

Rhino conservation in Assam

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The conservation of rhinos in Assam has been facing an uphill task and renewed challenges since 2012 with the rhino poaching figure crossing 40 in 2013 in Assam. Various efforts taken by the government since 2012 so far have not been able to reverse the trend of increasing rhino poaching in Assam. The rhino poaching in Assam, especially in and around Kaziranga, witnessed an upsurge from September 2012 prompting the Assam Government to reinforce the frontline protection measures by sending hundreds of *jawans* of the Assam Forest Protection Force with semi-automatic rifles to fight against the poachers.

The poachers too are becoming tactical and are trying to hit in areas where they might have found lacunae in the protection regime of the Kaziranga National Park authorities. If we analyze the poaching trend in Kaziranga National Park, organized poachers are targeting the eastern part of the Park and in Burapahar and Kukurakata forests areas. Poachers also seem to keep a constant watch on stray rhinos going towards the sand dunes in the Brahmaputra (*chapor*) outside the current area of the Kaziranga National Park and try to eliminate some of those stray rhinos to take the horn for illegal trade in the international market. When the rhinos stray out of the national park, it becomes easy prey to the poachers and for the protection of these stray rhinos, the Government of Assam should strengthen the protection measures in the fringe areas of Kaziranga where the rhinos often stray out.

The Government of Assam should form a rapid response team comprising of nearest police station and forest office to act as fast as possible to save the straying rhinos in active cooperation of the fringe villagers.

The Government of Assam has taken some landmark legal initiative to protect the rhinos in the State. The enactment of the Wildlife (Protection) (Assam Amendment) Act 2009 provided substantial increase in punishment to the poachers. Now, a first-time rhino poacher will be convicted with seven to ten years of imprisonment and a fine up to Rs 50,000. If the same person is convicted second time for poaching of rhinos, he will be punished with ten years to life imprisonment and a fine of Rs 75,000. Such offences have also been made cognizable and non-bailable through this Act. Further, the Government of Assam has given power to use firearms to all the forest officers for the protection of the forests and wildlife in the State under the provision of the Criminal Procedure Code 1973. Immunity from prosecution without prior government sanction has also been granted to them in case of use of firearms by them in course of discharging their duty. This has given a big morale boost to the forest staff engaged in the rhino protection work. However, despite such initiatives, the increasing trend of rhino poaching in Assam could not be reversed so far which is indeed a

worrying issue as the rhino happens to be a remarkable cultural heritage to the people of Assam.

In the first Asian Rhino Range State Meeting held in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia from October 2 to 3, 2013, it was decided to –

□ continue to increase the level of protection in the protected areas with rhino populations and in potential translocation sites to ensure that poaching does not threaten the growth of the population. This will require building more capacity in anti-poaching, especially as the

quires a long-term plan to identify suitable sites for new populations and to prepare such sites for future releases;

□ as a matter of urgency, set up a project through the relevant ministries in India and Nepal, under the aegis of the Environmental Crime Programme of Interpol, so that information on criminal suspects is shared without delay between rhino range states in anticipation that known criminals who are still at large, and who have been active in South Africa, might refocus their attempts to acquire

poached rhino horns in India and Nepal;

□ build support from the local communities living in proximity to Greater One-horned Rhino populations for the conservation of the species, and explore potential benefits that can flow to such communities, including from tourism.

At the international forum, the governments of India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Bhutan and Nepal have all agreed to the 2010-2020 Strategic

Plan for Biodiversity, including Aichi Target 12 on preventing extinctions of species like the rhinos. Nepal has been successful in checking rhino poaching in their protected areas in the past three years. That only one rhino has been poached in the last 20 months in Nepal is a testament to the increased investments by the Government and enhanced coordination between law enforcement

agencies in Nepal in the fight against rhino poaching.

Regular flow of fund to the rhino bearing areas has to be ensured by the Government so that the field officers can exercise their duties effectively. In Assam, the Government fund release system to the rhino bearing areas are always late and even as of date, sizeable approved funds for rhinos are being held by the Finance Department of Assam which is hampering the rhino protection to a great extent.

Strict anti-poaching operations need to be in place in order to reduce rhino poaching in Assam as close to zero as possible. Crime prevention is the responsibility of governments and as such effective and suitably intense anti-poaching operations should be supported by governments. Crime prevention efforts should be monitored for effort, coverage and efficiency. The Government must put more energy in ensuring enhance conviction of rhino poachers in Assam to deter rhino poaching attempts. Unless conviction is not achieved under the existing laws protecting the rhinos, reversing the trend of increasing rhino poaching will continue to remain as a distant dream. For those that illegally kill rhinos or trade in rhino parts, the consequences of breaking the law need to be serious. This requires rapid criminal investigations and tough penalties that are enforced consistently through the courts. The Judiciary in Assam should actively think of setting up first track courts to deal with the rhino poaching cases in order to ensure the survival of the rhinos not only for our generation, but for the generations to come.

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number of populations increases;

□ urgently study the degradation of the rhino habitats due to invasive alien species, and design and implement management interventions to recover prime rhino habitats;

□ achieve the goal of a 3% annual increase in rhino population, the establishment of new populations within the former ranges will be essential for each species. This re-