

## Inside Kaziranga's One-Horned Dream

A rhino has been poached almost every week this year in Assam's Kaziranga National Park. 25 poachers have been arrested. Crores have been allotted to anti-poaching measures. So why are the poachers still multiplying and prospering?



By Urmi Bhattacharjee | Grist Media – Mon 7 Oct, 2013



A rhino carcass in Kaziranga National Park. The horn has been cut off by poachers.



Locals examining the carcass of a rhino in Kaziranga National Park after poachers shot it dead with a .303 rifle and carved off its horn. Photo: Dhruvajyoti Saha

## **THE POACHER**

In 2008, Bogendra was 17 years old and on the run.

A property dispute had grown out of hand and Bogendra had killed someone. He had grown up in a poor family in Golaghat district in Assam and he knew he was on his own. When a case was registered in Bokakhat station and a non-bailable warrant was issued, Bogendra ran. He fled towards the north bank of the river Brahmaputra, which flows along the Kaziranga National Park.

According to a close associate, it was on the north bank that Bogendra saw the rhinos for the first time. Centuries ago, the Indian one-horned rhino roamed the wetlands of the Indus, the Ganga and the Brahmaputra. Today, the rhino is limited to just two national parks in Assam – Kaziranga and Manas. The tall grass of Kaziranga is today home to the world's highest population of the one-horned rhinoceros, hosting a population of 2,290 rhinos as per the last census that was completed on March 26, 2013.

A status that was severely threatened by the arrival of the 17-year-old. In Kaziranga, just 20 km from the place he ran from, he met gangs of poachers who would change his life forever.

Today, Bogendra owns land, money and cars. He is one among an estimated 200 poachers who kill in and around Kaziranga. Suspected of having killed almost 15 rhinos for horns that fetch crores of rupees in the international market, Bogendra is one of the most notorious poachers in Assam. Nevertheless, none of his killings have been registered as a crime under the Wildlife Protection Act 1972.

As a senior officer in the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) explains, “The biggest problem in wildlife poaching is that it is next to impossible to get an eyewitness. These crimes happen in the wee hours of the morning or night and in extremely solitary places. Thus, establishing a crime before the court is a herculean task. Due to the lack of sufficient corroborative evidences, poachers are not charge-sheeted and they get bail.”

And as conservationists gloomily suspect, with every successful poaching the poachers get more and more confident.

Certainly, the legend of Bogendra has grown and grown. Over time Bogendra has built two kinds of links. He has built strong connections with the international wildlife trade. At home, he has visited Bokakhat close to his home and seduced others into the lucrative game of poaching, promising them assistance in the form of money and weapons. He has managed to escape the eye of conservationists and the police with growing dexterity each time. He has used multiple aliases, and operated under the name of the Nabin Kutum on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. He is known to have even posed as a woman to give the police a slip. Like all successful poachers, he has mastered the escape routes and developed strong links with international traders.

According to sources, almost 90 percent of his targets have been rhinos that lived on the outskirts of the park. This was a calculated move since rhino death cases outside the park often go undocumented by park authorities. Moreover, the state forest department is said to have almost no control over the wetlands in the bordering districts of Nagaon, Sonitpur and Moriagaon. Rhinos are also known to stray away to Majuli in Jorhat, the largest humanly inhabited river island in the world.

In 2010, however, a case was registered against Bogendra in Jorhat district, in upper Assam’s and about 80 km from Kaziranga, after he poached a male rhino inside Jadav Payeng’s artificial forest. Payeng is a different kind of legend who created a 1,360 hectare forest by planting tree after tree for three decades on a sand bar in Kokilamukh area of Jorhat. Today, it is home to numerous wild animals and about five rhinos and two tigers. Herds of elephants, migratory birds and rare snake species also visit his forest.



A file photo of notorious rhino poaching suspect Bogendra Kutum.

## **THE TRADE**

This year Kaziranga has lost a rhino almost every week to poaching, with a total of 31 rhinos killed already. Last year, on two occasions poachers hacked off rhino horns while the animals were still alive, leaving the 2,000 kg animals to die a slow, painful death.

