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Kaziranga: the frontline of India's rhino wars

4 April 2017 / [Sharon Guynup](#)

India's iconic nature reserve is a center for the conservation of one-horned rhinos and other rare species — and debate over how these vulnerable animals should be protected.

- *Kaziranga National Park in India's Assam State is home to around 2,400 one-horned rhinos, as well as elephants, tigers and hundreds of other mammal and bird species.*
- *India's rhinos were hunted nearly to extinction by the early 20th century, but have rebounded since the park was established. However, rhino horn is highly sought in the black market and poaching remains a constant threat.*
- *Rangers in Kaziranga rely on antiquated weaponry to face off against poachers, whose links with international crime syndicates mean they are often better armed and better financed than forest guards.*
- *The park's approach to conservation has drawn criticism from indigenous rights group Survival International, a critique that gained prominence in a recent BBC documentary.*

In the dead of night on February 15, gunshots blasted the guards into action in India's Kaziranga National Park. Rangers stationed in a nearby camp quickly spread out, searching for the shooters under the light of a nearly full moon — to no avail.

By morning, they'd located the victim, the park's first poaching casualty of 2017: a female Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*). They inspected her 3,500-pound body, which was riddled with bullet holes and collected 11 spent cartridges from an AK-47 assault rifle. The gouged wound on her nose marked the spot where her horn had been hacked off.

Welcome to the rhino wars.

Guards out on patrol in Kaziranga. Photo by Steve Winter/National Geographic Creative.

The last stronghold

Indian (or greater one-horned) rhinos once lived across the subcontinent from Pakistan to Bangladesh. Today they hang on in just a handful of sites in Nepal and India. Kaziranga, in the northeast state of Assam, is the last real stronghold for this massive, prehistoric-looking animal — home to about two-thirds of the 3,500 that remain.

It's a precarious situation. [According to the IUCN](#), "any catastrophic event in Kaziranga (such as disease, civil disorder, poaching, habitat loss, etc.) would have a devastating impact on the status of this species."

One of those threats is ever-present. Aron White, a wildlife expert with the London-based Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), says that "poaching is the main threat to the survival of rhinos today, driven by demand for their horns."

Poachers killed this rhino in Kaziranga and sawed off its horn to sell on the black market, where it can fetch a higher price than cocaine. Photo by Steve Winter/National Geographic Creative.

For centuries, that horn has been used to treat a host of maladies, though there is no proven medical benefit. Over the last decade, skyrocketing demand in Vietnam and China has made rhino horn one of the world's most valuable illegal commodities. It's now worth more than cocaine on the black market.

A [2008 report to the U.S. Congress](#) called the trade in endangered species “the wildlife version of blood diamonds.” Well over a thousand rhinos are being slaughtered for their horn in Africa and Asia each year. The problem has even reached Europe: In March, a white rhino named “Vince” was [poached from a zoo near Paris](#), shot in the head, his horn removed with a chainsaw. The traffickers are international crime syndicates that move rhino horn and other endangered species products across the globe, says Rahul Dutta, a consultant on wildlife trade for the International Rhino Foundation. Because it’s a low-risk, high profit business, he says, “people who were involved in the drug trade or arms mafias have shifted their efforts to wildlife crime.” The United Nations estimates the global illegal wildlife trade at \$19 billion a year. Transnational commerce in rhino horn is prohibited under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, a treaty regulating that trade signed by 183 nations, though shadowy networks still thrive across Africa and Asia.



Sunrise in the village of Bandardubi, where a rhino escaped floodwaters by leaving the park that borders the village. Photo by Steve Winter/National Geographic Creative.

Back from the brink

I’ve visited this lush landscape a half dozen times over the past decade. It’s heaven for rhinos and other grazers. Kaziranga is a lush, 332 square-mile island of head-high elephant grass and forest sandwiched between the mighty Brahmaputra River to the north and the undulating Karbi Anglong hills to the south.

