

Kaziranga's straying rhinos causing concern

By Sivasish Thakur

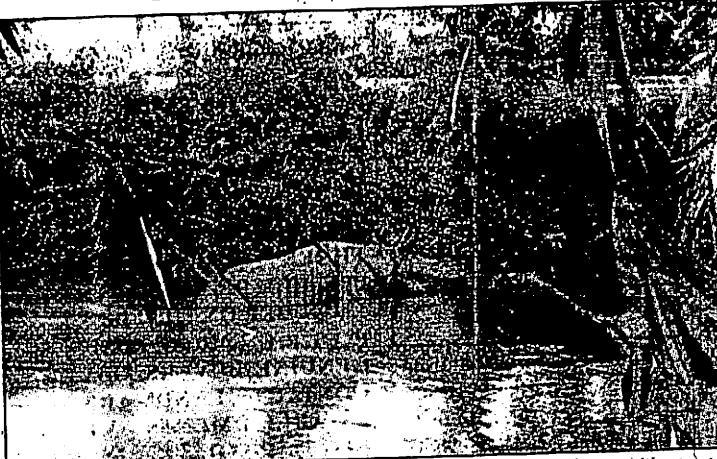
GUWAHATI, March 2 - Rhinos straying out of the Kaziranga National Park (KNP), the abode of the great Indian one-horned rhinoceros, has emerged as a major concern for the Forest Department and conservationists.

While the phenomenon of rhinos wandering off the Park is not exactly uncommon, of late there has been a perceptible increase in the number of straying rhinos. The development bodes ill for the celebrated Park, as it could lead to a serious man-rhino conflict besides exposing the rhino to poaching. The ominous signs of such a conflict are already palpable with a person having been killed and another

injured by a rhino recently. A rhino had also died of firearm injuries on January 27 after it had strayed to the Assam-Arunachal border near Lakhimpur.

"The situation is definitely turning bad this year, and unless treated in all urgency it may become extremely serious," a Park official told *The Assam Tribune*.

According to the official, the big ziranga, the shrinking grassland due to invasion of mimosas, the unusually



(1,855 as per 2006 census) in Kaziranga, the shrinking grassland due to invasion of mimosas, the unusually

dry season since last year resulting in the drying up of some wetlands, and infighting among the rhinos for food and space could be the disturbing factors behind the phenomenon.

"Normally we witness a few rhinos wandering out of the Park at this time of the

year but this time there is certainly an upsurge in their number. Significantly, most of the straying rhinos are

generally old males, as they are vulnerable during infighting for space or food," he said.

The official said that sometimes rhinos exhibited the tendency to migrate from one place to another. "It is only now that they are living in restricted spaces. Decades back they had a much bigger and uninterrupted habitat along the Brahmaputra plains. It is not surprising that some still show the tendency to migrate which is ingrained in their genes," he said, adding that a few rhinos from the Royal Chitwan National Park in Nepal are known to be living in the Valmiki Tiger Reserve of Bihar after crossing a rugged, mountainous terrain.

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Kaziranga's straying...

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The official was of the view that acquiring a stretch of riverine areas that constituted

excellent rhino habitat would go a long way towards a secure future of the endangered species.

Dr Bibhab Talukdar of Aaranyak, a leading conservation group, felt that the situa-

tion exercise under the prevailing conditions would deprive the indigenous people of their political rights.

"We urge the Government to keep in abeyance the entire exercise of delimitation," said Bhattacharya, adding that identification of foreigners, providing constitutional safeguards to the indigenous people and the update of the NRC should be completed first by

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tions, Punjab veteran Park Singh Badal today took over as Chief Minister for a record fourth time at the head of a 18-member Akali Dal-BJP alliance ministry, reports P

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tion was rife with disturbing possibilities for the future of the rhino and the KNP. "Kaziranga is already heavily populated with rhino, and translocation is a must to ease the pressure on it. But that will take time, as the security in the selected protected areas to the desired level," he said.

Dr Talukdar also expressed

doubts with the preparedness

of the KNP to deal with an emergency in the event of a rhino requiring immediate

tranquillization and transporta-

tion after it entered a human

settlement.

"The monitoring of the straying rhinos is another serious issue that needs to be addressed, as straying rhinos are extremely vulnerable to poaching or may even end up as victims of man-rhino conflict," he said.

Dr Talukdar said that apart

from translocation, long-term

measures for ensuring security

to the rhino should focus on

extending the area of Kaziranga. "The sixth edition to Kaziranga, which covers some 300-sq km, should be handed over immediately and efforts should be made to acquire more areas," he said. Dr Talukdar said that the Forest Department needed to prepare an exhaustive plan in view of the ramifications of the deteriorating situation and deal effectively with every aspect of the problem of straying rhinos.