Rhinos have been slaughtered to near extinction in many places in the world. The trading of rhino horns is a booming business in the South Asian market. The Chinese believe that rhino horns have aphrodisiac properties, apart from other benefits like a cure for cancer. Though such faiths are

largely unfounded, the demands for these horns continue to be extremely high in Vietnam, China, Korea and other places. In Vietnam, it is also taken as a status symbol to own a rhino horn.

Suspected poachers come from Karbi-Anglong, Nagaland and Mizoram. Dimapur in Nagaland is the hub from where these horns are traded to the international market via Moreh (a Manipur border town) to Myanmar, and from there to other South Asian countries. Less commonly, the smuggling route is through Kohima, Nagaland and Tripura. While animals like tigers, pangolins, elephants and bears are also targeted, the poaching of rhinos is maximum given the minimal skills needed and the high returns.

Poachers usually have a complex network of informers who have complete geographical knowledge about the park and its security. There are often middlemen who facilitate the killing and teams of snipers trained in the use of sophisticated guns who usually come from Nagaland and Karbi-Anglong (Kaziranga shares 60 km of its park border with Karbi-Anglong).

A single kilo of a rhino horn can fetch as high as Rs 80 lakh to Rs 2 crore – almost 10 times the money earned out of a tiger poaching. Even the field boy, whose only job is to help the entry and exit of the poachers through a demarcated route, gets a hefty pay of about Rs 4 lakh.

Poachers in Kaziranga are also aided by militant groups like the Karbi People's Liberation Tigers and Kuki People's Army. For militants, poaching is a relatively easy way of raising funds. "Earlier, these groups used to get a hefty sum for supplying weapons to the poachers. Now they demand a share of the trade amount," says Bibhab Kumar Talukdar, an Asian rhino specialist.

The militants' involvement is obvious from the numerous cases of rhinos being shot with lethal weapons such as AK-47 guns. The park is divided into five ranges including the Agarotoli, Baghori, Kohora, Burapahar and the central range. Of the five ranges in the Kaziranga national park, the Burapahar range is facing the worst crisis since it is the most prominent militant hideout.



Forest guards at the site in the Burapahar range of Kaziranga National Park where a rhino was killed on January 28 this year. Seven empty AK-47 cartridges and three empty .303 rifle cartridges were recovered from the site where the carcass of the male rhino was found. Photo: Dhruvajyoti Saha

### **A HIDE NOT THICK ENOUGH**

In 2011, the rising instances of poaching prompted an increased vigilance around the park. The forest department was severely jolted after the 2012 floods swept away about 60 rhinos in the national park. More security arrangements were made and commandos from the COBRA battalion of the CRPF were posted in Kaziranga.

The MoEF is now calling for submissions to amend the Wildlife Protection Act since the act is said to have many loopholes, but experts have time and again said that the stricter implementation of the existing act is the need of the hour rather than trying to improvise its provisions.

The Assam state government takes pride in its 2009 amendment to the Wildlife Protection Act 1972, that makes wildlife crimes non-bailable and can lead to even life imprisonment for convicts. Under the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 (the original act and not the Assam amendment), killing of any animal protected under Schedule 1 amounts to immediate arrest and jail for seven years.

In the last two years, the WCCB has become active and the CBI has begun a probe into rhino poaching. Post the series of floods from June to September in 2012, Assam started losing a huge population of its rhinos. Those that ventured to the highlands of Karbi-Anglong became easy prey to poachers. A few rhino deaths were suspected to have gone undocumented. Wildlife watchers and conservation groups pressed hard for a CBI probe into the rhino killings. Following the Union Minister of Environment and Forests (MoEF) Jayanthi Natarajan's visit on September 7, 2012 and after tremendous pressure from conservation groups, a CBI probe was finally initiated.

But look closer and every single thread of the new anti-poaching measures unravels.