It’s also hemmed in by an exploding human population. The land is a patchwork of rice paddies, crop fields, sprawling tea plantations, pasture, factories, and towns and villages built in cement block and bamboo.

It’s hard to believe that 150 years ago, this was a malarial backwater, with much of the land unbroken grassland and forest. Then, in the mid-1800s, with India ruled by the British Raj, Assam’s tea industry enveloped huge swathes of rhino habitat.

Around that time, the rhinos also became popular sport hunting trophies. Staging elaborate big game hunts became a favored pastime among both the European and Indian elite during the 18th century — and well into the 19th. The Maharajah of Cooch Behar famously killed 207 rhinos from 1871 to 1907 and King George V's post-coronation hunting party in 1911 targeted rhinos and tigers.

In 1902, the commissioner of the Assam Valley described the rhino situation in a [letter to his superior](#). “The animal which was formerly common in Assam has been exterminated, except in remote localities,” he wrote. “I am convinced that, unless an order of the kind is issued, the complete extinction of a comparatively harmless and most interesting creature is only a question of a very short space of time.”

By the time Lady Curzon, wife of the Viceroy of India, came to Kaziranga to see a rhino in 1904, all she saw was footprints: perhaps two dozen were left alive there. She persuaded her husband to save the unique animal, and a few months later, he protected Kaziranga as a reserve forest. In 1924, several hundred people living in the area signed a petition against the reserve, outraged that land should be reserved for animals and demanding that it be given to them as farmland.

Their request was ignored.

During the dry season when Kaziranga is open for tourism, hordes of tourists flock to the park to view wildlife from open jeeps — or elephant back. Photo by Steve Winter/National Geographic Creative.

With growing awareness of the need for conservation, this grassland was later upgraded to a sanctuary, eventually became Assam's first national park, and in 1985, it was named a World Heritage Site. [Tourist revenue in 2015](#) brought about a half million dollars into the area.

Now, the hope is to hedge against a catastrophe in Kaziranga by increasing rhino populations to 3,000 across seven protected areas in Assam. The effort, the Indian Rhino Vision 2020 program, is a broad collaboration between Indian and US government agencies and conservation and community groups.

Conservation efforts have paid off and the animals have rebounded in Kaziranga, but it's been a slow process because they mature late and are not prolific breeders. Females reach reproductive age between the age of five and seven, and males, 10, says Vivek Menon, executive director and CEO of the Wildlife Trust of India. A rhino pregnancy takes 16 months, and females only birth one calf every three years or so.

The most recent census counted 2,401 rhinos in Kaziranga, an achievement hailed by the Assamese government as a monumental conservation success story. Many other species have also benefitted: Kaziranga has become an improbable Noah's Ark, with a large population of breeding Asian elephants, hundreds of bird and mammal species, and the highest density of tigers in the world.

There has been some recent controversy over how the park is managed. Although rangers in wildlife parks across the globe carry guns to fight poachers, Kaziranga has recently faced criticism over its armed anti-poaching patrols from Survival International, a British indigenous rights group, whose claims were covered in a recent BBC documentary.

Guards on patrol in Kaziranga National Park. Photo by Steve Winter/National Geographic Creative.

A powerful charm and an ancient apothecary

For centuries, hunters have pursued rhinos because of the creature's supposed magical powers and healing properties. Some local Assamese tribes once wore a charm around their necks

containing skin or horn: they believed it surrounded them with force field-like protection from their enemies. Others stitched a piece of rhino bone into men's forearms to imbue them with the animal's colossal strength. The Nepalese drank its urine to cure asthma.

Traditional remedies using rhino blood, skin, urine and horn were first compiled by Chinese physician and herbalist Li Shizhen in 1597 in the *Pen Tsao Kang Mu* (The Great Herbal). According to Bernard Read's 1931 translation, rhino products have been used to cure devil possession, typhoid, headache, dysentery and carbuncles; remove hallucinations and "bewitching nightmares"; to expel fear and anxiety; as an antidote to poison — and more.

