

Call of the wild

Sanctuary

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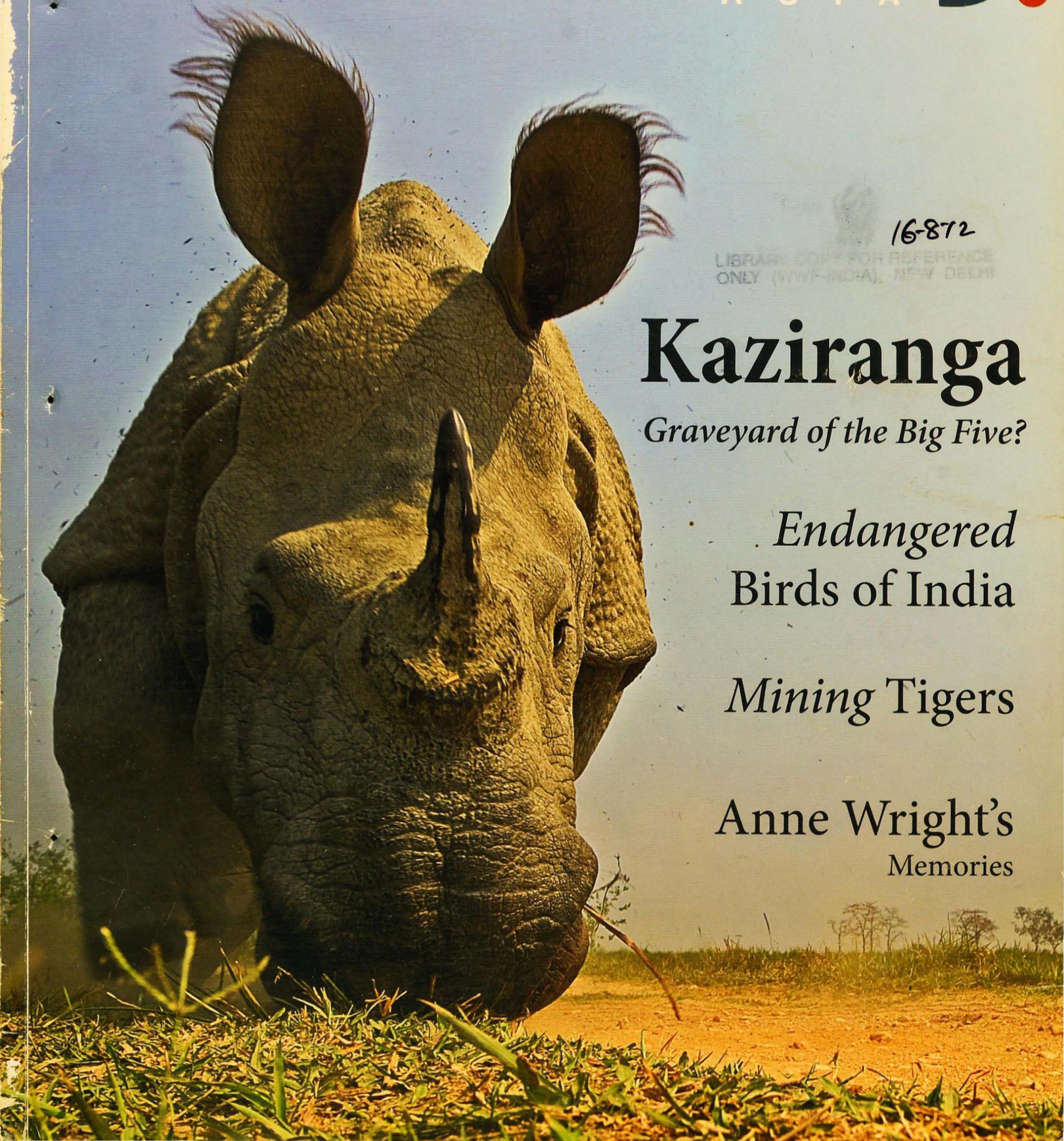
Kaziranga

Graveyard of the Big Five?

