

Call of the wild

Sanctuary

Vol. XXXII No.2, April 2012

A S I A

₹100

RECEIVED
11 APR 12
INDIAN CONSERVATION SOCIETY



Conservation Biology in India



Despite poaching being an ongoing problem, the Rajiv Gandhi Orang National Park has recorded an increase in the rhino population. According to a recently concluded census, the 78.81 sq. km. park now has 100 rhinos, a significant increase from 64 in 2009. The increase can be attributed to strong anti-poaching measures. Recent initiatives in Orang include awareness campaigns and joint vigilance teams with villagers in the most susceptible areas. A two tier regular supervision-cum-inspection protocol of every protection camp has been instituted. Patrolling is intensively monitored and recorded on a daily basis at the Camp, Range and Division level.

Pictures Don't Lie

An Orang Odyssey

Sushil Kumar Daila, Divisional Forest Officer, Mangaldai Wildlife Division, recounts a recent rhino poaching incident in Assam's Orang National Park and highlights some positive developments that will help secure the park.

A female rhino was shot dead by poachers in the Rajiv Gandhi Orang National Park at 1:45 a.m. on January 9, 2011 near the Kachariveti camp. The poachers decamped with the rhino horn the same night. Their *modus operandi* took us by surprise. Normally they would enter when the moon was full; this time they chose a moonless night. Moreover, they brought the rhino down with a single bullet.

The next day, as we sat discussing the issue, all of us depressed, a thought occurred to me: "What if one or more of the poachers had been photographed in one of the 30 or so camera traps we had installed for our tiger estimation work?" Immediately, the Range Officer, Salim Ahmed, our staff and I began to inspect camera after camera. To our great surprise and delight, we discovered that on the night of January 4-5, 2011, one of the cameras actually had caught three poachers carrying two .303 rifles. Instantly we compared the faces with those of known suspects. But none of our staff members could identify the men.

Speculating that they might be from nearby villages, we organised a house-to-house night raid in two neighbouring villages of Kachariveti tup no.1 and no. 2. We had a large contingent of forest staff with us, including women foresters/forest guards and even some army personnel. The search operation began at 10 p.m. and ended at six a.m. the next day. Leaving nothing to chance, we scoured every single house. Our feet were numb with the

cold as we had walked barefoot in swampy areas and across the Panchnoi river to reach some of the scattered dwellings. But we found no poachers.

Got them!

We then decided to announce a cash award of Rs. 25,000/- for information on the men and printed good quality, large-sized 'WANTED' posters in Assamese, with the pictures of the poachers carrying two .303 rifles. We put the posters up all over Darrang and Sonitpur districts. The plan worked. Within 24 hours, the intelligence information began to pour in. But the culprits had also been forewarned in

the process and when we got to their homes, predictably, they had vanished. We did, however, manage to unearth one poacher's cell phone number from titbits of paper inside his house. We also began to put word out that the Government was going to issue shoot-on-sight orders against them if they did not surrender. That was enough for them. On February 4, 2011, they entered the Dhekiajuli police station and surrendered. They were arrested by us then and there and we seized the two rifles, which perfectly matched the weapons in the camera trap photos. The next day they were jailed and a charge-sheet meticulously filed, for once with clinching evidence.



DHRITIMAN MUKHERJEE



In my time as a Divisional Forest Officer, I have unfortunately seen four rhino poaching cases. But nothing pained me nearly as much as the death of an adult male rhino that was shot by poachers at dusk on January 23, 2010 in the Jhaoni Island of the Rajiv Gandhi Orang National Park. As soon as the staff heard two gunshots, we set out to nab the poachers. We tried long and hard, but they escaped. We noticed, however, a horrifyingly thick blood trail in several places on the three square kilometre island. Eventually, we were able to locate the rhino. Alive. But with its horn chopped off. The animal was in acute pain and was walking in tight circles, in utter distress. We watched helplessly, in total anguish. Grown men – we were all in tears as we watched the magnificent animal writhing in pain. We called for the best vets in Assam, but the rhino died, after struggling for life for two full days. The entire staff of Orang witnessed first-hand just how ruthless the poaching gangs are. The rhino would have collapsed from the shock of the bullet, but even as it breathed they had brutally gouged out its horn. When on the same island two months later another rhino poaching attempt was made, one of the poachers was shot dead by our staff. Since then no incident has taken place. There has been a lull for 26 months now, but we harbour no illusions. The poachers are there and waiting for us to drop our guard.



