellers in India in those days. The Moghul Emperors were very fond of shikar but at the same time they were great lovers of nature and displayed keen interest in the wild life of the country and its preservation.

The concept of management and conservation of wild life during the Moghul period may, in short, be defined as that of the "Chase". Game was protected and preserved in hunting reserves called *Shikargaha* for the primary aim of providing sport to the royalties.

When the Moghuls first came to India in 1526 rhinoceros was found along the Indus and Emperor Babar is reported to have come across it in the plains of the Punjab. The elephant was also found in many places from where it has since vanished. The last remnants of the wild buffalo survive in parts of Assam, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh. In 1822 lions were reported to be found in considerable numbers in Saharanpur and North Rohilkhand and in 1830 they were seen in Mt. Abu and Sabarmati regions, but now they are confined only to the Gir Forests in Gujarat.

Moghuls also tamed and trained some of the wild animals and birds like the Cheetah, the Caracal (or *siah-qosh* as they called it), the Falcon and the Hawk as aids to hunting and for following their quarry. Akbar is reported to have kept a thousand Cheetahs for this purpose.

British Period

There was an abundance of wild life in India before the British rule. Later, the increase in

population together with the control of diseases both of men and animals resulted in more demands for land and the frontiers of wild life began to recede. This decline gathered momentum from about the middle of the 19th century, with the increase in the number of high powered and dependable weapons. Indeed the doom of wild life was, as it were, sealed the day gunpowder was invented.

Army officers, tea-planters and civil servants were, in many cases, heavy despoilers of game. In Kathiawar, a cavalry officer is reported to have shot as many as 80 lions in 10 days, while on one occasion 14 lions were shot in a day in the Gir Forests.

In the *Oriental Sporting Magazine* of 1876, it is recorded that a sportsman in the Bengal Duars fired about 100 shots at rhinos in a single day, killing 6 and wounding more than 25. F.B. Simson, author of the "Sport in Eastern Bengal", it is recorded shot 500 to 600 tigers during 21 years of his stay in India at the close of the last century.

It was not long before this contagion spread to the ruling princes also. For example, in the shoot organised by a Maharaja between 1871 and 1907, it is recorded that no less than 370 tigers, 208 rhinos, 430 buffaloes and 324 *barasinghas* (swamp deer) were shot, in addition to innumerable other small game and birds. Another Maharaja shot 616 tigers during his life time, and another holds the 'proved' record with over 1,100 tigers to his credit. In Kashmir, one sportsman accounted for 58,613 wild fowl between 1907 and 1919, averaging over 4,590 birds per annum. In Bikaner the record for the shooting of Imperial Sandgrouse at the Gajner lake was 1,100 birds with 35 guns in 2 days. In a shoot at the Keoladeo Ghana Lake of Bharatpur 4,273 duck and geese were shot.

Second World War and after

During the War years, heavy depletion of wild life took place, wherever armies were encamped. Later with the advent of Independence, the problem of food production assumed paramount importance. Vast areas of forests were cleared, in many cases with quick mechanical means, to provide new fields and farms. Every effort was made to eliminate all enemies of crops, whether animals, birds or insects, and even encouragement was given to protect the crops. Crop-protection guns were allowed to be used for hunting within 3 mile radius of any village. Under the guise of the so-called vermin destruction, much slaughter of deer and other game animals thus took place.