THREATENED WILD LIFE OF EASTERN INDIA

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The problem of protecting wild life in South India was discussed by Leslie Brown in Can South India's Big Game be Saved? (COUNTRY LIFE, *April 13, 1961*). *Here the wild-life problem as it affects Eastern India is examined.*

AT the beginning of this century the great Indian one-horned rhinocerous was in danger of becoming extinct. To-day, through conservation measures, it can be considered safe, although it is confined, mainly, to sanctuaries and reserves. Other wild animals of this region, with one or two exceptions, do not share the rhino's fortunate position and one does not have far to look to find the reasons: poaching, forest exploitation, disregard of game laws, uncontrolled grazing of domestic cattle (which carry rinderpest and other diseases to wild life) and the opening up of virgin lands to cultivation are some of the main factors. An apathetic public and the ignorance of some officials (I have heard a senior conservator state that sanctuaries should be encouraged in order to conserve the stock of deer for food—this, in a largely Hindu community!) actively hinder the cause of wild-life preservation, but some progress has been made.

After the tumult of Independence it was realised that some action by the Central Government was essential to save India's fauna before it was too late. In 1952, the inaugural meeting of the Indian Board for Wild Life was held under the chairmanship of the Maharajah of Mysore. The Board is composed of eminent naturalists and senior officials of the Forest Department and Government who formulate and advise on all matters of wild-life conservation policy. Since 1952 four regional secretaries have been appointed and the States within the Union have been encouraged to form their own wild-life-boards. The Eastern Region is fortunate in having as secretary Mr. E. P. Gee, the naturalist and photographer, and the wild life of this area would be much the poorer were it not for his efforts. But have the last nine years shown substantial improvements and what hope is there for the survival of the wild animals of the Eastern Region in the future?

In sanctuaries and reserves the wild life has, in most cases, a good chance of surviving for the study and enjoyment of future generations. On the other hand it is rapidly being exterminated in areas such as the Naga Hills and unclassed State forests. A senior police officer told me some time ago that in a central district of the Naga Hills, where he was stationed, there was almost a complete absence of bird life—an area once noted for its avifauna. He attributed this to the omnivorous habits of the Nagas and the chronic scarcity of food due to the hostilities that still continue. But the pattern is familiar throughout the mountainous districts of north-east India, where the hill people have always relied on forest produce as a part of their existence. Save in a few isolated districts there can be little hope of introducing effective conservation measures in this wild country, though an ill-conceived attempt was made in 1950: the Tirap Frontier Tract National Park, an area of some 800 square miles on the Indo-Burma border, inaccessible, unsurveyed and unknown, still awaits a first visit from some fortunate naturalist.

1.—AN OLD BULL RHINOCEROS IN THE KAZIRANGA WILD-LIFE SANCTUARY, EASTERN INDIA. The rhino population of the sanctuary is now estimated at 350, an increase of 50 over the 1953 figure

2.—A FAMILY PARTY OF WILD ELEPHANT IN THE MANAS SANCTUARY. Poachers have become a serious menace in the less frequented areas and constitute a real threat to the wild life

In other parts of the region rewarding steps have been taken in the past five years with the creation of three new sanctuaries: Hazaribagh in Bihar, Gurum Pani (meaning hot water—on account of the sulphurous springs) in Assam, and Keibul Lamjao in Manipur, which is specifically designed to protect the few remaining brow-antlered deer. Gurum Pani provides an interesting example of how well-considered legislation can beneficially affect wild life. Shortly after the second World War two "sportsmen" are said to have accounted for 25 deer in two nights' shooting around the hot springs. Similar occurrences, although not so deplorable, became all too frequent until the area was virtually devoid of wild life except for an occasional elephant. Since 1956, however, sambar, barking deer, gaur or mithan, rhino, elephant and tiger often visit the springs, but the interesting thing is that many of these animals have re-assumed their diurnal habits. Hazaribagh, gazetted in 1954, contains a variety of wild life (cheetal [Fig. 3], tiger, sloth bear, nilgai and sambar), but all the animals are reported to be extremely shy of man—even after seven years of protection—which indicates that poaching continues. One must look to the established sanctuaries, notably the Kaziranga and the Manas, both in Assam, to find definite signs of achievement.

Bounded by the River Brahmaputra on the north and the trunk road on the south the 166 square miles of the Kaziranga Sanctuary (established in 1928) provide excellent opportunities for seeing wild animals undisturbed in their natural habitat. The rhino population is now estimated at 350, an increase of 50 over the 1953 figure (Fig. 1). But the most significant feature of the past ten years has been the astonishing increase of the fine swamp deer or barasingha: in 1952 a party of two or three was a rare sight indeed, but to-day herds of forty or more can be seen grazing unconcernedly on the open midans. Yet the very habits of these graceful animals, including a preference for open country, make them an easy target for the poacher. Wild elephant—a herd of some 100 was seen last

