

CONSERVATION

Assam's field staff struggle to protect rhinos

Assam's protected wildlife areas are suffering from the worst financial cuts for over 20 years. For example, the budget for Kaziranga National Park, home to over 1,200 rhinos, has dropped from \$831,000 in 1996/7 to \$581,000 in 1997/8. 'We are completely dry of funds now - we have no money even to pay salaries,' stated P. Lahan, the man in charge of all wildlife and forest areas in Assam, earlier this year. The state government simply has not got the money. Assam, a poor state anyway, suffers from serious insurgency problems, so its government has to spend a lot of money on the army and police, and this is not reimbursed by the central government in Delhi. According to the experienced and much respected Lahan, 'Funding for the wildlife sector is going to get worse; we are living from hand to mouth.' In early 1998, Lahan and others had not had a salary increase for eight years.

The national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, several of which are home to the endangered rhino and tiger, are in need of much maintenance. Each year after the monsoon flooding, damage occurs to roads, bridges and camps, and with very little money to repair them, conditions are becoming desperate. Of the main rhino areas, Kaziranga National Park had to stop the entry of buses, as the bridges were too fragile to carry their weight. Largely as a result of this, the number of visitors to Kaziranga fell from 49,282 in 1994/5 to 15,692 in 1996/7. Orang Wildlife Sanctuary did not re-open after the last monsoon in 1997 as the roads and bridges were too badly

damaged. Out of desperation, the field staff at Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary have recently built 2.5 km of road themselves, although 30 km are needed for patrolling by vehicle.

The field staff are suffering too. Salaries are sometimes delayed by months. This is a considerable hardship, as forest guards living in the wildlife areas have to buy all their own supplies and those for their families who live elsewhere. Furthermore, when a guard is injured, there is no provision in the budget for his hospital bills. NGOs have improved their morale to some extent by providing many of them with boots, uniforms and some equipment, but more gear is still needed. The guards need more mosquito nets, water filters and other basics. Many of the camps need new roofs, as the rain presently pours in. The welfare of the field staff is vital; these men are the backbone of the Forest Department, and the survival of the rhinos and other wildlife depends on them.

Patrol work has been seriously hampered by the budget cuts. Field staff need more guns and rifles, walkie-talkies, torches, batteries and battery re-chargers. Some camps have none of these items and are virtually defenceless, and thus the staff are also unable to patrol. This is especially so in Orang, where eight camps out of 23 have no arms; as a result, rhino poaching in Orang has increased - rhino numbers have halved to only 50 in the last four years. In some areas, the camps themselves have been washed out and need to be replaced entirely. In Pabitora (which has 76 rhinos) two destroyed camps on the eastern boundary made possible two poaching incidents in 1997.



Many camps are in disrepair, as seen here in Pabitora Wildlife Sanctuary, causing the forest guards to become disillusioned. (Photo: Esmond Martin)

It is a miracle that despite these deplorable conditions, most of the field staff remain dedicated. This has been due to the good leadership of several outstanding Range Officers. Consequently, rhino poaching has been generally contained in 1996 and 1997, but for how much longer can this continue with severe financial shortages for rhino protection and the maintenance and development of parks and sanctuaries?

P. Lahan, the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Wildlife in Assam, would welcome donations to the Wildlife Areas Development and Welfare Trust in Assam, which was founded in 1996 to preserve wildlife. The Trust's brochure states: 'The forest staff is fighting a bare-handed, losing battle with the armed smugglers and poachers, and the enemies of the forests . . . Both the protectors and the protected are heavily suffering as the Department continues to reel under acute financial crisis.' Funds can be sent to the

Trust at Rehabari, Guwahati, 781008, Assam, India.

Lucy Vigne and Esmond Martin

Species planning for captive-breeding programmes – the genus *Columba*

The captive history of the pigeons of the genus *Columba* is already several thousands of years old, and descendants of the rock dove (*C. livia*) are now found in many breeds worldwide. Several others of the 51 species have become widespread in aviculture, but most are rarely or even never kept. With the right management techniques, however, they could well be kept and bred, as is proved by the breeding programme for the pink pigeon (*Nesoenas mayeri*), which is closely related to the *Columba* species.

By checking the *International Zoo Yearbook*, many avicultural magazines and related literature, I was able to compile a list of species which are