*Endangered
Birds of India*

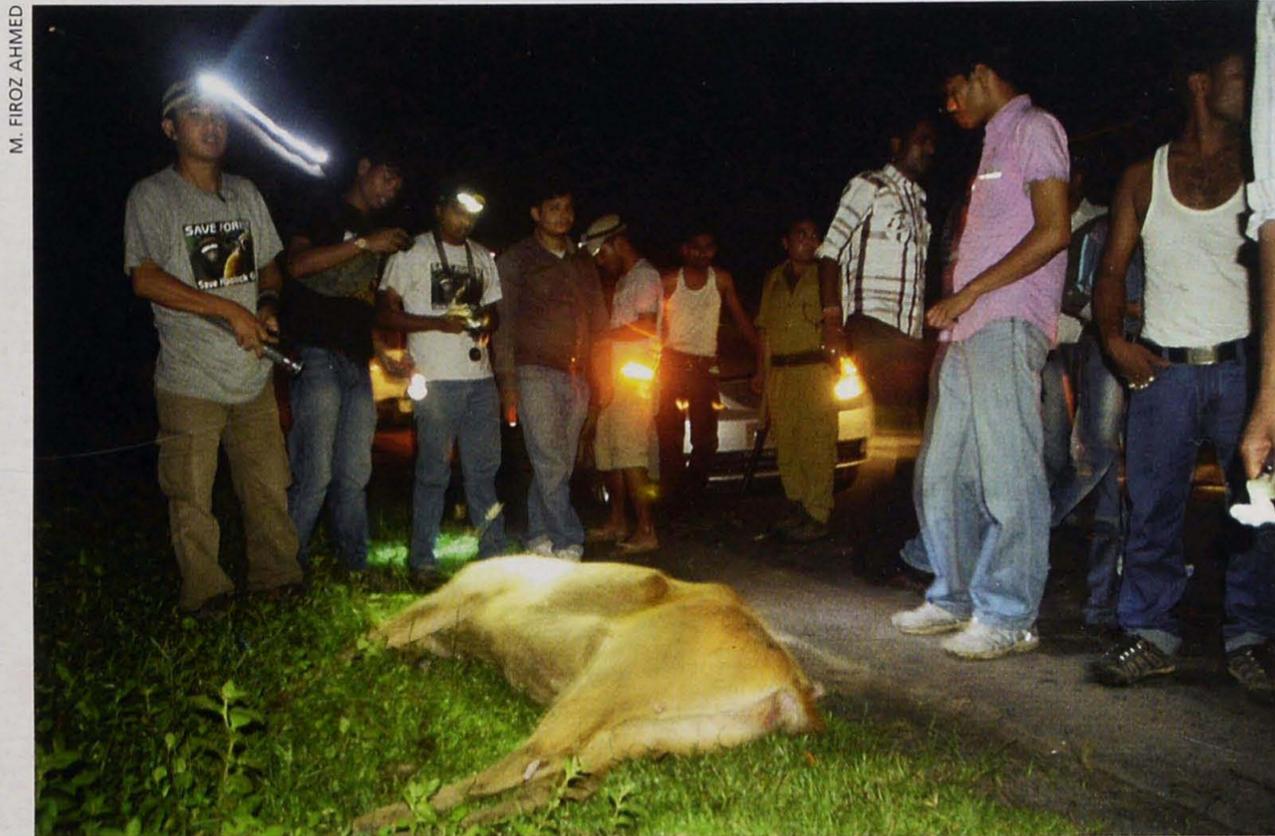
Mining Tigers

*Anne Wright's
Memories*



Kaziranga

Is this a Big Five graveyard? asks **Shailendra Yashwant**



M. FIROZ AHMED

The home of the great Indian one-horned rhino, Bengal tiger, wild buffalo, Asian elephant and eastern swamp deer, Shailendra Yashwant suggests, is justifiably regarded as one of India's best protected national parks. But can the pride of the Assam Forest Department survive the brutal double-barreled attack on it from poachers on the one hand and land grabbers of all descriptions on the other?

