

Rhino poaching on the rise in Kaziranga park

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Increased poaching of rhinos is causing concern to the authorities of the Kaziranga national park, known for its one-horned rhinos.

According to director of Kaziranga S.K. Sen, 25 rhinos were killed by poachers in and around the national park in 1995 against 14 in 1994. Mr Sen says poaching has increased because following the heavy floods of the last monsoon, it has not been possible for the park authorities to restore all the camps of forest guards inside the park.

According to forest officials and guards engaged in anti-poaching operations, a serious shortage of staff, weapons and equipment has also been standing in the way of effective control of poaching. There are three forest guards in one camp while the camps are supposed to be operational round-the-clock. The number of staff in each camp must be doubled.

Range officer B.N. Talukdar says there is need for more wireless sets, vehicles and better weapons. The poachers are often armed with carbines while the guards do not have matching weapons.

According to him, "Our boys often do not even have shoes." Many of the forest department staff are yet to get their salary for the last month.

The fabulous price which a rhino horn fetches in the international market is behind the increase in poaching. According to estimates, rhino horns fetch \$-45,000 a kg in Taiwan which is about Rs 14 lakhs. While the poachers come from the adjoining Karbi hills or from the settlements near the park, the kingpins of the groups are believed to be influential people.

Forest officials question the theory propounded by some environment experts that poaching and the destruction of forest wealth can be prevented by the participation of people who stay in the park's vicinity. It is much more lucrative, they point out, for a villager staying near the park to guide a poacher to a rhino than to depend on the environment projects which can bring only small returns. According to them, the only way to stop poaching is by guarding the forest more effectively. As a first step, the number of patrols by forest guards has been increased.

While the 1993 animal census — the latest one — shows an increase in the population of rhinos, elephants and tigers at the national park, the same cannot be said of some other animals present at the park, such as wild buffalo, swamp deer, hog deer and wild boar. In fact, their recorded numbers have shown a decline.

Forest officials, however, argue that a "scientific census" has been carried out only for rhinos, elephants and tigers. The numbers of other animals have been ascertained only by sighting in the course of the census of the three principal animals at the park. The park authorities are planning a rhino census in 1996 and an elephant and a tiger census in 1997.

While the present area of the park is 430 sq km, about 70 sq km has been lost to the Brahmaputra river due to erosion. There is a proposal to bring in additional areas into the park, especially the migration routes of elephants to the nearby Karbi Anglong hills. When the entire area proposed is included, the park area will double to 869 sq km. But quite a few encroachments will have to be cleared before this can be achieved.