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On the dilemma over the rhino horn

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SAVING THE RHINO: While proposals for dehorning the rhino demonstrate intent to solve the rhino poaching problem, it is also a complete admission of defeat, and that too, to unregulated forces. Photo: Ritu Raj Konwar

Intervening to remove a rhino's horn, in response to a patently illegal activity, may set a dangerous precedent

In the luscious wet forests and golden grasslands of Assam, a keratinous debate is brewing. The debate is about the *Rhinoceros unicornis*, the One-horned Rhino of India, and its single horn. The rhino, short-tempered and evolutionarily ancient, is an animal with enigma: one which writer Rudyard Kipling described as wearing a suit of armour, a great beast which survived the Pleistocene Mass Extinction of animals, and whose single, mounted horn is both a mystery and a product of exceptional evolution. Tragically, this defining characteristic is also the reason for the rhino's continuous decimation: rhinos are poached for their horns, with mounted, gunned battles leading to losses of forest guards, conservation effort, and the very lives of the animals in our states.

The Assam government now has a proposal to take away the ostensible source of death and illicit trade: the rhino's horn itself. An expert committee has been constituted by the State to consider the 'feasibility and necessity' of de-horning rhinos, in a move to 'save' them. At the moment, the proposal suggests that the horns of rhinos that 'stray' outside protected areas,

or rhinos that need to be translocated, should be 'trimmed' ('Assam Government awaiting expert opinion on trimming rhino horns', *The Hindu*, February 13). Comments on this issue are open till the end of the month.

At one level, this move signals the desire of the State to address a long drawn out and exhausting battle. In Assam itself, rhinos are poached every few weeks, and 11 have been killed this year. Poachers are known to carry sophisticated weapons like AK-47s, and are ruthless. Yet, in the protection of rhinos, the forest department's role is legendary: Assam became the first State in India to issue 'shoot at sight' orders for poachers in Kaziranga National Park, boosting the rhino population.

Of one horns and poachers

However, the battle to protect the rhino, whose horn is seen as nothing less than gold or cocaine in the illicit market, only starts with healthy populations. Poachers strike opportunistically. Being a high stakes and high-risk trade, it is unlikely they will stop until the last rhino is gone forever.

And here is where the decision to de-horn rhinos needs to be put into broader perspective: the ecological role of the horn, the open question of addressing poachers as an audience, and the very ethics of intervention.

Unlike the African rhino, the Indian rhino has a single horn. This horn is made of keratin and if cut in a way that includes the skull, it will not grow back. If cut in a manner which excludes the skull it is likely to regrow. While the Assam government stresses that the proposal being considered is only for temporary trimming, I don't believe the most significant question is whether the horn is removed temporarily or permanently. Rather, the essential question is: who is the audience for this exercise?

The rhino is considered the most coveted animal in the illegal trade. By removing its horn, we assume that there is perfect complicity between demand and supply of this product, the horn. But this is not the case. Evidence suggests that poachers kill anyway, being part of a violent, and ultimately dangerously illegal occupation.

In African countries, where de-horning has been tried as a measure to protect rhinos, poachers have killed dehorned rhinos out of vengeance. In India, poachers have killed female rhinos for their horns, even though they have horns significantly smaller than those of males. In a nutshell then, poachers trap, shoot or kill opportunistically, and the size of the horn (or even its presence) may not be a deciding factor.

The second, much more complicated problem to mull is that of protection of rhinos that don't get dehorned. This is on the same lines as the first question: if the audience for the dehorning exercise is the poacher, then we cannot assume he will leave poaching altogether because stray rhinos (which are technically easier to poach) don't have horns. In fact, this may victimise regular rhinos more, and it is most likely that rhinos with horns inside protected areas like Kaziranga, Pobitora and Manas may be attacked with greater gusto.

The ethics of intervention

The debate surrounding rhino conservation in Assam today is a direct response to the social reality of rhino poaching. The ecological consideration of the role of the horn for rhino

reproduction and feeding may not have been the primary deciding factor in this debate. Indeed, the role of the rhino horn has been poorly understood.

But field observations confirm that successful males are also those who have large horns, and the horn has been seen as used in foraging for food. Even if we consider a deficiency of data on the role of the horn — while the animal possesses it — it will be difficult to consider the answer to the opposite question: can the rhino lead a normal life without the horn?

Here is where the most difficult question of all comes in: the very ethics of our intervention. Intervening to remove a rhino's horn, in response to a patently illegal activity, may set a dangerous precedent. There are several species which are highly prized in the poaching trade, and these include tigers, lions, tokay geckos, and elephants. Tigers and lions are killed for their skins, nails and bones, tokay geckos for their body parts, and till recently, elephants were slaughtered in India for their ivory.

Dehorning rhinos may or may not stem poaching of rhinos. But it may set a precedent for similar such exercises, which are seen as a management tool, but have unknown impacts on the actual life and ecology of the animal. If we dehorn rhinos, we may at some time also consider de-tusking elephants. Finally, the impact intended on the 'audience' of poachers itself is unknown. In the absence of rhinos, will poachers pack their bags, or will they move towards capture of other species?

Animals do not live in the boxes or bestiaries we make for them. The rhino's horn has been seen as a symbol of power, and in our human imagination, the horn has pride of place, as in the symbol for Assam Oil, and many other Assamese metaphors. In effect, the rhino did not ask for its horn to be understood as power, and transference of this power to humans, whether as a sheath for a dagger or under Traditional Chinese Medicine.

While proposals for dehorning the rhino demonstrate intent to solve the rhino poaching problem, it is also a complete admission of defeat, and that too, to unregulated forces. These are forces which we should not buckle to, for reasons both logical and ethical. The answers will lie in demonstrating seriousness in solving the actual problem: through higher conviction rates for poaching cases, enforcement, vigilance and carrying forward the commitment the Assam government has already shown. There is no other means of saving the unfortunate rhino.

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