

Trouble in Kaziranga

A Sanctuary Report

Kaziranga National Park is the jewel in Assam's crown, with its healthy population of herbivores – rhino, wild buffalo, deer and elephant – as well as large predators such as the tiger. The Asian one-horned rhinoceros is without a doubt the star of the park, this being its last major stronghold. In recent years, the rhino population has increased thanks to stricter protection. However, widespread, uncontrolled, illegal grazing inside the park in the last few months is reversing these gains and jeopardising the park's health.

Hundreds of domestic cattle have entered the park in recent months, destroying the natural flora. Worryingly, the grazing is taking place not just in the peripheral areas but also inside the first and second additions and in the eastern (Agaratoli) range right inside the Sohola wetland. Small-time politicians are inciting the villagers to enter the park, hoping to reap the benefits in terms of votes. Grazing might sound like a minor problem but it does,

in fact, pose a serious threat to Protected Areas as it adversely affects the regeneration of grasses and shrubs and creates a hard surface over the ground disallowing the growth of short grasses suitable for rhino forage.

Grazing will allow the proliferation of weeds such as *Vetiveria zizanoides*, which will become the dominant species, making grass conditions inappropriate for burning. All this will affect the habitat to the detriment of the herbivore population, Kaziranga's greatest attraction. Grazing pressure has already led to the deterioration of habitat in Pabitora and Manas. As a result, the rhino population in both these parks has fallen. If this is not to be repeated in Kaziranga, urgent action must be taken. Habitat erosion will have serious implications on Kaziranga's large herbivore population. Allowing the deterioration of Assam's premier park will reflect the state poorly in both the national and international media, as well as with the revenue-generating tourism industry.

The government of Assam must be convinced that stopping the grazing is in its best interests. They must act immediately, before more harm is done to one of the world's greatest heritage sites. The government, with the advice of the forest department, must also look into providing alternate grazing lands by restoring areas outside the park and encouraging a shift to stall-feeding.

Readers can help by writing a letter asking for the protection of Assam's wildlife to:

*Mr. Tarun Gogoi, Chief Minister of Assam,
Janata Bhavan, Dispur, Guwahati – 781 006,
Assam. E-mail: cm-assam@hub1.nic.in*

*Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee, Prime Minister of
India, South Block, New Delhi.*

Fax: (011) 2301 6857/ 301 9545

E-mail: pmosb@pmo.nic.in

*Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, President, Congress Party,
10, Janpath, New Delhi – 110 011.*

Fax: (011) 23018651





On the cover

The absence of tigers in the island kingdom of Sri Lanka has placed leopards at the apex of the food pyramid.

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A S I A

16 Gold Dust River

The Subansiri river in Arunachal Pradesh has many names, but for Debal Sen it will always be his gold dust river. As he journeys along the river's course from Taksing to Majuli, he encounters fabulous forests, rare wildlife and ancient tribal cultures, in what is still one of the most remote forests of India. But how long will this magnificent region survive?



28 Meadow to Market

The markets are full of herbal drugs, shampoos and toothpastes, many of which are extracted from alpine and sub-alpine Himalayan meadows. Anjali Awasthi and Sanjay Kr. Uniyal raise concerns that this is leading to the over-exploitation of rare herbs, in violation of Indian and international laws. They argue for more Protected Areas in the Himalaya as well as the increased cultivation of herbs in and around villages, to reduce pressure on wild plants.

34 Chambal – Land of the Bandit Queen

Wildlife researcher K.S. Gopi Sundar has always been fascinated by the Chambal river. Legendary fiefdom of dacoits and bandits, this river is one of the most biodiversity-rich tracts in India. Home to gharials, muggers, Gangetic dolphins, skimmers and flamingos, the Chambal is a perfect example of coexistence between people and the wilderness. Gustasp Irani rafts down this river near Kota and urges readers to experience the magic of the Chambal for themselves.

Contributors



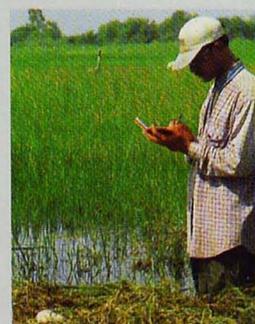
Debal Sen

Cardiologist and photographer, he has a special fascination for the remote forests and rivers of northeast India. **16**



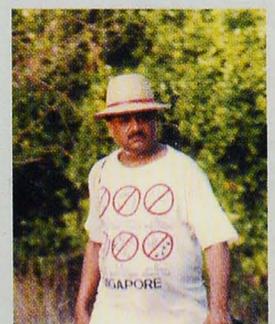
Sanjay Kr. Uniyal and Anjali Awasthi

Researchers at the Wildlife Institute of India, they are studying Himalayan ecology. **28**



K.S. Gopi Sundar

A wildlife researcher, he is engaged in path-breaking work on the endangered Sarus Crane. **34**



Prakash Dubey

Trekker, photographer and itinerant traveller, he has published several books about India's wildernesses. **42**