

## THE MONAS GAME SANCTUARY, ASSAM.

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*Introductory.*—It is perhaps not known that the province of Assam took a lead in the matter of preservation of its wild fauna some years ago and that there are a fair number of forest reserves gazetted as Game Sanctuaries. Though, due to financial difficulties,

it has never been possible to arrange for the enforcement of strict protection which is implied in the word "Sanctuary." In fact, only the most important of these, the Monas Sanctuary, has had some attention paid to it—by the poachers to a great extent and of necessity by Government also. It is proposed to set out here the conditions prevailing at present and the proposals contemplated for the better protection of game in this Sanctuary, and perhaps later, elsewhere in the province.

*Location, Physical Features, Types of Forests.*—The Monas Sanctuary is situated in the Brahmaputra valley to the north of the river, mainly in North Kamrup District, extending also a little into Goalpara District. It is about 150 square miles in area, forming a strip about 10 miles wide along the foot of the Bhutan hills. The drainage is from north to south, of which the Monas and its branch the Beki are the most prominent features, while innumerable small streams also traverse the area, all ultimately finding their way to the river Brahmaputra.

The Sanctuary itself is flat and rather low-lying with an abundance of extensive marshes overgrown with reeds. It is, however, mostly covered with a dense growth of coarse grass and tall reeds, with an occasional tree (mainly *simul*) standing up, here and there, above the grass. But along the Bhutan boundary occurs a strip of open tree forest, in which can be recognised such species as *Bridelia* sp., *Acacia catechu*, *Dalbergia sissoo*, *Cedrela toona*, *Amoora* sp., *Sterculia villosa*, *Careya arborea*, *Dillenia indica* and others. The undergrowth consists of light grass and species of *Flamingia* with species of *Eupatorium* invading gradually. The grassy areas get burnt annually between the months of December and March, but the grass grows again into an impenetrable mass, but for elephant paths and tunnels of game animals.

*Object of the Sanctuary.*—The prime object of the Sanctuary is to afford all possible protection (and encouragement to multiply in peace) to the rhinoceros. But the task is rendered extremely difficult on account of several factors. The rhino haunts are rarely of easy

accessibility and a very conscientious game-watcher may not be able to visit them at all or even make sure of the absence of poachers from the vicinity. But the price on its head (or we may say, its horn) is so great that it is worth while for the poacher to take all the risk, trouble and inconvenience involved in the attempt. A rhino horn once successfully smuggled into a place like Calcutta finds a ready sale (especially among the Chinese, who have a great faith in its *aphrodisiac* properties) and will fetch anything up to Rs. 15 per tola. Besides the horn, every other part of the body of the animal is valuable, the meat being highly valued by the local Hindus not for its edible qualities but for its supposed sanctifying properties ! A factor helpful to the poacher is the habit of the animal of laying its droppings successively in the same place : so that, one has only to wait at a fresh heap of dung to get at the animal when it turns up next.

After the rhino, the buffalo, the bison, and the swamp deer demand our protection. Efforts have also been made to keep out ivory poachers ; and the present low price of ivory proves a further check to their activities.

*Life in the Sanctuary.*—Life in the Sanctuary is varied. In the low-lying marshy lands and in the grass areas are found rhino, buffalo, pig and deer as also bears ; while elephant, bison and sambhur seem to prefer the tree-jungle at the foot of the hills.

*The Rhino.*—The rhinoceros is said to have been plentiful some years ago, but poaching on a large scale has so reduced their numbers that it is very rarely that one may even be sighted nowadays. The few that still exist have learnt to keep far out of man's way. It is estimated that during most of the year about 30—40 rhinos make their home in the Sanctuary. It seems however that those to the west of the Monas migrate northwards into the outer hills of Bhutan during the dry months of the year. Luckily all shooting is prohibited in Bhutan ; and though no staff exists to enforce the rules, the punishment meted out to the offender, if detected, is likely to be so heavy as to prove a deterrent in itself. It is a pity, however, that

the prohibition is not very effective against the Nepali settlers in Bhutan.

From the foot-prints observed, it is surmised that there are two distinct species of rhino in this Sanctuary : in one case, the footfall indicates a heavy-bodied animal, the footprint is more or less rounded and the three nails are set out almost equally from the edge. In the other case, the animal seems to be of lighter build, the footprint is distinctly oval, and the median nail is set well projected in front compared to the side nails. Mr. Milroy thinks that the latter may be *Rhinoceros sondaicus* ; but in the absence of knowledge of any hornless rhinos in the area, the presence of this species cannot be vouched for.

*The Elephant*.—During the winter elephant herds are not at all common in the Sanctuary, but with the first flush of green grass (after the burning) and the first shower of rains in April they make their presence apparent in the tree-jungle and in the high grass-lands by the innumerable tracks they make all over the place. It must however be added that solitary bulls (*goondas*) live permanently in the Sanctuary, each having almost a defined "beat" for itself. The herds vary in strength from ten to twenty generally. But herds over a hundred strong have been known, though they are very scarce nowadays. It might be noted as an interesting fact that the only animal the elephant does not relish meeting is the rhino ; rather. The distrust would appear to be almost mutual.

