

A Note on Kaziranga

By
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On Kaziranga Rhinos, Cheetal's issue of March, 1982: No. 3, states "Recently more than thirty carcasses of rhinos were discovered in Kaziranga. They did not die of any disease as their horns had been chopped off—apparently the work of poachers whom the enforcement staff failed to catch". The magazine goes on to comment ".....as Assam seems to be unable to protect the rhinos in Kaziranga; the translocation would give the species a better chance of survival".

I was in Kaziranga between the period 15.5.1982 to 18.5.1982. Rhino's population based on actual physical count in the years 1966, 1972 and 1978 (at six years interval) stood at 366, 658 and 939 respectively. Next census is due only in 1984. The projected population to date appears to be around 1060 rhinos. Records further show that this great one-horned rhino was abundant in the dynamic habitat carrying the natural mix of riverain woodland, flood plain grasslands and swamps, till the end of the last century. Senseless slaughter by poachers and hunters decimated the population to less than a dozen in 1904. Kaziranga with an area of 433 sq kms was declared a Sanctuary in 1916 with the primary objective of preserving the rhinoceros. It got the status of National Park around 1970, when the Assam National Park Act received the assent of President of India in mid 1969. Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, now applies to the area and rhino is under Schedule 1 of the Act.

During the period 1966-78 for which population figures have been provided above, records reveal that total number of natural deaths (predation, old age, con-specific combat) was 401 and the number of rhinos poached over this twelve-year period was 63. In spite of these deaths the net increase in population has been 573 in 12 years—an annual gain of 48 rhinos in the population. There is, therefore no cause for concern at the moment of rhino population having been decimated either by natural deaths or poaching.

All rhino horns of natural deaths should, it is presumed be collected by the local administration if they are vigilant and honest. Horns collected up to 1978 were disposed off by periodic competitive sales. There has, however, been no sale after 1978. The following figures for the three years 1979, 80 and 81 are relevant:-

Year	Natural deaths	Horns recovered	Calves (dead)
1979	19	16	2
1980	58	44	12
1981	38	23	14
	115	83	28

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Calves do not develop horns until they are 3 years old. Recovery of 83 Numbers of horns out of 87 adults that had natural deaths gives a recovery percentage of 95.4%. This is a commendable achievement by any standards. Two facts emerge undisputedly, namely (a) population has increased from the all-time rhino low of less than a dozen in 1904 to over a thousand now (1982) and that (b) natural deaths are detected and their horns collected and accounted for.

It is also perhaps not fully appreciated that in spite of the burning of grasses from December to February, they (*Arundo donax*, *Phragmites karka*, *Erianthus spp etc*) grow very fast into tall thick mass and rhinos who are great wanderers, have to tunnel their way through them leaving innumerable tracks that they use over and over again. It is on these tracks that poachers dig pits, camouflage them with thin branches and the heavy rhinos fall in the pits and die and the poachers cut away their horns. Such tracks can only be petrolled by means of elephants. In this ideal rhino habitat, the petrolling staff is thrown at a disadvantage due to inadequate number of elephants. It indeed, goes to the credit of the administration that they have succeeded so far in maintaining an increasing population growth.

There has, however, been a sudden spurt in poaching incidences in the two years 1980 and 1981. As against 11 animals poached in 1980, as many as 25 animals were poached in 1981. While the poaching percentage in 1978 was a mere 0.6% it has increased to 2.38% (four times) in 1981. This adverse unexpected situation has to be nipped in the bud to prevent the present happy position about population increase taking a negative trend.

Dr. Bradley-Martin's research carried out in China, India, Hongkong, Taiwan and North Yemen and several other Asian countries, has dispelled the long held myth that Asians prize the horn as an aphrodisiac. Instead Dr. Bradley-Martin found that they use it mainly as a fever reducing drug—a vital piece of knowledge that may lead to the provision of alternatives. This Study reveals that "there is a booming market for African rhino horn in North Yemen where it is used to make the handles of traditional daggers. Apparently Yemenis—returning with their savings from neighbouring Saudi Arabia—are prepared to pay top prices for the real thing. One reason why the whole sale price of rhino horn has rocketed twenty-fold over the past five years" source IUCN Bulletin November/December 1980 (Vol. 11, No. 12). While in 1978, the auction price of per kg of rhino horn was Rs. 16,000/- (Rs. sixteen thousand) the highest offer received by the Assam Forest Department, only two years later was Rs. 62,500 per kg in 1980—no sale was done, however. I will not therefore be surprised if this sudden rise in poaching is also connected with demand in North Yemen and may be in other Gulf countries. Temptation to make quick money is too great amongst poachers.

