

LOOK

Complete April 1985

Kaziranga cannot be

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allowed to die

About 430 square km of grasslands, marshes spangled with flowers, stretches of open water laced with reeds and strips of woodland constitute the Kaziranga national park in Assam. Established in 1826 as a game sanctuary, it became a wildlife sanctuary in 1940 and ultimately in 1972 a national park.

The one-horned Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) has found sanctuary here and has multiplied from 400 in 1966 to about 1200 now and is the largest single concentration in the world of this endangered species. Besides rhino, a host of other animals, some rare, are also found in the grassy habitat of the park. Elephant, tiger, leopard, wild cats, wild buffalo, sambar, muntjac, swamp deer, hog deer, pig, capped langur, rhesus macaque and gaur are some of the noteworthy mammalian species.

It is also the home of India's only ape, the hoolock. The spot-billed pelicans are not only common, they also nest here. Many marsh and water birds breed here in summer, and many migrate to it in winter when their breeding grounds in northern latitudes come under heavy snow.

Anxiety about the future of the park stems from four good reasons: poaching of rhinos for their horn, the presence of a large number of villages around the park, non-demarcation of ecological meagre boundaries and the proposed construction of a broad gauge railway on the southern fringe of Kaziranga.

In 1981 alone around 25 rhinos were killed by poachers in Kaziranga. In 1983 between 45 and 50 rhinos fell to the poacher's avarice. In the first six months of 1984 another 20 or 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 years 1966, 1968, 1969 and

1970 the number of rhinos killed by poachers was five, 10, eight and two respectively.

The phenomenal increase in the price of a rhino horn is supposed to be the main force behind the recent increase in poaching. In 1969 the price of a kg of rhino horn was around Rs 33,600 in south east Asian markets, where the demand is greatest. This soared to Rs. 80,000 per kg in 1980. The present price is over a lakh of rupees per kg. The average weight of a horn is around 500

Added to the hazards presented by poaching, absence of a buffer zone, highway traffic and floods, is the danger posed by a proposed railway line along the southern boundary of the park, reports Anwaruddin Chowdhury

An important factor hindering detection of contraband horn is that its movement from Assam to other parts of India is free and unrestricted. Horns shed during combat between two animals are collected by the Forest Department and auctioned. There is no means of distinguishing the poached horn from the auctioned.

Lack of a sufficient number of patrolling elephants and power boats thins down the vigilance. The issue by the civil district authorities of licences to net fish in the park also lets into the park poachers passing themselves off as fishermen. The high incidence of poaching at Kaziranga compares unfavourably with Chitwan national Park in Nepal where not a single rhino fell a victim to poaching between 1976 and 1983. In Chitwan, which has the second largest concentration of rhinos, the authorities have taken the army's assistance in guarding the park.

Also, in the absence of any barrier or buffer zone domes-

tic livestock are regularly grazed inside the park. This has led to an unhealthy competition for food between wild and domestic animals and also caused harm in other ways. 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 buffalo has

become even rarer than the rhino.

The wild buffalo has retreated from the peripheral areas of the park and is concentrated mostly in the inner northern area. But in that retreat too it is threatened by the presence of over 7000 head of domestic buffalo on seven riverine islets just north of the park. Moreover a type of liver ailment is taking its toll of the wild buffalo. This ailment has been transmitted by the domestic livestock grazing along the park

