



Kaziranga Rhino wallowing in mud. In the background is the thick impenetrable tall grass through which the animal has to tunnel its way to wander about. Poachers make pits on the tracks to kill Rhinos for their horns.



Three horns in the custody of the Assam Forest Department. The one on the extreme right is a fake one. Horn of a domestic cattle mounted on a cement base and suitably coated to resemble the base of a genuine horn is passed on as genuine stuff. Defective coating has peeled off exposing the spurious character. The one in the middle—a genuine one—weighs a little over a kg and its present spot price would be around Rs. 70,000/- (Rs. seventy thousand).

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—Photo Shri S.P. Sahi

## Alarm Call by Great Indian Rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*)

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The Government of India's recent plan to translocate a few great Indian rhinos to some other potential habitat, has caused fresh controversy in the already politically strife torn North-Eastern Assam State.

The great Indian one horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*), an animal once at the point of extinction, is still a major force in tourist attraction for visitors to the marshy and difficult Kaziranga Sanctuary of the state.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the enforcement of a tough anti-poaching protection law (Indian Wildlife Act 1972), the magnificent animal is still under severe threat, for its horn.<sup>2</sup> The single horn, when fully developed, may weigh up to 1½ kg (max.) in maturity with a length up to 12 inches. It is believed, that when powdered, the horn has high aphrodisiac potential and it is much valued by groups of Asiatic people.<sup>3</sup> Amongst the mongoloid group of people in Asia, the powdered rhino horn is believed to be an aphrodisiac, which it is not; whereas the North Yemeni tribesmen take pride in carrying daggers with decorative rhino horn handles.<sup>4</sup>

Coming back to the political issue, the Assam protestors argue that the scheme to remove the rhino is designed at gradually stripping the State of an important tourist attraction. A section of militant students, in their recent protest note to the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, mentioned that the proposed translocation scheme of the Kaziranga rhino which they call "Assam Rhino" in any other reserve outside Assam, is a "conspiracy to deprive the people of Assam of an object of their hereditary pride". The agitated student groups are receiving support from local parochial and jingoistic politicians, so called 'conservationists', and wildlife officials. The issue has involved demanding the eviction of illegal immigrants, mostly from Bangladesh (and a certain percentage from West Bengal too) who the Assamese think, are swamping their linguistic and cultural identity.

The wildlife authorities in New Delhi, to their utter surprise at the controversy, have the view that the rhino translocation programme is based on sound conservation principles. They say that Kaziranga Sanctuary, whose total area is about 425 sq kms,<sup>5</sup> is overstocked with rhinos and they must be shifted to a new suitable habitat.

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The recent rhino population estimate shows that there are 1200 animals in India, and 960 of them are in Kaziranga alone. Reflecting back, Kaziranga was established as a Sanctuary in 1908, when there were about a dozen of the animals in the reserve. Poaching, encroachment of the habitats by man, drying of wetlands, all together contributed to push the magnificent animal into small isolated pockets of the Savannah Swamps of Kaziranga and the foothill forests in West Bengal and Nepal.

Though the scientists say that there are no aphrodisiac properties in rhino horn, poaching of rhinos has not stopped. The officials of Kaziranga Sanctuary admitted that 40 rhinos had been killed during 1981. The Indian Wildlife authorities believe that by 1900 the Javan one horned lesser rhinoceros became extinct and its other counterpart the Sumatran two horned rhinoceros vanished by 1935. The Indian authorities are seriously considering methods of preventing extinction of the species (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) and that is why they are in favour of translocation of a few potential animals to other suitable habitats.<sup>6</sup> The experts recommended last year that six rhinos should be lifted out of Kaziranga and introduced in the Dudhwa National Park in the Northern State of Uttar Pradesh. A few more could be translocated at a later stage in State Reserves of northern part of West Bengal.

Some sections of Assamese Wildlife officials think the rhino may not be able to survive the threats from poachers who are rampantly dominant both in the Dudhwa and North Bengal forest areas. Their suggestion is to resettle the rhinos in about 20 other forest reserves within Assam, which they say, would provide an ideal habitat for the species.

The translocation experiment of rhinos to Dudhwa was expected to start by next winter and this could perhaps be the starting point of similar projects involving other endangered Indian species. It may perhaps be worth mentioning India's most recent notable conservation success programme—"the project tiger" which was launched in 1973 to save the magnificent big cat from extinction.<sup>7</sup> Rigid protective measures have helped increase the tiger population both in the wild and the reserves. The recent (1981) estimates of population show 3015 animals, whereas the initial (1972) count was only 1844.<sup>8</sup>

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