The mighty Brahmaputra river flows along the northern boundary of the Park and the river Mora Diflu along the southern boundary. Poachers come from the northern bank of Brahmaputra in disguise as fishermen. Fishing licences are issued by another Department of Govt, who obviously are not aware of the gravity of the 1981 poaching situation. 50 kms of Brahmaputra forms the northern boundary and it is imperative that no fishing should be permitted over this stretch of the river. The situation is further aggravated by the fact that there are a number of *Chapories* (riverain islets and accretions) permitted to be occupied by Gov't by professional graziers. Rhino poachers find easy shelter in such places—all on the southern bank of Brahmaputra facing the Park. Natural succession of vegetation should be allowed to take its own course in these new islets in the interest of management of large herbivores like rhinos and elephants. Graziers must not be allowed to use these islets which not only disturbs the course of vegetative succession but provides bases for poachers to operate. A political decision at State level is needed on this. For patrolling 50 kms of Brahmaputra that forms the northern boundary, there are only nine posts without any facility of fast boats to negotiate the heavy current of Brahmaputra. At least twenty posts and two jet boats would be required if poachers have to be dealt promptly. Similar inadequacy of staff exists along the south eastern boundary of the Park, from Dhanbari area of Agartali range to Kaziranga beat over a length of 30 kms distance through which poachers enter the Park.

At least forty elephants would be required to be so permanently stationed inside the Park as to facilitate surveillance of the innumerable rhino tracks made by a thousand rhino amidst tall grasses. At present, to cater to the needs of the tourist traffic, forestry personnel and elephants, are in constant heavy demand to the detriment of the required intensity of field duties. A whole time officer of the rank of an Assistant Conservator of Forests exclusively for anti-poaching operations with control over the forty elephants and anti-poaching ground staff will improve matters.

Before putting the wildlife staff on the mat, facilities such as those mentioned above have to be provided to curb this sudden spurt in poaching.

Translocation of rhinos to Dudhwa N.P. is an independent issue—the creation of a second homeland for the Indian Rhino. One need not run down the Kaziranga administration to find additional argument for translocation.

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Bird Life in Ghana Bird Sanctuary, Bharatpur (India), Before and After the 1979 Drought

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Abstract

Bird life of the Ghana Bird Sanctuary was studied before and after the 1979 drought with a view to decrease the adverse effects on birds, in case of a drought, in future. The Sanctuary perhaps had the least number and species of water birds, it ever had, following the 1979 drought. Water birds seemed disorganised and tended to crowd. Food as a niche requirement was the most limiting factor. Interestingly, water birds changed their foraging strategy to remain in the sanctuary. Piscivores was the most severely affected bird-group. Of the four agents of disturbance, birds-of-prey disturbed waterfowl the most. The density of wader birds increased. Shrikes, babblers and other species that prefer scrub, also increased. Repeated onslaughts of such drought may adversely affect the birds but infrequent occurrence may be favourable.

Introduction

The Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary in Rajasthan (26° 45' N, 73° 30' E), is India's most popular bird refuge with over three hundred resident and migratory birds which have been listed by Saxena (1975). It attracts sizable crowds of international tourists.

The sanctuary predominantly consists of inundated tracts, housing a variety of ducks, teals, rails, storks, cranes and other kinds of waterfowl. Because of the scrub, marsh and woody habitats found here, the sanctuary harbours a variety of waders and terrestrial birds.

The sanctuary was visited in November and December of 1978 (RKB) and in February and March of 1979. During 1978 and early 1979 conditions were normal. In 1979, due to monsoon failure, a severe drought prevailed in the sanctuary. Reports that migrant birds were scarce or absent were publicised by the news media. This prompted a revisit to the sanctuary in November 1979. The findings of the second survey were compared with the notes taken during the first visit and the differences observed are presented in this paper.

Brief History

Ghana, also called 'Keola Dev' after a temple diety of the same name, is the most famous of Indian bird sanctuaries. Its renown is due to the assemblages of water birds, both resident and migratory.