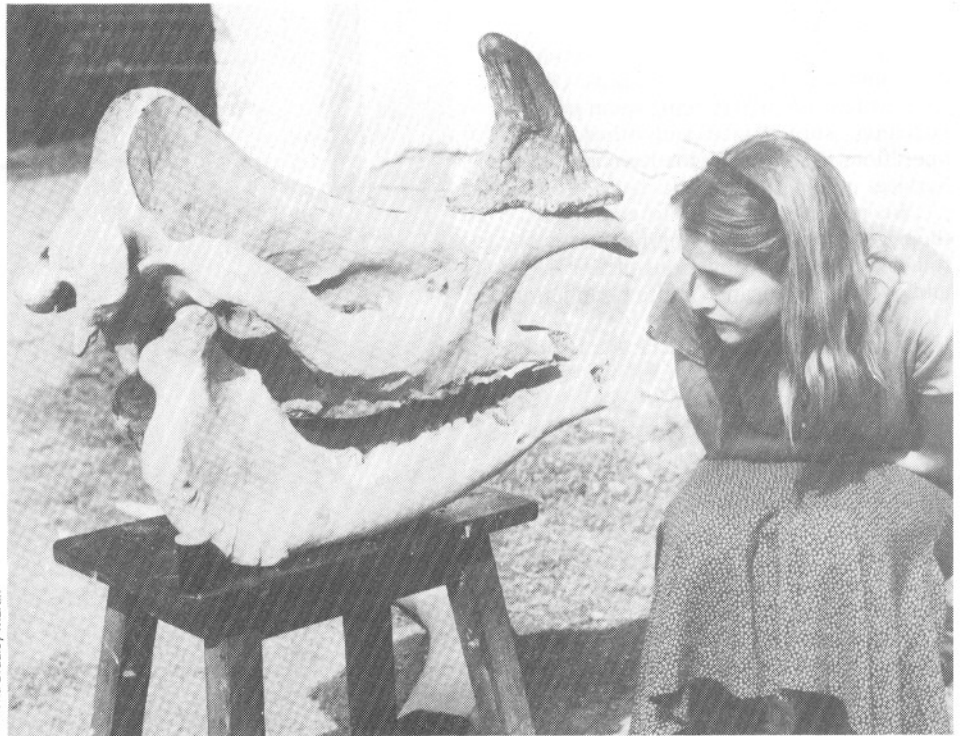


WIDER HORIZONS

Poachers kill rhino in India by electrocution

India's north-eastern state of Assam is famous for its greater one horned rhinos which number close to 1,500. Areas with particularly large rhino densities are Kaziranga National Park, which covers 430 square kilometres and is home to about 1,250 rhinos, Manas Wildlife Sanctuary of 391 square kilometres with about 100, Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary consisting of only 16 square kilometres with over 60, and Orang Game Reserve of 72 square kilometres with perhaps 60 rhinos. These wildlife areas are situated on the highly fertile alluvial flood plains and terraces of the Brahmaputra River, which runs from east to west through Assam. A rich abundance and diversity of fauna and flora exist in this lush habitat. In 1910, rhinos were granted protection and since then their numbers have been fairly steadily increasing, despite the almost continuous threat of poaching. However, in the last year illegal killings have increased in Assam to 58, the highest number since 1983. A new method, probably unique in the world, has been initiated to kill these endangered animals.

Assam is a poor state, and with the ever-rising price of Indian rhino horn, which now fetches over US \$15,000 a kilo wholesale in Singapore and Taiwan, the temptation is great for some local people to shoot a rhino or trap one in a pit to remove the horn. As the demand for Asian rhino horn increases in eastern Asia, middlemen in India have been strongly encouraging poachers, offering them about US \$6,250 a kilo, more than twice as much as four years ago. So desperate are they for rhino horn that they have developed a horrifyingly effective way of killing rhinos: electrocution. The first 'case' of electrocution occurred in September 1989 in Pobitora. Both Kaziranga and Pobitora have high-voltage power lines running through them. Poachers ingeniously hook wires on to the power line, drawing current from it to a rhino track where these live wires are suspended up to a metre above the ground. During the night, unfortunate rhinos follow the track, which leads out of the park or sanctuary, in order to graze in the adjacent paddy fields. They touch the live wires and are electrocuted to death. Burns on rhino carcasses indicate that they struggle to escape for about five minutes before succumbing to the 11,000-volt electric shock. The poachers quickly disconnect the wires from the power supply. Then they cut off the horn and bring it to a middleman in a nearby village or town to smuggle out of the country to eastern Asia. Seven rhinos



Lucy Vigne examines the skull of a greater one horned rhino.

were killed in this way at the end of 1989 and beginning of 1990 in Kaziranga and Pobitora.

Wildlife officials are very alarmed by the development of this new form of poaching which has proved to be such an efficient killer and may also endanger the forest guards. The undergrowth beneath the power lines has been cleared, and guards patrol regularly around them especially at night, looking out for hanging wires. The guards, however, need more equipment such as night vision binoculars, radios and automatic modern firearms if they are to combat effectively the well-armed poaching gangs. Also, poachers and middlemen, once caught, must be convicted. At present the same poachers, having pleaded not guilty, come back again and again to commit the same crime, having little to fear from the police. In 1989 a group of young illegal extremists started to threaten these criminals and even published their names in the local newspaper warning them to stop poaching or they themselves would be killed. The extremist group is called the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), and is trying to win support from society by fighting against crime. Already, at least three poachers and one middleman have been murdered by ULFA.

Lucy Vigne and Esmond Bradley Martin

Missing ivory

The Hong Kong Department of Agriculture and Fisheries has admitted that 116 of the 474 tonnes of ivory in Hong Kong does not have the appropriate CITES

documents. At the CITES meeting in October 1989 Hong Kong announced that there were 670 tonnes of ivory in the territory, of which 93 per cent was legally acquired. Since only 5.3 tonnes have left the territory legally since October it is possible that the missing ivory has been smuggled out to China, North and South Korea and Taiwan. The UK, on behalf of Hong Kong, announced in January that it would take out a six-month reservation on the African elephant to allow Hong Kong to continue its ivory trade.

WWF News

International alarm over environment

In the first international poll taken on environmental attitudes, between 75 and 100 per cent of those questioned called for stronger actions by governments and international organisations and stronger laws to contain industrial pollution, which was seen as a high-priority issue. Other causes for concern were loss of agricultural land, deforestation, radioactivity, desertification and acid rain. There was less awareness of the greenhouse effect and the destruction of the ozone layer. Most people would be willing to pay higher taxes if they knew the money was going to be spent protecting the environment. The poll was conducted for the United Nations Environmental Programme in Argentina, China, Hungary, India, Jamaica, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Nigeria, Norway, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Federal Republic of Germany and Zimbabwe.

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