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The status of the Sumatran rhinoceros in north-eastern India

The historical distribution of the Sumatran rhinoceros *Dicerorhinus sumatrensis* stretched from the foothills of the eastern Himalaya in Bhutan and north-eastern India, through Myanmar and Indo-China to Borneo and Sumatra. However, because of poaching and habitat loss the species is now struggling for survival in a few pockets of Myanmar, Thailand, the Malay peninsula, Sumatra and Borneo (Khan, 1989).

In the Indian subcontinent in the 19th century, the Sumatran rhinoceros occurred in parts of Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura, Mizoram, northern Bengal, Bhutan, Comilla and the Chittagong Hill Tracts (the latter two areas are now in Bangladesh; Lydekker, 1900; Finn, 1929; Milroy, 1934; Harper, 1945). The last two records for the subcontinent were in 1967, when a Sumatran rhinoceros was killed near Cox's Bazar in the Chittagong area (Cubitt and Mountfort, 1985) and a rhinoceros was seen by local people in the Punikhal area of Sonai Reserved Forest of Cachar district, southern Assam. The latter was probably also a Sumatran rhinoceros because until 1890 this species was once encountered infrequently in

the Katakhal and Innerline Reserved Forests of Hailakandi and Cachar districts of southern Assam (A. M. Choudhury, pers. comm.).

The areas closest to India's boundary where the species still occurs are the Lassai tract and Tamanthi Wildlife Sanctuary of northern Myanmar (Tilson and Traylor-Holzer, 1993). A survey in Tamanthi in 1994 revealed the presence of a few individuals (Rabinowitz *et al.*, 1995) and also recorded at least four reports of sightings in the Saramati area close to the India-Myanmar border between 1971 and 1993 (Figure 1).

In January 1996, I traversed the Ukhrul district of Manipur bordering Myanmar, both by road and on foot along tracks on both sides of the roads, to assess the possibility of the occurrence of any Sumatran rhino. In June 1996 I visited Nagaland, where part of Saramati is located, also to determine whether rhinos were present as well as to look for other species of wildlife. I used an illustration of the Indian one-horned rhinoceros *Rhinoceros unicornis* when interviewing local people about sightings but they explained to me that the animal that occasionally occurs in their area is

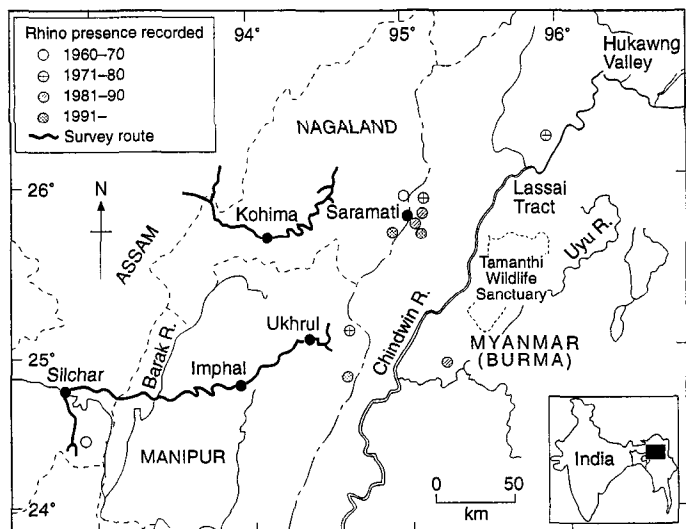


Figure 1. Map showing survey routes and recorded localities of the Sumatran rhinoceros in India and nearby areas of Myanmar. The locations in Myanmar are after Rabinowitz *et al.* (1995).

different, being hairy and having two small horns. In Manipur, the Sumatran rhino is occasionally reported from the Anko range of Ukhrul district. Villagers of Konkan (about 88 km by road south-east of Ukhrul town) encountered stray individuals as recently as the early 1990s (Aleng, pers. comm.). In the 1970s a rhino was shot by the Tangkhul Naga tribe (known as the Somra tribe in Myanmar) of Khamsong village, north-east of Ukhrul town. The Tangkhuls call the animal *selho*.

In Nagaland there are two specific records, both from the Tuensang district. In 1967–68 a rhino was reported from Saramati on the lower slopes of this 3826-m peak (S. Hukiye, pers. comm.). In 1994, the Yimchunger Nagas of the Fakim area south of Saramati reported seeing a 'dwarf' rhino (K. Thomas, pers. comm.). Some Nagas who occasionally visit the Hukawng Valley in northern Myanmar reported the occurrence of Sumatran rhino in that area also.

Both the Anko range and the Saramati areas are virtually inaccessible and are still covered with mature tropical and subtropical forests. Their inaccessibility and the presence of anti-government rebels has saved them from the onslaught of illegal timber operators. Local Nagas are not averse to conservation measures as long as their normal economic activities are not hampered. Fortunately these activities are very limited and are confined to occasional trips by hunting parties and some movement along traditional tracks across the international border. (Nagas do not set out specifically to hunt rhinos, mainly because of the difficult terrain and extreme rarity of the animal, but some Nagas, especially from the western areas bordering Assam, are involved in poaching of Indian one-horned rhinos in Kaziranga and other areas.)

About 400 sq km in the Anko range of Manipur and about 500 sq km in the Saramati–Fakim area of Nagaland are strongly recommended as national parks or wildlife sanctuaries to save the wandering rhinos and their habitat. Fakim is already a notified

wildlife sanctuary but covers only 6.4 sq km and is too small to protect sufficient habitat for viable populations of large mammals.

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Anwaruddin Choudhury
The Rhino Foundation for Nature in NE India
c/o The Assam Co. Ltd, Bamunimaidam
Guwahati 781 021
Assam, India