Crack of dawn, Kaziranga National Park. I am waiting for the rhinos to wake up and get on with their business of wallowing in mud before they launch into their daylong feeding mode. An elephant herd emerges from the tall grass and trundles towards a 'bheel' beyond the swamp we were watching. Sitting quietly in the jeep we watch the majestic creatures pass. Soon enough a lone rhino appears, and waddles to the swamp and settles down with a splash, momentarily spooking a hog deer

ABOVE Volunteers of the NGO Aaranyak contemplate a hog deer mowed down by a speeding vehicle on the National Highway 37. The recent Brahmaputra floods, took a toll of over 400 hog deer.

and a wild pig. A gaggle of Bar-headed Geese flying towards us is cut off by a lone eagle swooping down into the grass between the wild pigs, swamp deer and wild buffaloes to grab unseen prey. Somewhere behind me is the mighty Brahmaputra and stretching in front of me, beyond National Highway (NH) 37, loom the Karbi Anglong hills.

I spot pugmarks in the jeep tracks ahead of us. As we edge closer, Gopalnath, the forest guard accompanying us, mutters "tiger". A chital alarm call not far from us confirms the cat's presence. The thrill of sensing a tiger before seeing one is still the best part of forest time in my book. After waiting a while, we move on, slowly, senses alert.

Kaziranga!

Bittersweet

The 2012 animal estimation, released this year, indicates that as of 2012, the Kaziranga National Park harbours 1,165 elephants, 2,290 rhinos and as many as 118 tigers... adult, sub-adult and cubs (the highest density in the world).

Numbers can be gratifying... and misleading. Animal numbers might well be growing but the national park is not. In fact, rapid habitat defragmentation, disrupted corridors, deforestation in Karbi Anglong, and relentless poaching have combined to bring this World Heritage Site to its knees. What is worse, a virtual cold war exists between officials of the Assam Forest Department and their counterparts in the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council (KAAC). If some degree of sanity is not restored, and fast, we could be watching the demise of this Assamese natural jewel sooner than we imagine. In the monsoons, when the Brahmaputra river, which defines the northern boundary of the park, breaks its banks, its waters pour into Kaziranga's fecund grasslands. This massive flood has always been a source of life for the wildlife of Kaziranga. But virtually all its wild mammals are forced at this time to take to the hills of Karbi Anglong along the southern boundary of the Protected Area. For eons, the flood response of wild animals has been to migrate like clockwork, using specific forested strips or 'corridors' to access high grounds on the other side of NH-37. Today we know of four specific corridors that the animals use – Panbari, Haldibari, Kanchanjuri and Amguri. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) deployed camera traps in June 2010 to obtain photographic evidence of animal movement in these corridors. By the end of the year they were able to establish evidence of a range of animals dependent on these pathways, including elephants, wild pigs, barking deer, Jungle Fowl and leopards. Last Christmas, a melanistic common leopard, more popularly called the black panther and a Bengal tiger moving through the corridor were recorded in the camera traps.

Troubles galore

Realising the vital importance of the corridors, the Government of Assam, as part of Project Elephant, notified an area of 3,270 sq. km. as a 'No Development Zone' along the Kaziranga-Karbi Anglong Elephant Reserve on July 5, 1996. This extended across the districts of Golaghat, Karbi Anglong, Nagaon and Sonitpur. Unfortunately, the Assam Forest Department's



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Tiger Doomsday Clock

The recent spate of poaching incidents in Maharashtra has once again highlighted the chinks in our protection mechanisms. India has lost roughly half of all its tiger forests in the past four decades. This alone is tantamount to a death sentence on *Panthera tigris*, which must survive intensified poaching, and rampant human encroachments in a greatly diminished land area. The prognosis for India's surviving tiger population is therefore not very good at this point. This is why *Sanctuary Asia* feels it necessary to front-page its 'Tiger Doomsday Clock'. Time is running out and so are our options because beyond a point, when the land simply ceases to be hospitable for tiger breeding, the numbers will surely plummet, with little or no help from poachers, encroachers, miners, or dam builders... whose combined effect has reversed most of Project Tiger's early successes. On top of this we have the reality of climate change to deal with.