A 2006 Ohio University study found that "The horns most closely resemble the structure of horses' hoofs, turtle beaks and cockatoo bills." However, new trends have spiked its use in Vietnam, says Jan Vertefeuille, who leads demand reduction programs for WWF. "Rhino horn is marketed to desperate cancer patients... It is also used by successful businessmen — and it is usually men — ground up and mixed with water or wine as a cure-all, as a hangover cure, a detox after eating too much rich food or as a general health tonic," she says. "Black marketers have been very creative in getting people to pay a lot of money for something that offers the same benefit as chewing your finger nails."

Rhino horn products are also carved into trinkets or jewelry or displayed whole. They're worn or used as decorations as luxury items as a way to flaunt wealth and status.



A mother Indian one-horned Rhinoceros and calf grazing in Kaziranga. Photo by Steve Winter/National Geographic Creative.

Massive but vulnerable

The main east-west highway, Route 37, skims the southern edge of the park. It's where I glimpsed my first "gorh" (Assamese for rhino) back in 2006. It was early morning, and the hefty grey mass stood belly-deep in a pond near the road — a primeval relic whose ancestors split off

some 50 million years ago from the horses and tapirs that also share the *Perissodactyla* order. It was only the rhinoceros family that grew a horn — the feature that is now responsible for its demise.

We slowed the car to a crawl. The animal was close enough to see the huge folds of bumpy skin on its sides and rump that resembled riveted plates of medieval armor. It munched lazily on water hyacinth, its peculiar, prehensile upper lip curling around a mass of greens and pulling them into its mouth.

The beast turned to face us, swiveling its Shrek-like ears and raising its unicorn nose skyward, sniffing out the intruders. Its sense of smell — and hearing — is keen, perhaps to compensate for extremely poor eyesight. But it soon went back to its meal. It would be an easy target.



Men apprehended by park guards as suspected rhino poachers. Photo by Steve Winter/National Geographic Creative.

Centuries of poaching

While calves sometimes fall prey to tigers, humans are the Indian rhino's only serious predator, and hunting is not a recent problem. A 5th century coin from the ancient Indian Gupta Empire depicts a king on horseback attacking a rhino — and 1,000 years later, illuminated manuscripts show Mughal emperors doing the same thing.

Fast forward to the 1930s: an Indian government report noted that about 40 rhino carcasses were found in a game sanctuary in Assam — with the horns removed. Killing rhinos in protected areas was soon outlawed — and collecting its horn became a criminal offense.

The rhino death toll in Kaziranga has fluctuated since then, but the landscape became a killing field in the 1990s. The [United Liberation Front of Asom](#) and other separatist groups targeted rhinos to fund a bloody insurgency: bombings, assassinations and kidnappings. The carnage

peaked in 1992 when 48 rhinos were slaughtered and officials called in the Indian Army to beef up forces.

Environmental lawyer Ritwick Dutta noted in a [recent editorial](#) that rhino horn has become a form of currency to purchase illegal weapons and fund terrorism. “Rhino poaching is thus not just a conservation issue, it has serious national security implications,” he writes.

Poaching spiked again in 2012 right after two new militant groups formed nearby with the stated goal of fighting for an autonomous Karbi state. According to Dutta, an analysis of charges filed by police and forest officers showed poaching by both insurgent groups, the largest of which is the [Karbi People’s Liberation Tiger](#). Since then, 100 rhinos have died at poacher’s hands.



remote camera captures a one-horned rhino at dawn in Kaziranga National Park. Photo by Steve Winter/National Geographic Creative.

The landscape makes it a relatively easy affair. Tall elephant grasses provide perfect cover, and Route 37 offers an easy getaway. The majority of animals are killed under the light of a full moon — the “poacher’s moon” that illumines the landscape. The monsoon season is a particularly deadly period. Each year from June to September, floodwaters from the nearby Brahmaputra River submerge much of the park and send animals fleeing, making them easy targets. (Others drown — 22 died in 2016’s extraordinary floods — or get hit by cars crossing roadways.)