COURTESY ORANG FOREST DEPARTMENT



COURTESY ORANG FOREST DEPARTMENT

ABOVE Camera traps dated January 4, 2011 at 10:03:09 p.m. revealed that a tiger had crossed the area where the rhino was subsequently killed. The camera traps also provided leads on the rhino poachers as it captured their images on January 5, 2011 at 1:31:25 a.m.

FACING PAGE An adult male rhino was shot by poachers at dusk on January 23, 2010 in the Jhaoni Island of Orang. By the time the authorities located the rhino, its horn had been chopped off and the perpetrators had made a getaway. The alive animal was in acute distress and died after suffering for two days.

We appointed a private lawyer as well as a public prosecutor and worked very closely with them to ensure we had a water-tight case. We were determined to have these poachers who had killed a rhino on our watch convicted.

Piecing together the whole episode, I discovered that on January 4, at 2.30 p.m., just five days before the poachers had done their dark deed, I had personally walked that area with my staff on patrol. For all we know they were around, watching us and waiting until they thought it was safe to take out the rhino. They had clearly seen the flash, but could not locate the camera as it had been secured up on a tree. They then re-entered the area four days later from another point and escaped being photographed.

Orang must live

Over the last two and half years (September 2009 – February 2012), there has been a

major overhaul of Orang's protection force and protocols. Seven new anti-poaching camps, five RCC watch towers, two floating camps, patrolling roads, bridges and culverts have been added to the protection infrastructure. And vast improvements in the living conditions of our field staff have been undertaken. We have also been provided with three new vehicles, two speed boats, wireless equipment, IT gadgets and a host of other equipment, apart from our arsenal of arms and ammunition. Arms training and firing practice have also been given to the entire staff in collaboration with the Assam State Police.

That is not all. We have diligently settled all ex-gratia cases of cattle killing by tigers outside the national park, even those pending since 2002! And today compensation is paid on the spot, within 24 hours of any cattle kill. Additionally, we have organised awareness campaigns and formed joint vigilance teams with villagers in the most susceptible areas. A two-tier regular supervision-cum-inspection protocol of every protection camp has been instituted. Patrolling is intensively monitored and recorded on a daily basis at the Camp, Range and Division level. Strict and prompt action is taken against erring staff and we are fine-tuning our administrative set up for time-bound disposal of requests for leave, GPF advance, increments or any other problem raised by our field staff. Most

importantly, senior officers accompany forest guards on foot patrols and many joint patrols have been initiated with army and police personnel.

These efforts have borne fruit. Two well-orchestrated encroachment attempts by over 2,000 suspected Bangladeshi intruders in 2010 were stymied. A total of 67 hutments built on two separate days were demolished the very day they were erected. An additional area of 47 ha. was added to the Orang National Park by the Assam government to prevent possible encroachment after the incident, so that the river itself became a natural barrier. To date a total of 60 poachers have been arrested and prosecuted. As many as eight have been shot dead in encounters with our staff upon whom unprovoked firing took place. Seven rifles, a pistol and a large cache of ammunition were seized. We also had to deal with six distinct incidents of rhinos straying into villages. Happily, we were able to herd all the rhinos safely back to the park, at times after painstaking efforts for three to four days. To our utter relief, not a single case of tiger poisoning has taken place since December 25, 2010. Not a single rhino has been poached since January 9, 2011.

All this is good news for us, but we know we cannot lose focus for even a second. Orang's rhinos and tigers depend on us and we will be there for them. 🐾