*The Buffalo*.—The buffalo inhabits mainly the river beds of the Monas and the Beki and the grassy-lands on either side of them. It is felt that protection has definitely aided this species and that it is on the increase in the Sanctuary. A small or big herd is almost certain to be sighted in either river-bed on a warm day. The local Boro tribes are said to be very keen on its flesh (in fact they are very fond of any flesh) but the risk nowadays is too great for them to go after it.

*Bison*.—The bison resides in the tree-forest in the north of the Sanctuary near the Bhutan boundary and is only occasionally found

in the flat lands below. It is commonly seen during the rainy season from April to October but renders itself rather scarce at other times of the year.

*Deer*.—Sambhur occurs in pairs or small groups in the strips of tree jungle, and can be found even far away from any source of water. Big-sized specimens are quite common, but the antlers are rarely remarkable for their spread. The sambhur is perhaps the easiest to shoot from an elephant, as it stands and gazes at the elephant while the shikari can take his aim to drop it.

The barking deer is also a dweller of the tree-jungle and lives mostly singly.

The females of swamp and deer generally occur 8—10 together, while the males live apart. They inhabit highlands, close to water in the grassy areas. Sometimes they move in large herds of as many as 200—300 heads.

The hog-deer occurs invariably singly in the grass and is very quick on its feet. Occasionally its coat is found to be lightly spotted. The true spotted deer (chital), however, does not occur in the Sanctuary.

*Other Animals*.—Pigs are common all over the place, and some of them are of record sizes. Neither the Himalayan nor the Sloth Bear is numerous but they have the unfortunate knack of making a sudden appearance at close quarters when least anticipated. The pigmy-hog is also known to occur, though it is rather rare. Monitor lizards ('guisaps') are common and can be frequently sighted after a shower of rain.

Of carnivora, tiger is most prominent (being found distributed all over the area), though leopards are also known. The latter, however, appear to haunt the neighbourhood of villages in preference to living entirely in the forests; but the real forest leopard when met with is comparatively of larger dimensions.

Wild dogs are extremely rare though they are met with in the area.

*Aquatic Life.*—The Monas has a reputation for good fishing—mainly for its big-sized mahseer. Others are plentiful in almost all the streams in the Sanctuary, and are responsible for the destruction of fish in these streams. Crocodiles of the long-snouted variety live in the deep pools in both the Monas and the Beki.

*Birds.*—Peacock and jungle-fowl are commonly noticed from January to May. Partridges, quails and floricans are met with also, but are not so common. On the Monas and Beki rivers, “*Brahmini*” ducks (in pairs always) and *Mergansers* can be seen now and again.

*Need for Protection : Activities of Poachers.*—The need for protection of the rhino was felt as early as 1905, when the Monas Sanctuary was gazetted as such. Subsequently, a game-keeper with a small staff of game-watchers to assist him was appointed. The main duty of these men has been to patrol the Sanctuary area and arrest any poachers and trespassers they may come across. The local Boro tribes (Boros, Kacharies and Meches) are all jungley people accustomed to hunt animals in the jungle for their food. It was quite a task to make them realise that hunting became illegal with the formation of forest reserves in the locality. Even now it cannot be said that they are completely reconciled to the new order of things. They certainly do not see any need for protection, especially to the detriment of their food-supplies.

But, it was only at a later stage that the value obtainable for the rhino horn attracted the attention of monied shopkeepers and businessmen in the neighbourhood, who began secretly financing and encouraging the local tribes (with supplies of ammunition and promises of large rewards) to go after the rhino in the jungle, while they themselves remained safely in the background. The proposition became so paying that poaching began to be organised on almost a commercial scale and the villagers became daring poachers. Some ingenious dealers even started manufacturing false horns !! Unlicensed guns were plentiful in the villages and poaching became far too extensive for the small staff to check effectively.

*Steps taken against poaching.*—At an early hour, a detachment of the Assam rifles was despatched to tour the area adjoining the

Sanctuary for some weeks. All suspicious places were thoroughly searched ; and a good many unauthorised guns were seized and confiscated. Professional poachers who had migrated into the neighbourhood from adjacent districts elected wisely to leave the place in good time. The situation rapidly improved, but it was only after most of the rhino had disappeared.

Subsequently, gazetted forest officers have been posted off and on, on special duty, to tour the Sanctuary for some months at a time, and to keep the poacher scared by their constant movements. It must be said that all this has had a very salutary effect and that large-scale poaching is practically non-existent now. There was no reason to suspect that any attempt was made to shoot a rhino in the Sanctuary during the past year. Of course, petty cases of trespassing and poaching do come up now and again ; but none of the culprits concerned could had access to the rhino.