2012 – Two minutes and 50 seconds to midnight (extinction). Apart from the *Forest Rights Act*, passed

in 2007-2008, Indian forests are already being ruthlessly attacked by politicians and industrialists who seek to destroy tiger habitats with dams, mines and dismember them with highways. Jayanthi Natarajan, India's Environment Minister, said she would balance growth with environmental concerns, but that proved to be a short-lived promise. Her predecessor Jairam Ramesh, too capitulated to pressure from his cabinet colleagues and reversed many of the good policies he wanted instituted. *Sanctuary* will monitor Natarajan's actions closely, particularly in light of the fact that she has been giving approvals to almost every project that has come to the Ministry for clearance in the one year that she has been Minister, even over-ruling those that the Forest Advisory Committee advised her to reject. India's National Board for Wildlife has traditionally been a bulwark of support for our wildlife. But will it be allowed to continue playing this role, or will it be weakened by determined politicians? With isolation and strict protection India's wildlife can help regenerate degraded forest lands

and ecosystems. This could also deliver forest dwellers 'right livelihoods' in perpetuity, and help us fight climate change. Our doomsday clock can move both forward and back, but that depends on whether *Homo sapiens* proves to be wise, or unwise.



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jurisdiction is restricted to 'their' side of the highway. North of NH-37 'belongs' to the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council, whose Forest Department functions independently.

"Once the animals cross the road, whether elephants or rhinos, they are out of our jurisdiction," a frustrated Uttam Saikia, Honorary Wildlife Warden, Bokaghat-Kaziranga, says. "Consequently, even if an animal is mowed down by a speeding vehicle on the killer highway and is flung on the Karbi Anglong side, officials of the Assam Forest Department stay their distance so as not to 'offend' their prickly counterparts in Karbi Anglong." Apparently this is the reason for the failure of the Assam Forest Department in implementing the 1996 'No Development Zone' notification.

This is also allegedly why the Chief Conservator of Forest (CCF), Karbi Anglong, was (shockingly) able to renew licenses of as many as 14 stone crushing units operating within a 25 km. radius of the boundary of the Kaziranga National Park. This is also how an astounding 64 industrial units, including stone crushers, limestone quarries and saw mills continue to operate unhindered in the very corridors and contiguous forests that must be protected to allow unhindered migration of Kaziranga's denizens.

If it wasn't for a complaint to the National Green Tribunal by a private citizen, the sorry state of affairs would have continued. Put simply it appears that everyone is confused about the exact demarcation of areas to be protected and there seems to be no communication between the Karbi Anglong and Assam Forest Department authorities.

When asked to comment, the Principal Chief Conservator of Forest of Assam, V. K. Vishnoi's reaction was simple, "Not my jurisdiction, the district is governed by the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council that has its own forest division." He was quick to dismiss any further questions on the matter. And then expressionlessly, he said, "The Chief Conservator of Forests of Karbi Anglong was abducted a few hours ago."

Failing to get any opinion from him about this "state within a state," I left his office to discover that the abduction was all over



SHAILENDRA YASHWANT

the news channels. Abhijit Rabha, the Chief Conservator of Forests in-charge of the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Council and his Range Officer Ranjan Barua were allegedly abducted by armed Karbi People's Liberation Tigers (KPLT) militants as they were returning from a biodiversity survey that involved trekking to Singhason Peak, the highest point in Karbi Anglong at 1,600 m. This area was reputed to be a favoured hideout for the insurgents.

Autonomy for destruction?

Karbi Anglong, previously known as the Mikhir Hills, is now an autonomous hill district of Assam, under the provision of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. It is the largest of the 27 administrative districts of Assam state. It occupies an area of 10,434 sq. km., about the size of Hawaii! Just over 4,922 sq. km. of this is forested according to official records.

The poetic yet apt note on the KAAC website <http://karbianglong.nic.in/> has the following description – "These forest areas are natural museums of living giant trees, a treasure house of rare, endemic and endangered species, a dispensary of medicinal plants, a garden for botanists, a gene bank for economically important organisms, a paradise for nature lovers and a laboratory for environmentalists."

But for over four decades now the undiscovered and as yet un-policed interiors of Karbi Anglong's forests have harboured a number of armed insurgents, people's

armies, liberation tigers in whose wake come criminals and poaching syndicates who are offered virtual immunity from action by the Forest Department, which cannot even access the area.

A majority of Karbi tribal groups campaigning for autonomy have surrendered after signing dodgy peace accords with the Centre and Assam governments in exchange for constantly expanding autonomous control and access to the resources of the district. As more and more control is relinquished by the centre and the state, the KAAC for all its 'self-rule' aspirations seems to be directly dictated to by the small coterie of businessmen who wield political power in distant New Delhi. These worthies have one clear task in hand... make money the old fashioned way – by extracting all possible natural resources in the shortest possible time at the lowest possible cost.