According to Satyendra Singh, Kaziranga National Park’s director, most of the shooters come from Nagaland and Manipur, neighboring states to the east that also border Myanmar, although some come from nearby villages. Either way, local people often provide logistical assistance as fixers, trackers or porters — or by physically staking out a target.

“The rhino is a creature of habit that comes to the same spot every day [for weeks at a time], so it’s easy to kill,” says Wildlife Trust’s Menon. Once the scout finds one, they call in the location. The poachers come in under cover of night and either shoot it, dig a pit on a trail to trap it, or run a cable from nearby electric wires into a wallowing pond to electrocute it. Then it’s just a couple of hacks with an axe, they drop the two-to five-pound horn in a plastic bag — and flee.

Former Kaziranga range officer Dharanidhar Boro, center, with two of his guards displaying confiscated rhino horns. Photo courtesy of D.D. Boro.

On the front lines

On an extended visit to Kaziranga in 2008, I spent a few days with Dharanidhar “D.D.” Boro, who was then a range officer. There were two things he showed me in his office that I’ll never forget. One was a smelly, heavily secured vault that held dozens of confiscated rhino horns. The other was an album of moldering photos: evidence.

There were pictures of he and his men standing over piles of seized arms and ammunition. In chest-up mug shots, sullen prisoners held small blackboard slates carefully chalked with their name and the word “poacher.” There were photos identifying those who’d been killed.

Boro pointed out one particular image of two men who’d died in a massive shootout with 26 rangers and police officers. The men were former soldiers believed to be connected with an international smuggling operation. “This is why it’s so hard to fight them,” he’d said. They were outfitted with AK-47s and Russian-made night vision glasses. He and his men carried World War II-era .303 Enfield rifles — antique weapons that the guards still carry. Since then, some poachers have upped their game, using M-4 or M-16 assault rifles that can fire hundreds of rounds, says the International Rhino Foundation’s Rahul Dutta. Meanwhile, budget constraints mean that rangers sometimes lack basic gear, like walkie-talkies and flashlights.



Confiscated horns and evidence photos from rhino poaching incidents. Photo courtesy of D.D. Boro.

It's usually the "Level Ones" — the poachers — who are apprehended. "It's very often a local who is arrested close to the poaching scene, possibly in the park or in a nearby village in possession of a horn," says EIA's Aron White. In India, some have been arrested a second or third time without ever having made it to court for the initial offense — or their cases are thrown out for lack of evidence. The percentage of successful prosecutions has been extremely low, and that often comes down to evidence, says Rahul Dutta. He's been training rangers, park officials and police on how to collect evidence from a wildlife crime scene that will stand up in court. As a result, two poachers convicted in January were sentenced to seven years in prison and fined US \$765.

White and his colleagues at EIA recently [mapped](#) both seizures and thefts of rhino horn, creating a snapshot of the situation over the past decade. The most significant finding, he says, is the vast role played by Chinese and Vietnamese nationals and organized criminal syndicates.

Ramesh Pandey, who worked at India's Wildlife Crime Control Bureau, notes that the trans-border syndicates who mastermind this trade are organized and very dangerous "because the stakes are very high."

Geography is a factor. Assam, India's easternmost appendage, straddles ancient Golden Triangle trafficking routes that have long moved contraband including drugs, guns, and now, illegal wildlife, through the region. The major smuggling routes run north into Nepal and east through Manipur and Nagaland to Myanmar, says Pandey, headed for Vietnam and China.

Vietnam has become the largest hub, trafficking at such levels that the CITES Standing Committee issued a warning last fall stating that the body will not tolerate its failure to enforce the ban on international trade in rhino horn trade. Failure to do so could spark sanctions.



Ranju Borah watches prairie grass fire set by guards during burning season. The large scar on his face is from being attacked and bitten by a rhino. Photo by Steve Winter/National Geographic Creative.

