

A Distress Call from POBITORA

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By Dr. Abhijit Rabha

This is DELTA. The count is over. The tally stands at five eight, 58 individuals," boomed the voice of Paramananda

Lahan, a legendary officer who used to be one of the members of Durrell's Army (conservationists across the globe who had received training under Gerald Durrell).

This was remarkable for the time. The nearby Laokhowa Wildlife Sanctuary had experienced a nightmarish scenario in 1983, barely five years ago, when the entire rhino population there was slaughtered.

Uncertain times were looming in the near future for another pocket of rhinos at the nearby Kuruwa Reserved Forest.

The face of the Bear Officer late Golok Sharma was sullen and tense. He did not explain why that day, but two days later we were elephant-borne to see what was wrong. What we saw was not good for anyone... neither rhinos nor rhino-loving stakeholders. Sharma explained how the declining habitat and potential food scarcity in the coming decades scared him.

It was July 1986, and I was in the Pobitora Reserve Forest, Assam, lucky to be one of the few Indian Forest Service probationers assigned to my 'home cadre'. Pobitora was my first posting, under the undivided Nagaon Territorial Division, where I was introduced to a vast expanse of floodplains dotted with numerous oxbow lakes. Until we conducted the first estimation of the resident rhinoceros population in 1988, Pobitora's rhino numbers were mere speculative guesses.

In the event, we used a direct count methodology, dividing the area into pre-

arranged blocks. Elephant-borne estimation teams communicated via hand-held SXA-Portophone walkie-talkies, staying connected with the control room at Haduk Watch Tower. This was managed by the late Paramananda Lahan, who had traveled from the Forest Department headquarters at the renowned Kaziranga National Park to oversee the operation.

Conservation efforts that protect our natural heritage often rank among the most dangerous jobs in the world. Progress doesn't happen overnight; it's the result of countless hard days and nights spent in the field. The frontline staff of the Forest Department endure monsoon rains, slog through leech-infested, muddy terrain, and bear the heat of the blazing sun. Often, they sacrifice the comforts of home. It's only after decades of dedication that the realisation strikes – the mission has succeeded, and conservation has paid off. This is exactly what happened with the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary.

TROUBLES AROUND The Pobitora Reserve Forest was established in 1971, thanks to the advocacy of the villagers from the greater Mayong area, as per government notification number FOR Sett/512/63,51 dated November 18, 1971. It is located in Morigaon district, about 40 km. from Guwahati, the Gateway to Northeast India. The designated area covered 1,584.76 ha. However, the problem was the limited availability of palatable grasses for rhinos. Starting in 1980, this grassland began gradually losing ground to the woody growth of *Koroi* trees *Albizia procera*. The cattle grazing daily compacted the soil, and the cattle dung and urine acting as nitrogenous fertiliser further exacerbated the issue. As the *Koroi* trees took hold, they spread despite efforts such as annual grass burning. For rhinos, being megaherbivores, abundant nutritious grasslands are essential for their survival. Although our reports highlighted the issue, there was little action taken in response.

The rhinos' nocturnal excursions beyond the boundaries of the Protected

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Area became a frequent occurrence, creating tension for the patrolling staff, who faced numerous dangers each night. Despite these challenges, the rhino population continued to grow. On March 17, 1991, the area was officially declared the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary, spanning over 38.81 sq. km. Initially managed by a small beat office under the Western Range of Nagaon Forest Division, it is now overseen as part of a Wildlife Range under the Guwahati Wildlife Division. This transition marked a significant step in formalising the sanctuary's management and conservation efforts. However, problems continued to beset the sanctuary!

When severe flooding in the nearby Kopili river submerged the entire habitat in 1986 and 1987, the Haduk bank in front of the old inspection bungalow emerged as a safe spot for over 60 rhinos. The calves clung to their mothers when they crossed the deep waters of the Haduk oxbow lake, which was once part of the Kopili river. Now, with the

FACING PAGE AND BELOW Pobitora has witnessed positive transformation over the decades. This can be attributed to a mix of solid conservation efforts on the part of the Forest Department, coupled with real community involvement. It is now home to the highest concentration of wild rhinos per square kilometre in India.





