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Front Cover : Tiger in Bandipur **Photo Courtesy** : Sri S.G. Neginhal, IFS (Retd.).

Back Cover : *Syzigium cumini* in clonal seed orchard raised during 2004-05 at K.S. Gida Research Station, Chikkaballapura. **Photo Courtesy** : Sri Dilip Kumar Das, IFS.

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CHALLENGES TO OVERCOME THREAT TO RHINOCEROS IN ASSAM

B.K.Singh, IFS (Retd.)

Abstract

During management effectiveness evaluation exercise of Tiger Reserves in north eastern states, Kaziranga National Park is seen as most fascinating habitat. The state of Assam has 2600 Rhinos, of which 2400 are in this park. It is situated in floodplains of Brahmaputra River. The ground level of the Park was raised during earthquake in 1950. The sediments carried by Brahmaputra and rivers originating in neighbouring Karbi Anglong District are deposited. During monsoon, the rivers inundate the area by overflowing banks and filling low lying areas of the park. The flood is an annual feature. The Park has a large diversity of mammals, birds and reptiles. One horned rhinoceros, wild buffalo, elephant, tiger and swamp deer are present in good number and are popularly called as big five of Kaziranga. This Park has many appellations to its credit. It is a tiger reserve, a world heritage site, an elephant reserve and an important bird area.

Excess water of river Brahmaputra drains through the Park back to the river and recharge all important water bodies annually.

Introduction

The threat to the Park is severe as the rhinoceros population is very high and the entire boundary is porous. The northern side is surrounded by the river Brahmaputra and its numerous islands. There is a large population of traditional fishing communities all along the river, some of whom harbor poaching of wild animals especially Rhinoceros. The poachers entering the Park from northern side with the help of fishing communities use .315 and .303 rifles. Further there is no village inside the Park; villages close to the southern boundary also pose threat to the Park and make protection difficult. These villagers harbor poachers from Nagaland and Manipur who use assault rifles (AK 47, AK 56 etc.). From 1980 to 1997, a total of 530 rhinos were poached, averaging nearly 30 rhinos per year. Highest

poaching of 48 Rhinos was reported in 1992 when the population was 1100. In the years 2013, 2014, 2015 and 2016 rhino poaching cases were 27, 27, 17 and 18 respectively. 6 Rhinos were poached till November 2017. The market for Rhino horn is in China and Taiwan. Rhino population in the Park was 940 in 1980 grew to 1300 in 1997 and has finally grown to 2400 as per the latest census in 2015.

Some other Protected Areas (PAs) in Assam also harbor Rhino population, equally vulnerable for poaching. Bodo agitation in eighties and nineties resulted in wiping out all Rhinos from Manas National Park. Elephants and tigers were also wiped out. The populations of these animals are slowly building up as a result of migration from adjoining Royal Manas of Bhutan. Management of Manas of Assam

Former Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Head of Forest Force), Karnataka.

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state has reintroduced Rhino, but poaching goes on unabated. They are thinking of reintroducing again. Two Rhinos reintroduced in Burachapori Sanctuary in the flood plain of Brahmaputra have died. It appears that the mother was diseased and the calf was too young to survive alone. The choice of the pair for reintroduction was probably inappropriate.

Though there is no village inside Kaziranga National Park, cattle from adjoining villages graze inside. It leads to habitat loss and poses even bigger threat to protection. There are 178 anti poaching camps spread over the Park so as to keep entire area under surveillance. The spots of one Rhino poaching in the night of 2nd November 2017 and two more in the night of 4th November are hardly 200 meters from Tunikati anti poaching camp in Buda-pahar range. The same gang stayed in the Park for two days and committed both poaching. They were caught by Police in Nagaland after one week. During my visit, the staffs of the camp were confronted with a question as to how the poachers stayed in the forests without being noticed, they had no answer. A senior officer shared with me that there is suspicion on some staff for abetting this.

Government of Assam has taken many measures for effective management of Wildlife in the state including legislative changes, bringing Wildlife (Protection) (Assam Amendment) Act, 2009 for strict enforcement in handling wildlife crime including poaching of Rhinos. "Anti Rhino Poaching Task Force" a Special Task Force comprising of district Police of Golaghat, Nagaon, Sonitpur and Karbi Anglong districts as well as Forest personnel of Kaziranga National Park is established in

2014. They have arrested many poachers in the series of commando based raids.

Additional support for control of poaching in the Park is provided by placing 535 personnel from Assam Forest Protection Force with as many .303 rifles, 200 SLRs. Services of 125 home guards are also available. Process is on to acquire more sophisticated arms like AK Series weapons.

An Electronic surveillance system, called the Electronic Eye is installed with eight tall towers of 45 meter height and one control tower. They are fitted with visual and thermal imaging cameras with 24X7 accesses. The visual camera can track any movement within a radius of 10 km during the day while thermal camera can track up to 3 km during night. To cover surveillance on entire Park eight more towers are required to be installed. For full night surveillance many more towers are required. Presently the system is in operation and provides limited support to anti poaching strategies.

During the patrolling in the jungle, the staffs are not only prone to attack by poachers but are also attacked by wild animals like Rhino, wild buffalo and elephant. Fifteen forest personnel were killed while patrolling the jungle in last twelve years. Eight were killed by Rhinos, four by buffaloes and three by elephants. In addition 41, 10 and 6 staffs were injured by Rhino, buffalo and elephant respectively.

Government of Assam is committed to protect Rhinos and they have full public support in this regard. The services of CBI is often sought to unearth forward and backward linkages. Other states should also constitute task forces with similar support.