Guards under attack

It's hazardous work protecting an endangered species that's a walking gold mine. Kaziranga's rangers are stationed in any of 178 anti-poaching camps on three-month rotations. They're out on

patrol day and night, mostly on foot, though some monitor the park in jeeps, by boat or on elephant back.

They must avoid possible attack by tigers, elephants, rhinos, cobras and a host of other dangerous animals, says Keshav Varma, former director at the World Bank and founding director of the Global Tiger Initiative. “The terrain that needs to be defended is absolutely vast and treacherous,” he says, and poachers with sophisticated weapons present a constant threat. Criticism of the forest department’s methods has recently come from England, from the nonprofit indigenous rights group [Survival International](#) (SI) and the BBC, which covered the group’s claims about Kaziranga in a recent documentary called “[Killing for Conservation](#).” In an email campaign launched in early March, SI alleged that Kaziranga is “the most infamous example of” an “inhuman trend” of tribal people being “tortured and killed in the name of conservation.” It also charged that “tribal children have been shot ... in the name of conservation,” that guards shoot intruders on sight, are given legal immunity and forest officials evict indigenous communities from their homes.

Survival International also urged dozens of travel agencies to stop trips to the park, according to Sophie Grig, one of the organization’s campaigners. On April 3, a month after posting, the group’s [online petition to boycott Kaziranga](#) had just 43 signatures.

A government-sanctioned “shoot on sight” policy is a myth that dates to the 1970s, according to Hemendra Panwar, the founder and former director of the Wildlife Institute of India, one of the country’s premiere science centers.

Singh, the park’s director, called the claims and the BBC film, “wrong reporting not based on fact. There is no such “shoot-to-kill policy,” he says.

Indeed, no such policy has ever been issued by the government, according to lawyer Ritwick Dutta, who has fought for environmental protection in Supreme Court cases. Guards are given initial immunity from prosecution until an investigation is completed: there is an official inquiry into the circumstances of every bullet fired by rangers, [he explains](#).

More people were killed by rangers after the government granted immunity, Dutta notes, but there was also a rise in poaching at the time, from three rhinos killed in 2011 to 11 in 2012 — and 27 in both 2013 and 2014. More people coming in to hunt means more confrontations with forest guards, he says.



Guards on patrol at dusk in Kaziranga. Photo by Steve Winter/National Geographic Creative.

Conservation and human rights organizations across the globe have [debated the merits of excluding local populations from protected areas](#). For rangers in Kaziranga who face heavily armed poaching gangs, the answer seems simple. Since Kaziranga is a national park, “no one can enter without prior permission, much less with firearms,” says Panwar. “It would be naive to expect ‘law enforcement squads’ to carry loudspeakers to unilaterally warn poachers that they have been spotted and should surrender, when...the response is bound to be a spray of fatal bullets.”

Both Survival International and the recent BBC film lead people to believe that seven-year-old Akash Orang was purposefully shot by the forest department. It was, however, an accidental shooting. In July 2016, park guard Manas Bora fired in the air, trying to chase a rhino out of a village on Kaziranga’s periphery, says Singh, and the boy was struck by a stray bullet. Bora was suspended and is in police custody. The forest department paid for the boy’s medical care and gave the boy’s family more than \$3,000.

When local people are shot in Kaziranga, protests often erupt in their villages, though some, like Rahul Kutum in 2010 and Gaonburha Kealing, three years later, sparked larger protests. Guards were not charged in either case.

The BBC also ran footage of a police clash with villagers who were being evicted from their homes in the region last year. Their removal was ordered by the Gauhati High Court and was led by district authorities and police. Some of the people had lived there for years, but they were squatters who did not own that land, says Singh, although they were given stipends to move.

One-horned rhinos in Kaziranga. Photo by Steve Winter/National Geographic Creative.

A lifetime of work in conservation has made Wildlife Trust’s Vivek Menon a cautious optimist in considering the fate of the Indian rhino. While populations have increased, he doesn’t believe in letting one’s guard down. “You have to work every day to protect species like rhinos,” he says.