

## Rise in rhino poaching in Assam

The first ever concrete evidence of rhino poachers using tranquilising guns to kill rhinos in Assam has been unearthed near Kaziranga.

**Bibhab Kumar Talukdar**  
Aaranyak

**O**n 16 November 2006 the Bokakhar Police recovered a Swiss-made tranquilising gun along with darting accessories, chemicals and a US carbine (small rifle) from a hideout just 800 metres away from the Kaziranga National Park boundary.

This seems to be a new technique that poachers in the region have started to use and seriously underscores the urgent need to re-examine the entire anti-poaching strategy in rhino-bearing areas in Assam. Preliminary investigation suggested that the tranquilizing gun was originally purchased by the Office of the

Chief Wildlife Warden of Nagaland from registered suppliers in India. This begs the question: how could the gun be transported out of the Nagaland Forest Department into the hands of poachers? This needs serious investigation by agencies like the Central Bureau of Investigation in India. The status of this important case is not known. But for the greater interest of the rhino protection in Kaziranga National Park and other rhino-bearing sites of Assam, a thorough investigation in this particular case is of utmost necessity.

### Poaching increases in Kaziranga

On 10 December 2006, acting on intelligence, the enforcement agencies in Kaziranga were able to detain three poachers who were about to launch rhino poaching in Kaziranga National Park using

the poachers could enter the Park, the Park authorities were able to detain them and recovered one more hand-made tranquilising gun along with chemicals used to immobilise wild animals. Had the poachers been successful in getting into the National Park, more than ten rhinos could have been poached in a single night using the tranquilising guns and chemicals - without making any noise.

“  
More than ten rhinos could have been poached in a single night using the tranquilising guns.”

Since March 2007 the Park has witnessed a sudden increase in rhino poaching in Kaziranga National Park. Four rhinos were poached in Kaziranga within a span of only 15 days, and thus sent a strong signal that wildlife crime needs continued monitoring, even in the best-managed national parks like Kaziranga. The first rhino was poached on 4 March, the second on the 9th, the third on the 16th and the fourth on the 17th - all in different parts of the Park. By 20 July, poachers were able to kill a total of ten rhinos in Kaziranga National Park: one each in Baguri and Kohora Range, and four each in Burapahar and Agaratoli ranges.

### Severe floods

Then, unfortunately, a flood engulfed more than 70% of the Park between 25 July and 5 August. The rhinos started straying out of the National Park in search of safe highlands outside the Kaziranga. There too, the poachers did not allow the rhinos to survive the crisis period in peace. Two rhinos were shot down by poachers during the flood time outside the National Park and their horns taken away.

The current attack on rhino in Kaziranga reflects and reverberates that the rhino is always under threat from poachers. The forest staff in Kaziranga have been working hard, but they need more morale boosting and support. Again it was proved how crucial it is to have a good wireless network in the Park which DSWF and Aaranyak, with support from the EAZA Rhino Campaign, is modernising under a ten-year wireless network project for 2003-2012.



Mothers are fiercely protective of their calf, and in October 2007 one gored a poacher to death

RENAUD FULCONIS



“  
 Two poachers were killed in a battle between poachers and anti-poaching forest staff at Kaziranga.  
 ”

**Gun battles and new recruits**

In April 2007, two poachers were killed in a battle between poachers and anti-poaching forest staff at Kaziranga, and four more arrested in the same month.

With that development, it was hoped that poaching would reduce from May onwards. But poaching continued, which made us realise that some new young groups might have joined the established poaching gangs. And our anticipation proved correct, with the arrest of four more poachers on 11 August 2007 from the western part of the National Park: Chingpar of Christian basti, Karbi Anglong; Longching Lekhte of Fuluguri; Rongbong Ingti of Amguri; and Jabeli Rongpi of Fuluguri. All four poachers have admitted their involvement in the killing of a rhino in the Chanak Chapori area of the National Park on 10 July. We are now looking for two other wanted poachers: Killing Mengchang and Gandhi Lekhte as they are still absconding from the authorities.

It has been found in our investigation that new youths have started becoming involved in poaching, making anti-poaching efforts even more challenging. It will be a matter of time before we can identify all the new youths involved and track and nab them to stop further poaching. What is needed is to put more intelligence gathering strategies - for which a constant flow of funds is essential.

**Grants**

Save the Rhino supported Aaranyak in 2006 through the EAZA Rhino Campaign, which gave €27,600 to the project. Save the Rhino has continued to support Aaranyak in 2007, donating £2,800 in July raised by our Rhino Trek India 2007 event.

IMAGES: WCMC & AARANYAK



Confiscated tranquiliser guns and equipment used by poachers



The four poachers arrested in August 2007



The Parliamentary Secretary to the Government of Assam receives wireless equipment from Dr Talukdar



The poacher caught in Pabitora

**New hopes**

Recently one more poacher was arrested in Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary, where he was planning to kill a rhino. The arrest has definitely saved at least one rhino from being poached in Pabitora. 15 brand new pieces of wireless equipment were also given to Pabitora under the EAZA Rhino Campaign-supported project. The new equipments were received by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Government of Assam in presence of the Chief Wildlife Warden of Assam and other dignitaries on 14 May 2007 at the Range office of the Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary.

“  
 15 brand new pieces of wireless equipment were also given to Pabitora under the EAZA Rhino Campaign-supported project.  
 ”