At least 25 poachers have been arrested around Bokhakhat since May this year but almost all of them have been bailed out – the crime could be established in none of these cases. Similarly, almost 80 poachers who had been arrested in the neighboring district of Karbi-Anglong alone last year after the floods, have all been bailed out.

With a conviction rate of zero, serious questions have been raised by wildlife watchers, conservationists and intellectuals on the competence of the forest department and the public prosecutor who have shoddily handled wildlife crimes. The forest department has very poor involvement in enforcing these cases under the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 due to general reluctance and apathy, which makes matters worse.

“We are unable to secure conviction since the current system is very loose. The public prosecutor is selected randomly by the state government and they have no orientation on wildlife crimes and their severity,” says a special officer of the WCCB.

However, with almost zero wildlife conviction rates, one cannot rule out the allegations of bribery against the public prosecutor by various sources. The allegations come from a wildlife warden, some members of the forest department, special officer of the WCCB and senior journalists. The number of cases where convicts have been charge-sheeted remains almost nil.

Just as disturbing is the way in which the records of wildlife conviction are maintained by the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF), Assam. An RTI information request on wildlife

conviction from a Bokakhat youth called Rohit Choudhury has been doing the rounds from one official's desk to another. Choudhury enquired about the number of cases where wildlife criminals were convicted. His questions, asked about a year ago, were continuously transferred from the PCCF's office to the Divisional Forest Office and Rangers office, with no concrete reply. Replies would only state that that the information sought had been transferred each time to a new desk.

Some Kaziranga insiders claim that many rhino poaching cases have deliberately been kept hidden from the public eye. Sources on the ground say that at least 10 recent poaching cases have been suppressed. "Many a time, I have been told that gunshots were heard and got unofficial reports of killings. But none of these were reported outside," says a source inside Kaziranga who did not wish to be named. According to these sources, information is suppressed at three levels involving the forest guards, the range offices and the divisional forest officer.

Big promises were made during Jayanthi Natarajan's visit to the park in September 2012 but they remained confined to proposals or failed altogether. One of the proposals was to introduce aerial drones fitted with cameras in Kaziranga. A year later, in September 2013, the ministry of defense turned down the proposal citing security reasons.

Wildlife conservationists feel that this volte-face was due to apathy and the reluctance to try out new ideas. A former employee with TRAFFIC, the wildlife trade monitoring network, says, "TRAFFIC had a special military intelligence officer. If an NGO could do this, the state government could have easily used such measures to take care of security concerns in the park instead of dropping the idea of introducing drones altogether."

No congruence has been established between the police and forest department and also between Kaziranga and the neighboring Karbi-Anglong. There remains an acute lack of coordination between the five divisions of the park and the neighboring districts of Morigaon, Nagaon and Karbi-Anglong, all of which was supposed to be strengthened after Natarajan's visit.

Animals know no boundaries, so it is natural for them to go astray in search of food or higher ground in case of floods. Once strayed, an animal is almost an orphan with no one to own it. The killings of straying rhinos are often not accounted for by Kaziranga or Karbi-Anglong authorities. On various occasions Kaziranga officials say that if a rhino has died outside the park, it is not their responsibility. In Karbi-Anglong, too, officials don't take responsibility if the rhino belongs to Kaziranga.



Though the CBI probe into the rhino killings was announced last year, it is yet to do any good since the state government has handed over only three cases to them. All of these cases were at least a year old and the evidences have invariably died out.

Winter is coming to Kaziranga. And with the onset of winter, the situation could turn grave. With the water receding inside the park, these pachyderms will be left without any option but to stray out to the north bank of the Brahmaputra for water.



A rhino straying out to the National Highway 37 when the September 2012 floods inundated Kaziranga.  
Photo: Wildlife Trust of India

## **THE GUARDS**

Though the Kaziranga park authorities have a workforce of 1,200, serious questions have been often raised about its efficiency. A poacher told me, “I was perched on a tree and I had left my shoes at the bottom. An entire forest battalion walked past the tree right under my eyes. They didn’t see me.”