Not surprisingly the illegal trade in timber has sky rocketed in the Karbi Anglong district over the years. Despite the many joint-management agreements signed by forest officials of Karbi Anglong, Nagaon and Golaghat districts, a rash of illegal timber sawmills operate with impunity along the Karbi Anglong-Nagaon border. And free markets for timber operate openly at Samurali, Chowdhury Bazaar and Zinda Bazaar in the Nagaon district adjacent to

ABOVE Mining for stones and rampant bamboo extraction in the Karbi Anglong forest is a major threat to Kaziranga.



ABOVE The Brahmaputra floods (facing page), are vital to the ecological health of Kaziranga but National Highway 37, roads, quarries and construction have turned the life-giving flood into a death trap as animals are unable to reach high ground in Karbi Anglong. Asian elephants (above), one-horned rhinos, tigers and wild buffaloes are among the megafauna most affected..

Howraghat. And so what if this is banned by the Supreme Court of India?

Says Raj Phukan, Secretary General, Green Guard Nature Organisation, a grassroots NGO involved in wildlife and habitat conservation activism in the Karbi foothills since 1996: “The forest destruction is most visible in the Parkup Range. Reliable sources have also reported that the KPLT, which was recently in the news for the abduction of the forest officials, is directly involved in tree felling activities. Unlike other outfits like the now surrendered KLNLF and UPDS, which were protective of the Karbi natural heritage, the KPLT openly patronises the forest destruction by charging Rs. 50,000 per C.O. (Cutting Order) holder.”

I saw hundreds of stockpiles of logs on my way to the Swang forests that borders the Nagaon and Karbi Anglong districts. Raj recounted the names of wild animal species that he and his group have rescued in the

last few years, on the outskirts of the forests and from the highway – moon bear, serow, clouded leopard, pangolin, slow loris, hoolock gibbon, capped langur, rock python, barking deer, Grey Peacock Pheasant, Tragopan, king cobra. The list was so long that he shook his head, resigned and embarrassed to discuss the abysmal state of the affairs in his home district.

Satellite mapping of forest degradation on account of shifting cultivation in the hill districts of North Cachar and Karbi Anglong district, carried out by the Assam Remote Sensing Application Centre, reveals that the impact is resulting in soil sterility, soil, floods and downstream siltation. Despite this, in Karbi Anglong, bamboo is still extracted to be turned into pulp for the Nagaon Paper Mill at Jagiroad. The illogic of it all would be comic if the hard reality of it were not so wretched,

In his report ‘*Multi-dimensional Mitigation Initiatives to Human-Elephant Conflicts in Golaghat and adjoining area of Karbi Anglong District, Assam*’, Dr. Bibhab Kumar Talukdar, Secretary General of Aaranyak, writes that these forests have been playing a crucial role in maintaining the seasonal requirements of elephants in the Kaziranga-Karbi Anglong Landscape but “human induced activities

including encroachment and thoughtless destruction of forests has made the contiguous forests further fragmented and thus worsening the tenuous interface system.”

“Any change in land use patterns that impact the corridors connecting Kaziranga to Karbi Anglong, whether it is clear-felling of forests for bamboo, timber or cultivation, quarrying, encroachments for human settlements, even increased vehicular movement on the highway, will have long-term impact on the survival of this critically important landscape. Already the Indian bison has not been sighted here for over 15 years now and you can only imagine the fate of other animals,” he reiterated in an interview in Guwahati a day after Abhijit Rabha’s abduction.

The wildlife trade

Rhino horns, elephant tusks, skins and body parts of all cats, deer, monkeys, gibbons, anything and everything is fair game, when you can exploit the confusion between authorities across the borders, of a state within a state.

There are two kinds of poachers. The first is a poor tribal with some expertise in tracking animals, trying to get out of a *daaru-debt*, marry his daughter off, buy his way out of a perennially bad state to a slightly better one. He gets a pittance and is hardly aware of Interpol or what his Rs.5,000 *bakshish* really means for the survival of a species. The other more lethal kind, is the professional, usually a tribal from Nagaland, Mizoram, or Manipur, who is an expert marksmen, or traditional hunter with no traditional restraint to staunch his blood lust. Such men are usually on the payroll of mafias operating from Dimapur, the epicenter of wildlife trade in Northeast India.

