



BITTU SAHGAL

## Mercury rising in India

According to a recent study by the Centre for Science and Environment, India is fast becoming a dumping ground for toxic mercury. Mercury emissions to the environment are notoriously difficult to control and this has prompted calls for a complete phase-out of the commercial and domestic use of the metal. India is the world's biggest recycler, but its recycling techniques do not conform to international standards. As a result, significant amounts of mercury have entered the food chain and groundwater systems. Mercury has life-threatening effects on human health, and can severely disrupt reproductive systems and affect unborn foetuses.

## Rhinos on the rise

Forest officials in Kaziranga have reported a fall in rhino poaching, bringing the endangered pachyderm further back from the brink of extinction. An improvement in park protection and the support of villagers residing in villages around Kaziranga has seen a positive

upswing in conservation efforts. Reformed poachers now drive jeeps and conduct wildlife safaris aiding eco-tourism. According to current census figures, over 1,600 rhinos now live in Assam's Protected Areas. In the early 1990s, as many as 50 rhinos were slaughtered by poachers every year. Last year, only four pachyderms were killed, and so far only one has fallen to the poachers in 2003.

## Rare lizard in Chilika

The Barkudia limbless skink *Barkudia insularis*, considered extinct for the past 86 years, has been rediscovered in Chilika by a team of researchers from the Chilika Development Authority, around the Badakuda island. The presence of an island resort at Sanakuda island, close to the Badakuda island is creating concern among the environmental community. The resort was allegedly set up by clearing natural vegetation including a rare endemic mangrove species and noisy generators now provide electricity to the resort. Aside from the rediscovered skink, the area is

also frequented by the rare Irrawady dolphin and numerous bird species. The Wildlife Society of Orissa had demanded immediate inclusion of *Insularis* in the *Wildlife Protection Act* and has asked for immediate action to be taken against the resort's illegal occupation of the Sanakuda island. Nearly two million birds, visited Chilika in the winter of 2002, making it one of the most important migratory waterfowl habitats in Asia.

## Beyond the ban

In a door-to-door survey in the Kashmir valley, the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) and International Fund for Animal Welfare interviewed over 45,000 people to compile a list of *shahtoosh* workers hit by the ban on *shahtoosh*. The idea is to provide them an alternative livelihood, recognising their traditional and rare weaving skills. The survey report has strongly recommended that an appellation of origin for the unique weaving skills of the artisans be created, which will help them produce an exclusive handcrafted product that will

command higher prices and provide employment to all segments of *shahtoosh* workers hit by the ban. WTI also confirmed that *shahtoosh* shawls are still woven in the Kashmir valley, despite the ban on its production and sale. The survey revealed that a maximum of 15,000 people were involved in the *shahtoosh* production process, most of them women.

## Schaller receives award

World-renowned researcher and conservationist Dr. George Schaller was awarded the Sálím Ali Loke Wan Tho Conservation Award by the Bombay Natural History Society. Dr. Schaller's pioneering work in Asia includes studies on the tiger in Kanha, chiru in Tibet, snow leopard and wild goat in the Himalaya and the giant panda in China. Dr. Schaller promptly donated the award to the Wildlife Protection Society of India and the Wildlife Trust of India to help with their efforts to end the trade in *shahtoosh*. 

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P.C. DHIR



**On the cover**

The population of Pintail Ducks *Anas acuta* is in decline because they are being poached and their wetlands are being reclaimed.

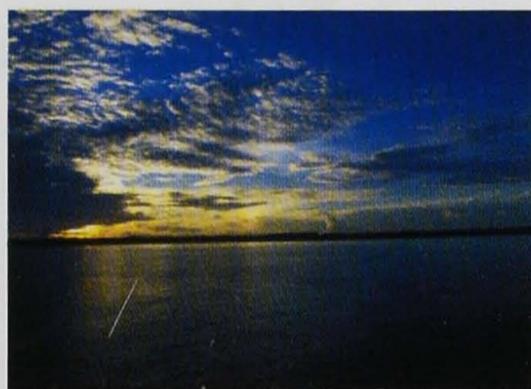
Photographer: N.C. Dhingra

Call of the wild  
**Sanctuary**  
 A S I A

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**42 The Wildlife Protectors**

India has a wonderful tradition of deep veneration of nature, crafted from awe, wonder, fear and dependence. As city dwellers are distanced from nature, the ancient stirrings weaken and sometimes die, writes **Bittu Sahgal**. But there remain those who strive to change the world around them. Such people can and *do* make a difference.



**22 The Edge of the World**

The Nicobar group of islands is India's southernmost terrestrial point and home to some of the most pristine habitats in the country. The Nicobars host a diversity of flora and fauna, with a high level of species endemism, write **Kartik Shanker** and **Meera Anna Oommen**. Although only a small percentage of forests have been lost till date, habitat conversion poses potential dangers to the area.



**34 Sailing with Sea Serpents**

**Aaron Savio Lobo** is fascinated by sea snakes, which he would like to see protected. During the course of his M.Sc. studies, he spent many hours in fishing trawlers off the coast of Goa, collecting and analysing specimens. Not much is known about India's sea snakes and there is a desperate need for more research. Sea snakes have few natural enemies, but mechanised trawlers are now the leading cause of mortality for these beautiful marine reptiles.

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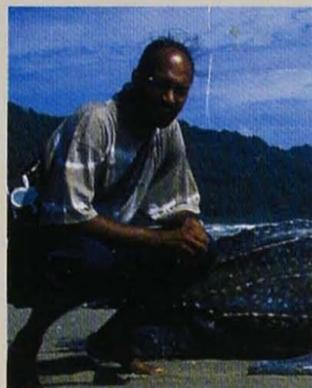
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**Aaron Savio Lobo**

A young researcher, he has just completed his M.Sc. on sea snakes off the coast of Goa and intends to study these reptiles further. **34**



**Pranay Waghray**

Based in Hyderabad, he is working for the conservation of forests in the Nagarjunasagar-Srisailem Tiger Reserve. **54**