

NATIONAL ACTION PLAN

a critique

by Rauf Ali

The Wildlife Action Plan for India adopted by the Indian Board for Wildlife on October 13, 1983, is based on discussions on the World Conservation Strategy and on the Bali Action Plan which was formulated at the World Parks' Congress at Bali in October 1982.

Fairly comprehensive, the plan deals with just about every aspect of wildlife management: i.e. the establishment of a representative network of protected areas, habitat restoration, proper management of these protected areas, protection in multiple use areas, the rehabilitation of threatened species, captive breeding programmes, education, research and monitoring in international conventions and the laying out of a framework for collaboration with voluntary bodies.

The action plan is a document which will essentially determine wildlife policies in the country, for the next few years, at least, and it is thus incumbent on all of us who are interested in natural history to take a keen interest in its implementation.

Having been actively involved in wildlife research for many years now, and having worked closely with officials dealing with wildlife policy, I, however, have certain reservations about the plan. Not, let me hasten to add, in substance, but in the way it is likely to be implemented. I therefore wish to air these

reservations in the hope of starting a meaningful dialogue amongst those interested in the success of this plan.

Firstly, let us consider the adequate representation of each habitat type, in each bio-geographic region. The Government has decided to go ahead with the Biosphere Reserve Programme, to ensure that adequate representation of each type actually takes place. However, a quick scan of the list of 12 Biosphere reserves now proposed, shows that the majority of them are either in the Himalayas or in the Assam region. The concept of adequate representation already seems to have been forgotten. Is this a precedent to the way the whole action plan is to be administered? (I remember writing to the Department of Environment on this very issue two years ago; I still have not got a reply.)

From this the next point follows logically. Either the areas recommended were those that the concerned authorities were familiar with, or there has been a heavy reliance on secondary sources. *There is no substitute for primary data.* Who collects this primary data, and over how much time? Remember that we are talking about selecting representative areas from a potential forest area of about a third of a million square kilometres. Given a year, as is prescribed by the action plan, to select these representative areas, it is inevitable that the choices will be haphazardly made.

CONSERVATION

It is heartening to know, however, that the use of LANDSAT imagery (photographs taken by satellite and stored on computer tapes) is proposed to aid the selection process. (It is possible to take this exercise a stage further.) One of the uses to which this imagery is being put in developed countries is to analyse the changes in land use patterns. By comparing such imagery taken during successive years, the conversion of any forest area into any other use, or its degradation over patches as small as half a hectare, can be monitored. It is possible to take this exercise a step further and set up a permanent monitoring facility that does this. Such properly run facilities would detect illicit forest clearances before the official on the spot can, and follow-up action could be monitored centrally. The effectiveness of the Forest Conservation Act and its implementation could thus be ideally monitored. It goes without saying, that the enforcement of this act in less enlightened states would prove more effective once the message that Big Brother *is* watching, gets across.

The first step is to divide the wildlife areas into adequately protected, inadequately protected, well-managed or poorly managed areas. But, who will decide this? Will it be a committee relying on official data or independent field investigators? The following case will make the importance of this issue clear. In a certain sanctuary with which I am familiar, cattle-grazing is not allowed. Grazing, however, takes place on the days the park warden does not visit the area (his tour programme gives ample warning) and does not take place on those days when he is expected. Presumably, if asked by a committee, this warden would report, that grazing has been stopped and there are no enforcement problems. Under the circumstances, it is reasonable to question the guidelines used to determine protection and management status. Are there going to be public hearings where everyone's view points will be heard? How are people who are honest about their management problems going to be protected from vindictive officials? This last point is a serious



E. Hanumantha Rao

The Rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*). The Action Plan envisages greater spending on anti-poaching personnel and equipment. Animals like the one horned rhinoceros would be prime beneficiaries of such efforts.

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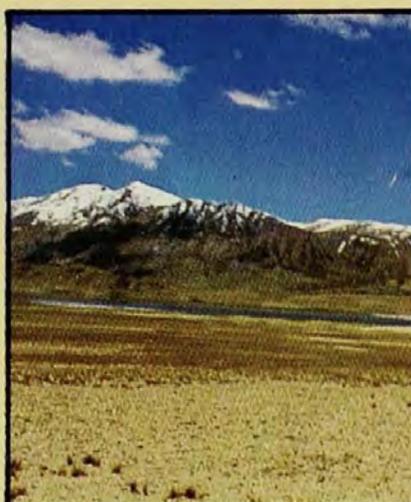
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