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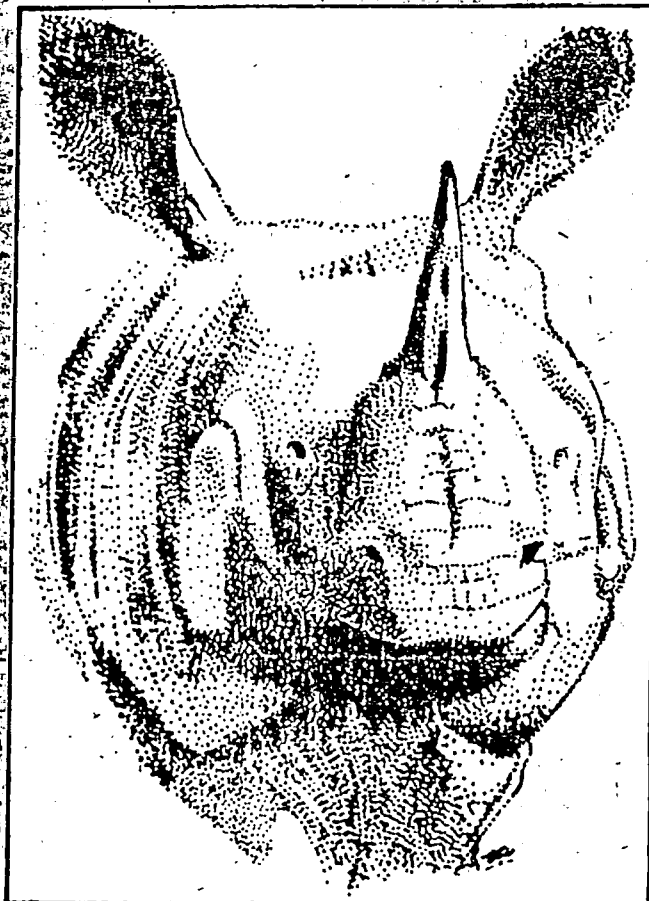
# Sunday

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# Sentinel

**IS KAZIRANGA DYING ?**



While travelling from Guwahati to Upper Assam through the National Highway No 37 a wild atmosphere greets every traveller

## By Anwar Uddin Choudhury

As he crosses Jakhlabandha, a small township in Assam's Nowgong district. The same feeling continues upto Bokakhat for a distance of about 80 kms. It is here the world famous Kaziranga national park is situated. Located towards the north of the national highway, it touches the road at places, at some places a thin belt of villages and tea estates separate the park from the highway and still at one point it crosses over the highway.

Established in 1926 as a 'game sanctuary' it became a wildlife sanctuary in 1940 and ultimately in 1972 a national park. The famous Kaziranga encompasses an area of about 430 sq kms, of mostly grasslands and marshes dotted with innumerable bills. It is the largest unspoilt and unoccupied grass land of the Brahmaputra valley.

The sanctuary is justly famous for the Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*). The rhino population was 400 in 1966 which increased to about 1200 by now. This in fact, is the largest single concentration of the species in the world. Besides rhino, a host of other animals, some very rare are also found in the

grassy habitat of the park. Elephant, tiger, leopard, wild cats, wild buffalo, muntjac, swamp deer, hog deer, pig, capped langur, rhesus macaque, hoolock and gaur are some of the noteworthy mammalian species. Its birdlife also deserves special mention. The spotted pelicans are not only common, they also nest here. An innumerable array of waterfowls winter here when their breeding grounds in the northern latitudes come under heavy snow.

A large number of tourists, both foreign and Indian visit Kaziranga annually. The flow of tourists is somewhat restricted due to the strict policy taken by the Government of India on foreigners visiting Assam, but for which the number would have been much more. During the rainy season most of the park area comes under high flood water forcing the animals towards the south where they often take shelter at the foot of the Karbi plateau. Some rhinos also seek the shelter of a small hillock, known as Kukrakata hills situated to the west of Kaziranga

### Conservation and associated problems:

Poaching of rhino for its horn, presence of a large number of settlements surrounding the park, non-demarcation of ecological boundary and construction of a railway line are the major threats faced by Kaziranga national park over the years and if proper steps are not taken at the right time the park will succumb to the injuries inflicted upon by those factors.

