

KAZIRANGA—POACHERS PARADISE

The massive wildlife cauldron—Kaziranga National Park—set amidst bewildering natural beauty has now fallen on sad days. For

Kaziranga has been known as the abode of the Indian rhinos, however, it has now become an illegal poacher's paradise. Rhinos at Kaziranga and the other reserved forests of Assam have become the targets of highly organised gangs of poachers. These beautiful animals are suddenly facing the threat of extinction, because of the tremendous demand for its horns in certain overseas countries. And the growing involvement of Nagas, poaching with sophisticated weapons, has added a new dimension to the problem.

According to official statistics, while there were only 15 cases of poaching of rhinos in the Assam forests in 1979, a many as 50 rhinos were killed and their horns removed by poachers in 1982. And between 1982 and June 1988, a total of 300 rhinos had fallen victim, either to bullets or improvised death traps laid out by the poachers. The most shocking aspect of this offence is that even cubs, which are yet to grow any horns, have often been shot. At least 15 rhino cubs were killed during this period, forest officials say.

A senior forest official pointed out that practically all measures taken to protect the rhinos in the sprawling 430 sq. km. national park or at the Manas, Orang and Pabitora reserve forest areas, had proved futile, so far. "We are always at the losing end in the battle to save the rhinos," said the official.



"It is shocking to see a healthy rhino lying in a pool of blood with its horns severed from its head, but hardly anything can be done to ensure their safety," he added.

Trading in rhino horns is earning 'big money' and more and more people are getting involved in it. A rhino horn weighing about 1 kg. fetches at least Rs 1 lakh in foreign markets. The horns of the Indian rhinos weigh about 800 gms on an average.

This clandestine business is thriving on the belief that Indian rhino horns have immense medicinal value. The horns are in great demand in the Far East, specially in Singapore, Hong Kong and China.

The belief is deep-rooted and the demand ever increasing. It is believed that only the Indian rhino horns have this medicinal value and not the African ones. Thus the African rhino horns, which are in great demand particularly in the west Asian countries are mainly used as dagger handles by the Arab sheikhs. The Indian rhino horns are twice as expensive as the African ones.

It is believed that well-organised Mafia groups are engaged in the poaching trade. Till recently, this clandestine business was controlled by a handful of people in Calcutta and Siliguri, in West Bengal. But the arrest of a number of Nagas for alleged poaching, has

given rise to the suspicion that new routes have been opened in the North-Eastern hill region, from where these horns are being smuggled out.

Rhinos are usually killed in two ways—with firearms or by "pit poaching". When patrols inside the forest areas are intensified, the gangs resort to "pit-poaching", as the use of firearms naturally entails greater risks. The poachers dig up trenches and camouflage these with the branches of trees. The trenches are usually dug in areas where rhino herds move frequently. Any rhino passing across the trench falls into it and is killed by the poachers.

The success in tracking down the criminals is limited. The poachers usually come from distant places and the people living near the forests act as guides and identify the areas where rhinos are found in large numbers. Even the arrests of actual poachers reveal very little about the racket. The entire operation is carried on through contacts at various levels and at various places. Not even a single kingpin, engaged in this clandestine trade has been tracked down yet as there are very few clues left behind by the poachers. The order for killing a rhino and the necessary payments are made through the "contacts", whom poachers rarely know. What matters to him is money. The order for the next kill may be conveyed to him by an entirely "new contact".

Penal provision in the Indian Wildlife Act is thoroughly inadequate and does not act as a deterrent to the offenders. The few poachers, so far ar-

rested, had to pay small fines for their offence and were bailed out. In recent times it has been noticed that the poachers are backed by a group of rich and influential people who appoint famous lawyers to plead their case.

It is learnt from official sources, that the rhino population in the Assam forests was 1,300 according to the 1984 census. Of these, 1,080 rhinos were in Kaziranga and the rest spread over Orang, Pabitora, and the other reserve forest areas. Thus the greater concentration of rhinos at Kaziranga naturally attracts more poachers here. Of the total number of rhinos killed in Assam over the past 5 years, more than half were at the Kaziranga National Park.

Sanjay Deb Roy, Chief Conservator of Forests and Wildlife, Assam, says that the problems of illegal poaching of rhinos had assumed serious proportions. Deb Roy added that a special task force has recently been raised to fight the menace. The task force comprising of 130 guards, trained in the use of firearms had been deployed at vulnerable points. The forest department proposes to raise six battalions of forest guards as early as possible, he added.

It is expected, that the recent measures will to a large extent curb the number of cases of illegal poaching in Kaziranga and the other reserve forests of Assam, if not stamp it out altogether. And if, not done on a war footing, the world famous rhinos of Assam will fast become an endangered species.

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