SANDIL HICKAYON

ABOVE The villagers from Greater Mayong played a pivotal, proactive role in the recovery of the rhino population. They took it upon themselves to protect the remaining rhinos in the area, many of which grazed peacefully alongside their cattle.

population pegged at 104 individuals, the ecological density of the species was far too high per square kilometre. Located so close to the large city of Guwahati, predatory businesses soon turned Pobitora into a 'tourism destination' as infrastructure investments flooded in. In the process, corridors the rhinos used for free movement got adversely affected.

THE BIRTH OF POBITORA Back in 1988, by the time the first rhino estimation was completed, the landscape of what is now the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary was quite different. At that time,

it seemed no one imagined it would turn into a home capable of supporting 100 rhinos. Moreover, the persistence of rhino poaching and the overall fragility of the species made the outlook for the Pobitora rhino population rather grim.

The positive transformation witnessed in the following decades was nothing short of miraculous. It can be attributed to a mix of solid conservation efforts on the part of the Forest Department, coupled with real community involvement.

The villagers from Greater Mayong played a pivotal, proactive role in the

recovery of the rhino population. The villagers took it upon themselves to protect the remaining rhinos in the area, many of which grazed peacefully alongside their cattle. This form of human-wildlife coexistence stands as an inspiring example of how local communities can actively contribute to conservation, even when faced with significant challenges.

Heartwarming, a boy, just 12 years old, wrote a memorandum to the Governor of Assam, urging action to protect the rhinos in Mayong. Accompanied by three adults, they traveled barefoot to Shillong, filled with determination and confidence. The meeting with the Governor and later with the Chief Conservator of Forests set in motion the necessary positivity, which resulted in united action to save the rhinos. It was a remarkable success story that demonstrates the wisdom of recognising how local communities and wildlife protection agencies can perform miracles if they unite for a cause.

The 2024 flooding has introduced new and worrying challenges for Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary. The changing currents of the river channels have led to severe siltation in the shallower waterbodies, which are crucial for the rhinos' survival, especially during the dry months starting in January.

POBITORA TODAY The climate-triggered 2024 floods have introduced new and worrying challenges for the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary. The shifting currents of river channels has led to severe siltation in the shallower waterbodies so crucial for the rhinos' survival, especially during the dry months starting in January. These waterbodies are vital sources of water for the rhinos, and if they vanish, it would have a negative impact on their wellbeing... as well as their future.

This highlights the imperative for better management of the sanctuary's water resources, including the development of strategies to mitigate the effects of flooding. The changing dynamics underscore the ongoing struggle to protect and preserve the rhino population and their fragile ecosystem amidst an increasingly unpredictable environment.

The greater one-horned rhinoceros, once teetering on the brink of extinction, is now one of India's greatest conservation triumphs. Yet, as habitat loss and fragmentation threaten their future, rhino conservation must once more be placed at the very top of our agenda.



ABOVE It is imperative for the future of the rhinos that Pobitora's water resources are better managed, including the development of strategies to mitigate the effects of flooding.

Rhinos are the heartbeat of Assam. Tackling poaching, habitat degradation, and wetland loss requires political will, plus resources. With no dedicated conservation plan for rhinos outside of Project Tiger areas, this is a distress call from MX2535 – *the Grid Reference for the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary, Assam in the India IIB Grid System.*

Given that this is the home of the highest concentration of wild rhinos per

square kilometre in India (possibly the world) and that it is a strong symbol of Mayong's pride, do we really need any further convincing to secure the future of *Rhinoceros unicornis*? 🐘

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BELOW Wild water buffaloes *Bubalus arnee* and migratory ducks dot the wetlands of the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary. The sanctuary is home to more than 375 bird species.



Sanctuary Asia

VOLUME 45 | ISSUE 2 | MUMBAI

FEBRUARY 2025 | PAGES 100 | INR 150/-



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