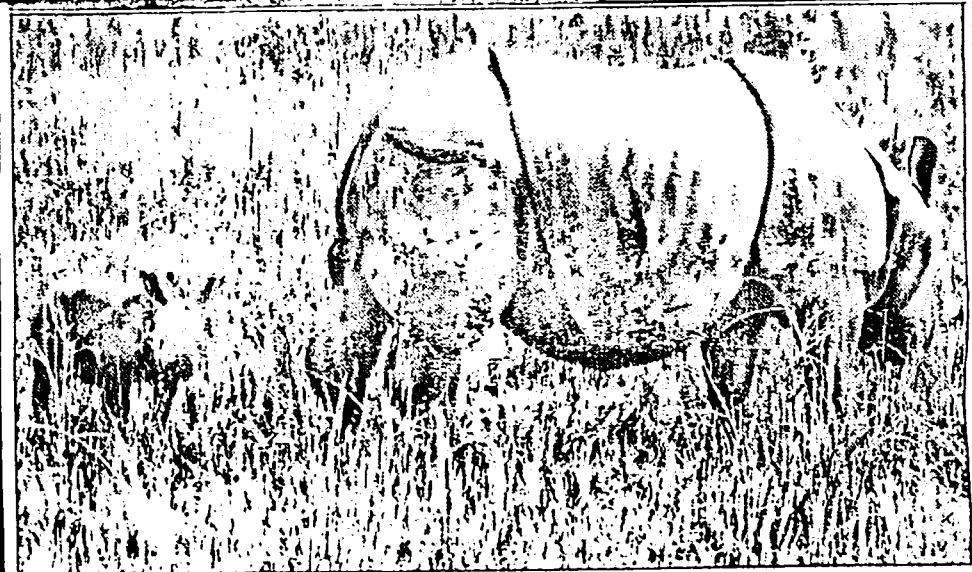
boundaries or within it.

According to the 1971 census there were about 23 villages with boundaries contiguous with the Kaziranga national park. Two of these were uninhabited while 8,000 people lived in the rest. The figure must be much more now. At least three tea estates are very close to the park boundary, and about 4,000 people live on them.

The present boundary of Kaziranga is demarcated on cadastral considerations and

does not coincide with the ecological boundary. Actually no ecological study has so far been taken up at all. While complete determination of the ecological boundary is not possible at present, due to various constraints, a partial determination is feasible.

During the high floods (which is an annual phenomenon) most of the animals ranging from rhino and buffalo to deer and pigs move south and take shelter at the foothills of the Karbi plateau. This is a part of those animals' normal cycle of activity. But neither is the area included within the national park nor has a separate sanctuary been created. The Forest Department has already paid more than Rs five lakhs to the Karbi Anglong district council to hand over 32 square km of area to the park. The district council has taken the money but is yet to hand over the area to the park authorities. The future possibility of the transfer of the area is bleak.



Hunted for its horn. A rhino with her calf in Kaziranga

The busy NH 37 just skirting the southern edge of Kaziranga has become another disturbing agent. The amount of traffic is increasing from day to day and the road is open to vehicular traffic for 24 hours. The development of the road has enabled the growth of settlements on both its sides, thus increasing the distance between the border of the sanctuary and the Karbi plateau. The descent of elephants in April-June to Kaziranga and their return to the Karbi plateau in September-October involves the crossing of the highway by the herds. The traffic upsets the herds during the crossings.

The situation is going to be aggravated as a broad gauge railway is to be laid along the southern boundary for which a route survey is to start soon. This railway, when completed, may deal the fatal blow to the national park. Besides further widening the distance between the park and the plateau it will also encourage human activity in the area. The movement of rhinos and other animals to the foothills will be disturbed. Animals could even be killed by running trains. The railway will be an intruder in the area and the rhinos will either be scared away or killed. On February 1, 1984 two rhinos were killed near Chandrapur village (about 26 km east of Gauhati) when they charged at a running train. But the worst affected will be the elephants whose twice a year migration between the park and the plateau will become hazardous.

Besides these dangers there is the problem of erosion by the Brahmaputra which washes the northern and northwestern boundaries of the park. Already a chunk of the park has been eroded. The Kaziranga national park is free of encroachment. But with the steady increase in the population in surrounding villages encroachment is a distinct possibility in the future.

LETTERS

Kaziranga

THIS refers to my article, "Kaziranga cannot be allowed to die" (March 17). Unfortunately, due to the Printer's devil and misunderstanding at the editing stage, a few errors inadvertently crept into it. The true position is as follows:

Kaziranga was established as a game sanctuary in 1926 (and not 1826). The forest department collects horns mainly from two sources—naturally dying animals and poachers. Hardly any horn is shed during combats to be collected by department em-

ployees.

The elephants descend to Kaziranga in September-October and return to the Karbi plateau in April-June. Thus, they remain in the park throughout the winter and leave at the advent of the floods.

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