“They did take my shoes, though,” he added with a sarcastic chuckle.

The poacher may scoff, but he knows that shoes are not to be taken for granted if you are a forest guard in Kaziranga. The forest guards, on the frontline of the war against poachers, get paid roughly Rs 7,000 per month and that too not very regularly. They work in extremely hard conditions inside

forest camps with little food or electricity. During the floods these guards are cut off totally but often work continuously on their own to protect the animals.

The home guards (Assam police elite forces) are different from the usual forest guards who belong dedicatedly to the forest department; these forces are sent to give a security boost to the park whenever needed and are not permanent. They have minimal or no training in using sophisticated weapons. A senior forest officer in the Baghori range even claimed that many of the SLR guns provided to the battalion in October 2012 have been simply shelved in the ranger's office and are actually not put to use at all.

The Kaziranga park also suffers from poor management and shoddy handling of funds. Since 2006, when Kaziranga was declared a tiger reserve, regular funds have come in from the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA).

On August 2013, the NTCA allotted annual assistance of Rs 9.33 crore to the park. Of this, Rs 3.6 crore is for building anti-poaching infrastructure while a shamefully miniscule Rs 1 lakh was allotted for intelligence gathering. There is also a tiger foundation in the park which gets regular funds, mostly from tourism and other donations. However, the department lacks transparency on the availability and utilization of those funds.

There are too few anti-poaching camps in Kaziranga and most camps have deployed just one forest guard. In the neighboring Karbi-Anglong, there are no anti-poaching camps apart from a couple of forest beat offices in the Karbi-Anglong headquarters of Diphu. There've been several rumors of the state forest minister Rakibul Hussain hiring battalions just ahead of elections to use these forces for his election campaigning. The entire home guard population that was recruited a few months ahead of the elections was said to have gone away to campaign for the minister, leaving the park in the lurch.

For some families in the region the dilemma of poaching is an intimate one. Many poachers' families have links to the home guards. Ganesh Doley was arrested and bailed out twice – last year in Karbi-Anglong and recently this month from the Golaghat sessions court. Doley had poached about 6-7 rhinos a few years ago in his initial years and is now involved in organizing poaching. He himself doesn't go inside but trains and facilitates others. He was arrested for his poaching activities and for having illegal arms.

Doley's brother is a home guard in Kaziranga. Even as forest authorities claim that there is no involvement of villages in poaching nor is there illegal encroachment, locals allege that there are

numerous infiltrators settled in the sixth addition area of the park. These illegal migrants and the fringe villagers are known to shelter poachers either out of fear or want of money.



Police with four rhino poaching suspects in Morigaon district of Assam on September 19, 2013. Photo: Ujjal Deb

### **TO CATCH A POACHER**

The forest department has resolved to get poachers to surrender and then use them to catch other poachers. But here, too, the department does not have policies in place for poachers to surrender.

A close associate to Bogendra says, “Bogendra had been under immense pressure from the WCCB and the CBI. He knew that he’d get caught soon. So he was trying desperately to surrender.”

Recently, Bogendra, advised by his lawyer, did a seemingly surprising thing – he surrendered before the Jorhat Juvenile court for the murder he had committed as a minor. And now, under the protection from the juvenile court, Bogendra’s most heinous wildlife crimes have been overshadowed.

But surrender comes in many flavors. Kartik is about 30 years old, with a dark, thin, unassuming face and bloodshot eyes. He grew up in extreme poverty in a village close to Bokakhat. He had been a

regular supplier of .303 rifles to poachers for almost a decade but surrendered in late 2011 and decided to help the forest department. It is a decision Kartik rues today. “They promised me the moon if I surrendered and became an unofficial informer to help them catch other poachers.

When finally I surrendered and decided to lead a normal life with my family, the forest officers refused to even see my face,” he says.

Kartik has no means of survival any more. “I often feel I should get into poaching again,” he says. “But since the gangs know that I had decided to surrender, they wouldn’t allow me to live. I’d get killed.”



A file photo of former poacher Kartik Pegu