

Rhinos, Dudhwa, and Reintroductions

Text and Photographs: **Gangadharan Menon**

After the last rhino was shot dead by a European hunter in 1878, not a single rhino existed in Dudhwa for the next 100 years. Then something changed in the April of 1984, when five rhinos were brought in from Kaziranga in Assam, followed soon after with five more from Chitwan in Nepal. Now 31 Great One-horned Rhinoceros of three generations roam the grasslands of Dudhwa.

R.L. Singh, an expert on this endangered species, put this experiment in perspective when he said, "The relocation of rhinos in Dudhwa is perhaps one of the most successful relocation programmes of an endangered species." This assumes tremendous significance when we realise that unlike tigers, whose footprints are spread across the country, the footprints of rhinos can only be found along the Brahmaputra valley in the northern parts of Assam and West Bengal. Furthermore, of the entire population of rhinos, 70% exist in just one area, the Kaziranga National Park.

My first exposure to the unique Terai region was in the Kishanpur Wildlife Sanctuary located outside Dudhwa. The reason was that there were unseasonal rains that made the roads in Dudhwa National Park slushy and inaccessible. At Kishanpur, we saw a lone male rhino that had wandered there from Nepal, for reasons best known to him! "There are no other rhinos here," explained Sonu, our guide. Gazing at the forlorn rhino, he continued, "*Saab*, Kishanpur is completely cut off from Dudhwa. So even if this rhino attempts to get to where the other rhinos are, he would get poached on the way. His days are numbered."

Dudhwa, where we went the following day, was a stunningly beautiful mosaic of blue and green: rivers, swamps, lakes, grasslands, and dense sal forests. This was an area so treacherous and infested with deadly mosquitoes that even the British soldiers stayed away from it for centuries. But over a period of time, poachers made their way into the last of the natural forests and grasslands



that remained in the Terai, and decimated many species. And the timber mafia hardly left any tree standing.

That was until the saviour of Dudhwa made his entry, the renowned, though controversial figure in Indian conservation, Billy Arjan Singh.

Billy was himself a hunter who had experienced a change of heart after he looked into the eyes of a leopard he had shot dead, and felt that the animal was pleading for its life even though it was dead. Just as some non-believers become fanatics after they turn believers, hunters too can become hardcore conservationists after some 'enlightenment'. Almost single-handedly, Billy fought for the protection of Dudhwa and all that dwelt in it. He had frequent run-ins with the powers that be, but survived because he had the same tenacity as the big cats that he tried to protect for six long decades. He became controversial for introducing hand-reared leopards and tigers back into the wild, though his experiments invariably met with success.

His film 'The Leopard that Changed its Spots' is a wonderful account of how he re-introduced a leopardess named Harriet into the forests of Dudhwa. The scene in which Harriet returns from the wild after a year to introduce her new-born cub to Billy, and then walks back into the forest, never to return, is an endearing moment that makes you feel blessed to have been born into this world, despite all its ills. Billy introduced another tiger named Tara back into the wild, and this too created ripples. But he deserves all credit for training these animals to hunt smaller mammals before releasing them into their natural habitat, where only the fittest survive.

One trip into the Park was enough proof of its rich biodiversity. Sonu introduced us to an interesting local who shared with us information on the most dominant tree in

Dudhwa, the sal. "*San saal badhe, san saal kbade, san saal pade*", which means, "grows for a hundred years, stands for a hundred years, and survives a hundred years even after it falls". What a beautiful description of the longevity of a tree! Seven different species of woodpeckers are found in the Park. The overall birdlife is also rich, comprising of 400 species. We recorded as many as 96 species in just two days.

Dudhwa has an interesting, and probably confused existence as far as the Forest Department is concerned. Originally it was established as a national park for protecting the Barasingha or Swamp Deer *Cervus duvancelii* in 1977, as half of the world's population of this Endangered species lives here. In fact, five different species of deer co-exist in Dudhwa. But sadly, the numbers of Barasingha have decreased over the years except in Kishanpur Wildlife Sanctuary, which is a part of Dudhwa Tiger Reserve, where up to 600 Barasingha are found, mainly in the Jhadi Taal area. "Lose deer, lose tiger", says V.P. Singh, a member of the Uttar Pradesh Wildlife Advisory Council, who succinctly pointed to the inevitable connection between predator and prey. On our jeep ride along the *jheel* in Dudhwa, we saw small groups of Barasinghas, their elaborate antlers looking like some exotic, aboriginal headgear.

On one of our jungle treks, Manoj Sharma, an expert naturalist, shared with us his interesting take on wildlife-watching. He said, "Don't look for the tiger. If you do, chances are you will miss a hundred other species of birds, insects, trees, and flowers!" As we went on an elephant ride through a lush forest path with grass as tall as the elephant itself, we chanced upon a rhino with her new born calf. And we were convinced that all is well with the relocated rhinos here. Despite this, relocation attempts are vehemently opposed by

Dudhwa was once home to one of the most extensive Barasingha (Swamp Deer) ranges. However, loss of habitat has posed an immense threat to the species





Above: The Greater One-horned Rhinoceros is poached mainly for its horn, which is wrongly believed to possess medicinal properties according to traditional Asian medicine. This species is facing a sharp decline in numbers due to the rising illicit demand for its horn

Below: Hunter-turned-conservationist, Billy Arjan Singh played a pivotal role in persuading the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi to declare Dudhwa as a national park





The Indian Hog Deer gets its name because of the hog-like manner in which it holds its head low while running through the forest, unlike most other deer that leap over obstacles



Adult Bengal Monitors are terrestrial, while young monitors display certain arboreal traits. Shy and solitary in nature, they usually avoid humans

conservative wildlife experts, the most recent being in Panna Wildlife Reserve in Madhya Pradesh. Here, the redoubtable H.S. Pabla was accused of releasing a 'tame' tigress into the wild. According to his detractors, he was providing easy meat



The author was delighted to experience Dudhwa's rich and myriad biodiversity on his jeep ride across the park

to the wild tigers there. But he defended his move by stating that the released tigress was trained in hectares and hectares of protected forest to hunt and kill, and that this so-called tame tigress had hunted and killed over a hundred animals (mostly Spotted Deer) before she was released into the wild.

Around the same time, there was news of the Gujarat government refusing translocation of the endangered Asiatic Lion to Madhya Pradesh on the grounds that the site selected did not have enough of a prey-base and there was also the problem of inadequate protection from poachers. Is it a genuine environmental concern for lions, or is it the concern of losing Gujarat's so-called 'pride', I wonder! In the 1980s, it was actually a veterinary epidemic in Kaziranga that prompted the forest authorities there to reluctantly agree to relocation. Will it require another one in Gir to relocate the lions? Mother Nature forbid! ■



Gangadharan Menon made a documentary on Silent Valley, referring to the impending disaster of a hydel project coming up there, which played a part in Silent Valley being declared a National Park in 1981.