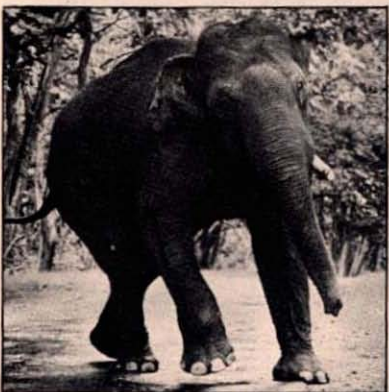
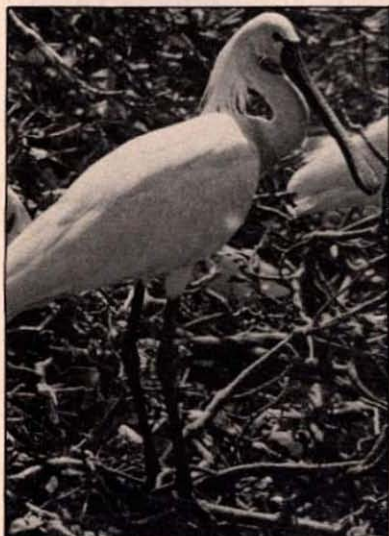


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The Society was founded in 1883 for the purpose of exchanging notes and observations on zoology and exhibiting interesting specimens of animal life. Its funds are devoted to the study of natural history in the Oriental region, and to measures for nature conservation. Individual membership can be in either personal or official capacity. Membership is also open to scientific and educational associations and institutions as well as companies.

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NEWS NOTES COMMENTS



Carambolin lake

The Konkan Railway Project, like many other environment v/s development issues, has been the subject of heated debate. The rail route will run southwards along the coast from Maharashtra through Goa and parts of Karnataka and Kerala, opening up rail access to several areas, and greatly reducing travel time on some routes.

Inevitably, there is a price to pay for this progress. Some ecologically valuable areas will be damaged, probably irreparably. Carambolin lake in Goa, about 12 km from Panaji, is one such area. This 70 ha wetland, the largest freshwater body in the state, is an important source of water for rice cultivation. Parts of the wetland are used as a grazing ground for local livestock, and fishing rights in the lake are auctioned each year. The lake is also a stopover site for large numbers of migrating waterbirds, and a wintering site for some. An estimated 120 species of resident and migrating birds have been recorded at Carambolin. The area is also an ideal field laboratory for local school and college students, and supports a growing population of birdwatchers.

Unfortunately, the Konkan railway route passes right through the lake. Even by official estimates, one third of the wetland will be destroyed. There are fears that the damage, both direct (draining the wetland) and indirect (increased disturbance, imbalance of the ecosystem by the introduction of foreign materials into soil and water, etc.) will be far more extensive. There has been talk about filling up part of the lake to construct a marshalling yard; that would destroy the wetland completely.

Local groups want the railway, if at all it is to be built, to go round the lake instead of through it. The extra costs (increased construction costs and compensation for land) would almost certainly be offset by the benefits that Carambolin provides to the area.

Apart from their wildlife values — healthy wetlands support a diverse flora and fauna — wetlands

benefit people too. They play a crucial role in maintaining the water table and preventing floods (by soaking up excess water during the monsoon). The world over, wetlands help sustain human communities in their vicinity. All this is widely known, but India's wetlands continue to be wantonly misused.

Several environmental groups want the railway route shifted further inland, where construction would be easier (because the major river estuaries would be avoided) and environmental damage and loss of agricultural areas far less severe. The other school of thought says that enough time has been wasted on discussion; work should begin immediately, and damn the consequences. Judging from India's past record, there is little doubt which side will win.

More Sumatran rhinos

The Sumatran rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) is one of the world's most seriously endangered large mammals, existing only in small, isolated populations in inaccessible areas of Burma, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. Detailed surveys in the late 1970s put the population in Sumatra at between 40 and 75. Habitat loss and poaching (to some extent even in national parks) as well as captures for a government-sanctioned captive-breeding programme, have caused numbers to fall further.

In October 1991, biologists from the Asian Wetland Bureau and the Indonesian forest department found clear evidence that the species still occurs in the remote Berbak Wildlife Reserve in Jambi province, Sumatra. There have been only two earlier reports — in 1936 and 1976 — from Berbak, though this is more because of the inaccessibility of the area than a lack of animals.

The signs included footprints, dung and saplings broken off in feeding behaviour that is typical of rhinos; and judging from the size of the prints, the animal was the Sumatran rather than the larger Javan



E.P. Gee

Too little habitat, too much superstition — most species of rhinos are endangered. Possibly not more than 50-60 Sumatran rhinos survive in the wild.

rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*). Signs of feeding were found in two locations 7 km apart. An earlier patrol to one of these areas in July 1991 had located tracks that were probably of the rhino, but too indistinct for a positive confirmation.

The Berbak reserve is a mixture of peat swamp forest, freshwater swamp forest and riverine forest. Apart from the rhinos, the fauna includes Sumatran tigers (*Panthera tigris sumatrae*), sunbear (*Helarctos malayanus*), and two species each of mouse deer (*Tragulus javanicus* and *T. napu*) and pigs (*Sus scrofa* and *S. barbatus*). Over 250 bird species have been recorded in the area, including the milky stork (*Ibis cinereus*), Storm's stork (*Ciconia stormi*) and whitewinged wood duck (*Cairina scutulata*).

There is a proposal to build a port on the adjacent coast, which will involve a road across the reserve, cutting off the southern one third. The consequences would be severe. Human disturbance would greatly increase, and poachers and illegal timber fellers would have easy access to Berbak's forests.

Good news on goshawks

The red goshawk (*Erythrotriorchis radiatus*) is among the world's rarest birds of prey. Till

recently, little was known about it except that it was endemic to Australia, endangered throughout the continent, and perhaps locally extinct in some areas. What little information was available was based on chance sightings. For example, in the 150 years before the project began, only 18 breeding attempts had been reported — and some of these were considered suspect, possibly being misidentifications of other similar-looking raptors.

In 1987, the Royal Australian Ornithologists' Union, with help from WWF and private donors, began a three-year study of foraging requirements, diet and breeding behaviour of the species. The findings of this study, released recently, have provided the basis for a management plan to build up populations to healthier levels, and perhaps allow the bird to recolonise parts of its former habitat.

The red goshawk occurs in well-watered, open forest and tropical savannah and on the edge of rainforest pockets, in large parts of Australia, but nowhere is it common. Its distribution has changed little since European settlement, with the exception of some coastward contraction in the east. But the bird was always rare, and local declines in abundance have been reported for some areas over many years.