“The wildlife trade is big money, and there is no doubt that militants and insurgents and criminal gangs holed up in the hills are financing themselves by trading in wildlife captured in Karbi Anglong. In the absence of effective policing and joint mechanisms between the Assam and Karbi Anglong

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officials the problem will be worse than it was in Kaziranga in the past,” says Bibhab Talukdar.

“It is extremely difficult to get statistics on poaching these days. All parts of the tiger are precious, so no carcasses will be found. Once the horns and tusks are removed, the rest of the rhino and elephant disappears into cooking pots. Even if a carcass is reported, jurisdiction confusion makes any action taken too late and too little,” adds Uttam Saikia.

Apathy cloaks the entire region, which conservationists refer to as the ‘Schedule Six Syndrome’. Even senior officials such as the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Assam offer a virtually paralytic response to the petty corruption unleashed by the KAAC, which has a not-so-petty impact on the last remaining patch of true biodiversity in Assam.

The official version

When I met D.D. Gogoi, Divisional Forest Officer, Kaziranga National Park, in Bokaghat on April 25, 2012, he defended the park’s protection record emphatically. In his words: “I strongly challenge the allegations of increased incidents of poaching in Kaziranga. In my tenure since 2008, there have been no more than five to six incidents every year in reducing order, and in half of those incidents, we have recovered horns, arrested poachers and vastly improved our intelligence to prevent more incidents. The latest census points to a healthy increase in population of all key species in Kaziranga across demographics.”

Reacting to the allegations of confusion of governance between Karbi Anglong and Kaziranga, he conceded: “Of course we cannot cross into their jurisdiction, but we do undertake joint patrolling with the Karbi Anglong Forest Department during monsoons to ensure smooth passage of animals to higher lands when the Brahmaputra floods Kaziranga.”

He agreed that there was immense scope for strategic cooperation and joint programmes with his Karbi Anglong counterparts especially as “his animals” did not distinguish the borders and given the quality of forests up in the hills, Karbi Anglong could be a haven for wildlife conservation with its own national parks and sanctuary with all the economic opportunities that can bring.



Our interview ended suddenly when Gogoi had to leave immediately in response to a wireless message he received. As we both stepped out of his office, I found myself less skeptical, more hopefully optimistic. Just then I got a text message from Uttam. Gogoi’s departure was triggered by news of the discovery of a tigress carcass deep inside Kaziranga. Not a poaching incident. The animal had died of natural causes... old age. For a second or two I considered requesting Gogoi to permit me to accompany him to the site, but on second thought, I figured I would rather retain the exhilaration of tracking a tiger, seeing its pugmarks, hearing it roar... than etching in my brain the image of a lifeless beast subjected to a post mortem.

I woke up next day to the welcome news that Abhijit Rabha and Ranjan Barua had been released. There was no mention of any military operation, or a negotiated settlement. Just that both of them were let go. I made many attempts after that to contact Abhijit Rabha to get his views on the state of the forests under his purview. But he was not reachable on his mobile. Even eight weeks after his release, following news reports of a judicial probe into the suspicious release of Rabha and Barua by KPLT, all requests for an interview were politely declined. As a journalist I understand the trauma of life threats. I do not grudge him that refusal. 🐾

Stop Press

Kaziranga drowned under “catastrophic floods”

As can be seen from the image above, this monsoon, Assam was struck by a severe flood. This has affected humans and animals alike. So far, over 100 people have died in various districts of the state and nearly 600 animals have perished in the Kaziranga National Park.

The floods swamped the area on June 22, 2012 pushing almost 80 per cent of the area underwater with grave consequences for wild animals. Some managed to reach high grounds in the adjoining Karbi Anglong area when 80 per cent of the park area (on June 29 the water level in Kaziranga touched 76.46 m., 1.44 m. above danger level) was submerged.

The department’s body count included 17 one-horned rhinos, an elephant, a wild buffalo, 412 hog deer, 10 swamp deer, 21 sambar, 31 wild pigs, two hog badgers, two gaur, one jackal and five porcupines at the time of going to press.

Many of the reserve’s 152 anti-poaching camps were submerged, of which six had to be shifted to other locations. The mud tracks, crucial for the movement of park officials and forest guards, too, are damaged.