The present Sanctuary staff consists of an officer-in-charge, a game-keeper, two head game-watchers and 15 game-watchers. The men are located in pairs at different control points in the Sanctuary and are expected to regularly patrol the areas adjoining their camps. The staff is certainly inadequate to assure complete protection but meets the purpose for the time being. The main difficulty is that even if a couple of watchers do locate a poaching camp (which is bound to be large, if the poachers are after rhino), they are not able to arrest the poachers. Dependence is placed mainly on the poachers not giving fight but taking to their heels at the sight of the Custodians of the Law : and, it does happen sometimes that the watchers manage to arrest one of the slower among the poachers, though it does not always follow that the trying magistrate finds the evidence sufficient to punish the poacher, in spite of his having been caught red-handed !

*Difficulties in the way of Protection.*—The upkeep of the Sanctuary is now a charge on the forest revenues of the province. These arrangements being on a temporary basis, the chances of their being kept up even at the present level cannot be considered bright,

especially in view of the present poor financial condition of the province. Apprehension is also felt that, until the people of the province themselves begin to take a real interest in the fauna of the locality, their representatives in the future Government may not be inclined to maintain the Sanctuary. Of course, if steps towards preservation were to wait till the people learn to value animal life at its true worth, there may be no rhinos left by then for preservation. Therefore, the success of the Sanctuary will entirely depend on its being able to pay its own way, unless the proposal to make sanctuaries a charge on central revenues materialises.

*Formation of National Park not possible.*—The first method (of making the Sanctuary pay) that suggests itself is to convert it into a National Game Park, wherein visitors will be admitted, on payment, for observing the animals in their natural surroundings. But this suggestion is ruled out owing to the absence of roads and buildings in the sanctuary as they will necessitate a large initial capital outlay to provide for these fundamental amenities to attract the visitors. The money is not likely to be forthcoming. Further, the local people will take no interest in the matter; at any rate, they will not be inclined to pay for going into the jungle! Even if people can be found to avail themselves of the opportunity afforded, the season during which such arrangements can work is all too short—only about three months in the year, from January to March. During the rest of the year the tall grass and reeds and the heavy rains preclude all possibility of anything like comfortable touring in the Sanctuary, leave alone sighting animals in the dense jungle. Lastly, it is felt that considering the area of the Sanctuary, the game animals (of the larger species) are not plentiful enough for them to cross the paths of visitors occasionally. All these disadvantages definitely render the formation of a National Game Park in the Monas Sanctuary impracticable.

*Proposals for the future.*—The only other alternative—a proposal which owes its conception to the Conservator of Forests, Assam—is to raise at least a part of the funds required by permitting restricted shooting to individuals and parties at prohibitive rates.

Besides, the shooting will be confined to the outer parts of the Sanctuary to the east and west, leaving the central portion an inviolate Sanctuary. This may seem to go against the principles governing sanctuaries, but it must be agreed that it is better to permit a known number of animals to be shot under control rather than have an unknown number poached without any advantage to the Sanctuary. It is anticipated that the glamour of shooting in a Sanctuary will attract really wealthy shikaries who will not grudge to pay handsomely for the privilege and who will not expect to balance their expenses with the material return of the "bag" collected.

Under this scheme, the number of shikar parties to be permitted every year will be controlled by the Conservator of Forests, who will administer the Sanctuary directly. He will see to it that only true sportsmen-naturalists who can be relied upon to observe all laws in force, are admitted into the Sanctuary. The number of animals they will be allowed to shoot (including those wounded) will be defined, dependant on the estimated strength of the species. There will also be restrictions as to the size, age of the animals that are shot, besides close seasons. Further, it will be provided that selling of the trophies or of the flesh for trade shall not be done.

A fee (heavy in comparison with ordinary reserve forest rates) will be levied for the permit allowing the party to enter the Sanctuary for camping and shooting. And on top of this, royalty will be realised on each animal shot or wounded, according to a schedule of rates, graded according to the rarity and value of the animal, the rhino, of course, being priced most.

The parties will be provided, as far as possible, with facilities such as elephants by the Forest Department on payment of a hire at scheduled rates. The parties will be accompanied by game-watchers who will help them in looking for game and also take note of their activities in the Sanctuary on behalf of the department.

It is believed that the presence of sportsman will in itself prove deterrent to the activities of the poacher. Further, it will help the authorities to know from time to time, the exact state of animal life

in the Sanctuary, indicated by the satisfaction or disappointment displayed by the shikaries as a result of their visits.

As a subsidiary source of revenue, it may become possible to catch young ones of certain animals alive for sale to zoological gardens.

*Conclusion.*—This method of preserving wild life by permitting it to be shot on a very conservative scale and at high expense, only afforded by the very rich and keen shikaries, seems to be the only means of financing the Sanctuary. Besides, this proposal really aims at restricting the removal of animal life to narrow limits, at a rate slower than the estimated rate of multiplication of the species ; and as such, it will secure, in effect, the preservation of the species, and poaching will automatically be eliminated. Such restricted shooting also provides against the possibility of certain species proving a nuisance to the dwellers in the vicinity of the Sanctuary, owing to their rapid multiplication under protection.

The possibilities of this suggestion therefore deserve serious consideration of all true supporters of preservation of wild life.

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