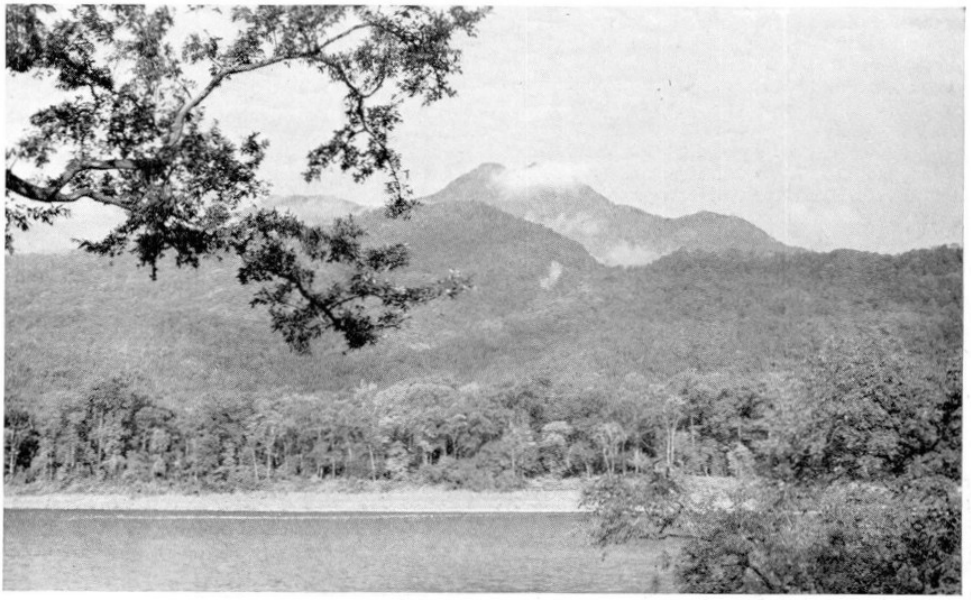
3.—CHEETAL OR SPOTTED DEER. Cheetal are found only on the north bank of the River Brahmaputra in Assam

year—are common in the more remote parts of the sanctuary, and wild buffalo (Fig. 6), whose shyness is still something of an enigma, are numbered at some 400. Hog deer and wild pig (Fig. 5) are plentiful and the bird life, rich in variety and numbers, combine to make the Kaziranga Sanctuary one of India's showplaces.

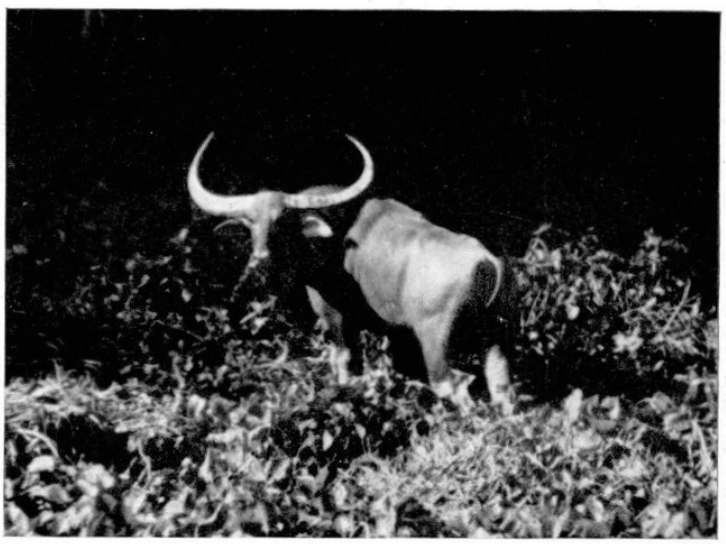
The Manas Sanctuary in the district of North Kamrup relies more on magnificent scenery and incomparable fishing as lures to the visitor (Fig. 4). It was formed in 1905 (as a protection measure for the rhinoceros) and covers approximately 120 square miles of forest, river and open stretches of grass land. The rest-house overlooks the 100-yard-wide, glacier-fed River Manas where it debouches from the foothills of the Bhutan Himalaya, and it is one of those rare places that do not lose their beauty on a cloudy, sunless day. In pre-Independence days the Governor's Christmas camp was held every year on the Manas and the visitors' book is filled with such remarks as: "The scenery amply compensates a poor day's sport," or (usually written by an eminent hand) "Broken by a monster below Tiger pool. If you can catch him, 'You're a better man . . .' " But there are, also, many shrewd observations on the ecology and natural history of the sanctuary.

In 1954, before the rest-house was built, and on nearly every successive year I have visited the Manas. Buffalo cart and elephant were then the only means of entering the sanctuary and the place abounded with wild life: elephant (Fig. 2), gaur, sambar, buffalo, cheetal, tiger, hog and barking deer and so on. On one occasion I witnessed a tigress cunningly stalk a party of cheetal, prey and pursuer passing not ten yards from my hide; on another I spent three hours in the midst of a herd of 40 elephant, my own animal, whose mahout was quite exceptional, at times almost touching the flanks of her wild brethren. Unfortunately, the poachers who have always taken their toll on the southern perimeter have become, lately, a serious menace in the less frequented areas and these, together with increasing numbers of wild dog and an insidious creeper that is slowly covering parts of the available grazing, constitute a real threat to the wild life. Action against the poachers is being taken and a number of cases will, doubtless, wend their tortuous way to some innocuous conclusion.

In a broad sense, the flora and fauna of these two sanctuaries may be taken as typical of the region as a whole, but in the field of wild-life preservation and improvement of sanctuaries in other areas, much greater efforts are required. One hears, for example, disturbing reports of destruction of wild life in the Jaldapara Sanctuary in West Bengal and little has been done for the Sonai Rupa and Orang Sanctuaries in Assam. Despite efforts to educate the public through the radio and Press to appreciate the need to preserve rather than destroy, much still depends on the individual forest officer, his knowledge and interest and his ability to instill enthusiasm into his subordinates. Although this article gives but a cursory glance at the problem, I hope it will re-assure those readers who have known India and her forests that the work done before Independence is not being entirely wasted. There are still many people who are aware of the importance of preserving and rehabilitating the fauna of this great country and one can only hope that their efforts will be sustained by the coming generation.



4.—LOOKING OVER THE RIVER MANAS TO THE BHUTAN FOOTHILLS FROM THE REST-HOUSE IN THE MANAS SANCTUARY. The sanctuary relies on "magnificent scenery and incomparable fishing" to attract the visitor



5 and 6.—A WILD PIG AND A WILD BUFFALO. Both animals are to be found in large numbers in the Kaziranga Sanctuary