Poaching of wildlife for trophies throughout the world is not a rare phenomenon at all. Hunting for ivory not only dates back several centuries — 'hunts' have been launched to the Tundra lands of northern Siberia also to extract ivories from the extinct 'mammoths' which were well preserved under snow. In case of the rhino it is its horn for which it is persecuted. The fanciful belief in the properties of its horn in southern and eastern Asia is the main reason behind killing of the noble beast. The rhino horn is not really a horn at all, it is not fixed to the skull but rests in the flesh. Though killing of rhinos in India was banned as far back as 1910, the illegal poaching could not be stopped fully, not even in Kaziranga where the largest concentration is found. In 1981 alone around 25 rhinos were killed by poachers in Kaziranga. In 1983 about 45-50 rhinos fell in the hands of poachers. In the first six months of 1984 another 20-25 rhinos were killed. The exact figures are not available for comparative analysis, as these are kept 'secret'. It may be mentioned here that in the year 1966, 1968, 1969 and 1970 the number of rhinos killed by poachers were 5, 10, 8 and 2 respectively. The phenomenal increase in the price of rhino horn is supposed to be the main force behind recent increase in poaching amidst greater risks. In 1969 the price of a kg. of rhino horn was around Rs 33600 in south east Asian markets which soared to Rs 80000 per kg in 1980. The present price per kg in south east Asian markets is more than a lakh.

Though strict laws are now being enforced still it has failed to prevent poaching. Another important factor which hinders detection is the free movement of horns from Assam to other parts of India. This free movement of rhino horns sold by the Forest department in auction made it very difficult for the authorities to detect the poached horns. Of late it is also observed that some forest and police officials are in league with poachers as in the first half of this year two forest guards and one policeman were among those arrested on charges of poaching. One G. Miri (about 45 years) of age of village Bohikhowa, adjacent to

Kaziranga, is reported to have killed around 30 rhinos in his lifetime as a poacher.

Lack of sufficient patrolling elephants and power boats may also be attributed as a factor hindering detection of contraband horns. The issue of occasional fishing licences by the civil district authorities also creates grave problem for the park as most of the fishermen are actually

poachers in disguise. But the authorities cannot shirk their responsibility by providing excuses. For in a considerably more difficult terrain and larger area — that of the Chitwan national park (Nepal) not a single rhino fell victim to poachers between 1976-83. The authorities there are taking army assistance in guarding the park.

The Kaziranga national park, although world famous and can boast of having the largest population of Indian rhinos, still lacks a protective buffer zone thus enabling wild animals to come in direct confrontation with man. Towards its immediate east, south and west the park boundary is contiguous with human habitations. The poor villagers have no means to prevent the marauding wild animals from entering their fields. Sometimes they even lose their 'precious' livestock. Moreover due to absence of any barrier or buffer zone the domestic stocks were regularly grazed right inside the park. This has not only led to unhealthy competition for food between wild animals and domestic stocks but also harmed in other way. Many domestic buffaloes from the neighbouring villages are living inside the park as feral animals and are interbreeding freely with their wild cousins. Thus the true wild water buffaloes (even more rarer than the rhino nowadays) are fast vanishing from the peripheral areas of the park and are concentrated mostly in the inner northern areas. But here again they are threatened due to the presence of about 7000-8000 domestic buffaloes on seven *chaponas* (river-islets) towards north of the park. Moreover, a type of liver ailment is taking its toll of wild buffaloes in Kaziranga. This ailment besides many other diseases has been transmitted by the domesticated buffaloes grazing along the park boundaries.

According to 1971 census there were about 23 villages having contiguous boundaries with Kaziranga national park of which two were uninhabited and the rest inhabited by about 8000 people. The figure must be much more now. At least three more tea estates are very near to the park boundary having a population of about 4000. As many as 33 villages were relocated in the country, in the last few years mostly from Kanha and Ranthambhor national parks while expanding the area. It is strange that in Kaziranga, which is relatively more important than the two former parks, this has not been done.

The present boundary of Kaziranga is not demarcated along the ecosystem boundary. In fact no ecological study has so far been

done here. While complete determination of ecological boundary is not possible at present due to various constraints a partial determination will be possible. During the high floods (which is an annual phenomenon) most of the animals ranging from rhino, buggalo to deer and pigs move south and take shelter at the foothill region of Karbi plateau. This is a part of the animals' normal cycle of activity. While rhinos, buffaloes and swamp deer move towards higher hills mostly during floods, some animals like elephant, gaur and muntjac move from Karbi plateau to the plains of Kaziranga during the dry season. The natural (or ecological) boundary of any wildlife reserve is determined on the basis of movement, areal requirement and the 'home range' of the main herbivores present in the reserve.

It is ironical to note that though animals migrate to the southern foothill region neither the area is included within the national park nor a separate sanctuary is created. The forest department has already paid more than five lakhs of rupees to the Karbi Anglong District Council to hand over 32 sq kms of area to the park. The District Council has already taken the money but are yet to handover the area to the park authorities and the future possibility of doing so is also bleak.

The presence of the busy National Highway No. 37 towards the south of Kaziranga has become another disturbing agent. The amount of traffic is increasing day by day and the road is open to vehicular traffic for 24 hours. The development of roads has encouraged settlement growth along both sides thus

increasing the gap between Kaziranga and Karbi plateau. More over the movement of elephants in April-June and September-October between Kaziranga and Karbi plateau, which cross this road, is also disturbed greatly. But now the situation is going to be more aggravated as the Government has decided to take a broad gauge railway line through the southern boundary of the national park, the survey for which will start very soon. This line when completed will strike the fatal final blow on the world famous national park from which it will never recover. Besides widening the gap between Kaziranga and Karbi plateau it will also encourage more human activities in the area.

The movement of rhinos and other animals to the southern foothills will not only be disturbed, there are even possibilities of many animals being killed by running trains. The railway is a stranger to the area and the rhinos will either be scared away or get killed, both of which are detrimental to the survival of the park. On 1st February 1984 two rhinos were killed near Chandrapur village (about 25 kms east of Guwahati) when they charged a running train — this is perhaps only the beginning.

But the worst sufferer in Kaziranga will be the elephants whose migratory routes between Kaziranga and Karbi plateau is already disturbed and unprotected. The elephants move down to the plains of the park at the advent of winter and again move up at the advent of the flood season.

Besides the already mentioned dangers faced by Kaziranga there is the problem of erosion by the mighty river Brahmaputra which washes

the northern and northwestern boundary of the park. Already a chunk of the park has been eroded away. The Kaziranga national park is still free of encroachment. But with the population in surrounding villages increasing day by day the future possibilities are very much there. While encroachment is easy the eviction is not so. Many factors debar the authorities from evicting the encroacher. Recently, the Government of Assam has decided to evict all post-1980 encroachments, which means that the rich forest lands that were encroached before 1980 will be regularised (!). Likewise the cut-off year will be moved from 1980 onwards till the last inch of forest vanishes!

As a remedial service the boundary of the present park should be redefined. The adjoining reserve forests of Kukrakata, Panbari and Bagser should be included along with the forested northern slopes of Karbi plateau. The seven *chaporias* or islets of the north along with Panpur RF should also be brought under park administration. The settlements (excluding the tea estates) situated between the park and Karbi plateau should be relocated outside. At least the stretch from Burhaphar to Kohora should be cleared off from settlements in the first phase. In the second phase the settlements from Kohora to Ageratoli should be relocated outside. These areas will ultimately serve as a protective buffer zone for the park.

The tea estates should be directed to enclose themselves at their own cost either by electric wire fencing or by other suitable methods.

The proposed broad gauge project through the southern boundary of Kaziranga should be shelved immediately, at least before giving petty politicians any scope to exploit ignorant public sentiments. The broad gauge could well follow the existing meter gauge line via Lumding by which Nagaland will also be benefitted as the line touches the state at Dimapur.

Some restrictions should be imposed on the vehicular traffic on the National Highway no. 37 in two seasons i.e., during floods when large number of animals take shelter on the highway and during the months when elephants move between the national park and Karbi plateau. The restriction will be required only for the night hours.

To keep off domestic stocks the areas contiguous with villages should be fenced off at the earliest possible with electrified fencing.

The auction of rhino horn by the forest department of Assam should be discontinued so that the free movement of horn will stop and the demand will fall.

Patrolling in and around the park should be intensified by inducting more trained elephants and power country boats. The civil district authorities should be debarred from issuing any fishing licence to operate within the park. Army assistance may also be taken to crush the backbone of poaching network. The success of Dachigam national park (of Hangul fame) and Chitwan national park (Nepal) may be cited as instances where army assistance in anti-poaching measures almost proved 100 percent successful.

Immediate steps should be taken to check erosion along the banks of river Brahmaputra.

Dedicated naturalists with proper training and sufficient knowledge may also be given the chance of managing the park.

The park and the adjoining areas (as proposed) should be declared a Biosphere reserve (under Man and Biosphere programme) as well as a tiger reserve (as tiger reserves are nowadays the best managed protected areas and Kaziranga is also a very good tiger habitat). Proposals should be made to include the area in the International Heritage programme, as a site of natural importance. And all this has to be done soon. Before it gets too late.

