



PROGRESS REPORT
OF
Forest Administration in the Province of Assam
For the year
1934-35

SHILLONG
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Dry seasons, high winds, and inattentive guards are adverse factors that are always with us, and there can be no profit in extending plantations unless their safety can be absolutely guaranteed.

107. No new forest village was established during the year but new settlers were admitted to fill up vacancies in existing villages. Regular surveys of forest villages and preparation of forest village records were made as far as funds permitted.

A general census of forest village population along with a census of cattle was carried out in the Goalpara Division during the year under report.

Two Santhal forest villagers of Goalpara were killed by a wild *Mukhna* which was proclaimed for destruction.

108. In Sylhet Division a cyclone on 30th April 1934 damaged a number of Departmental buildings and in the latter part of June 1934 there was an exceptional flood in Nowgong, Sylhet, Kamrup and Garo Hills. Free grants of unreserved trees, thatch, *ekra*, cane or bamboos required for household purposes or for making boats were given to the great relief of the flood-affected people.

109. The sale of bamboos from Government forests in Cachar is being adversely affected by our being undersold by those older tea gardens which have large grants under bamboos.

110. Forest work has been seriously interfered with in the Garo Hills by the extraordinarily complicated system of disposing of Nokmas *Awil* that was imposed upon the Department: the matter has been referred to Government.

111. The year opened with a stock of 27 elephants and a calf (excluding one Civil Department elephant). An elephant which escaped from Lakhimpur had to be written off. The calf was sold. One elephant gave birth to a calf which was drowned during a spate, its hobbled mother being unable to go to its assistance. There were thus 26 departmental elephants at the close of the year.

112. A working arrangement has been come to with the Bengal Government for the collection and sharing of Forest Revenue on the Karnafuli river separating the Lushai and Chittagong Hill Tracts.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PRESERVATION OF WILD LIFE AND ELEPHANT CONTROL.

I.—THE PRESERVATION OF WILD LIFE.

113. The outstanding event of the year was the assembling of an All-India Conference on this subject at New Delhi in January 1935.

To accompany the writer as a co-representative for Assam the Local Government were fortunate enough to secure Mr. T. R. Phukan, Bar-at-Law, who is not only a sportsman of wide repute but has also been for very many years one of the most prominent public men in the Assam Valley.

114. A Resolution agreed to at the Conference was that provincial Forest Departments should deal with this question in a separate section of their Annual Reports, which accounts for the introduction for the first time of this additional Chapter; the descriptions now given at some length of the Sanctuaries should not need repetition in subsequent Annual Reports. It had been recognized before the suggestion of holding the Delhi Conference had been mooted that efforts in Assam should be confined to the 6,600 square miles of Reserved Forests where there are already laws which, where not so at present, can be made adequate without difficulty and a staff which, if not adequate everywhere, can be augmented in important localities without very great cost.

It may seem shocking, especially to those who confound Game Preservation with Wild Life Protection, that it is not proposed to do anything very definite over the 14,800 square miles of waste lands still at the disposal of Government, but there are good reasons for this, the principal ones being the absence of staff and the impossibility of finding money to pay for one, and the fact that most of this large area is open to settlement and is bound either to be turned into cultivated fields in the not far distant future, or else to be so cut up by settlement that the larger animals at any rate will not be able to exist in the intervening patches without being a source of danger to human life and to the crops.

The policy to which we are committed in Assam in fact is that the Preservation of Wild Life should be so reasonably conducted that the cost involved is not out of proportion in these days of financial difficulties, and that public opinion is not antagonized.

115. The Reserved Forests may be divided from the animal point of view into—

- (i) Game Sanctuaries, where complete protection is afforded. The conversion of these into National Parks for the preservation of both fauna and flora is now under consideration.
- (ii) Reserves where game is still found in some abundance, and where it can be encouraged without inflicting injury upon villagers.
- (iii) Reserves where there is a certain amount of game which does no harm if the numbers are kept in check.
- (iv) Reserves which contain none of the bigger game animals owing to unfavourable conditions, which may be natural, such as insufficiency of suitable fodder, or artificially induced as when a large human population surrounds a small tract of isolated forest.

(i) *Game Sanctuaries.*

116. *A.—The Monas Sanctuary* on the Bhutan boundary consists of 159 square miles lying partly in the Haltugaon and partly in the Kamrup Divisions, and was in charge of Mr. O. A. R. Bhadrán, Assistant Conservator of Forests, throughout the year.

Elephants, Sambhur, Swamp Deer, Hog and Barking Deer are plentiful in the appropriate localities, as is also the Pygmy Hog. Bison keep very much to the neighbourhood of the foot hills and can always be found in good numbers at certain places. Buffalo have increased very markedly during recent years since the Cacharies have been prevented from shooting them, and are common on the 2 branches of the Monas river: there is suitable country both east and west into which they can spread.

The Rhino (Great Indian Rhinoceros) are now very carefully looked after and will increase if their present freedom from molestation can be assured. The reedy swamps in which they principally live make it most difficult to form an estimate of their numbers, but there must be 15 to 25 pairs apart from immature animals.

Mr. Bhadrán had reason to believe that most of the rhino migrated at one special season of the year up into Bhutan; this is a matter which will be further investigated.

Tiger, leopard and bear are all found, bear being very common; wild dog are scarcer than formerly, in fact almost rare, but they are probably more numerous in the actual hills.

Mr. Bhadrán has organized a very complete system of patrolling, and if this can be maintained, poaching can never become so serious again as it has been in the past.

117. His Excellency Sir Michel Keane honoured this Sanctuary by two visits.

118. *B.—The Kaziranga Sanctuary* of 165 square miles is situated in the Nowgong and Sibsagar districts on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, the river forming the northern boundary, and the Trunk Road running parallel, and very close to the southern boundary.

This had become so much of a *terra incognita* that the writer was warned that the swamps made marching through it with elephants quite impossible, but this proved to be a myth, and the Sanctuary has now been thoroughly explored. Mr. M. C. Miri, Extra Assistant Conservator of Forests, has been placed in charge and has shown commendable energy in recruiting staff and erecting accommodation for them, in organizing patrolling by land and river and in cutting patrol lines through grass country that was most bewildering owing to its flatness, the large number of *bils* all looking much alike, the positive net-work of rhino tunnels but the scarcity of wild elephant tracks leading definitely from point to point.

Invaluable work had been done by Mr. C. E. Simmons, Deputy Conservator of Forests, prior to all this activity in investigating the numerous and very complicated cases of rhino poaching, which began to come to light as soon as a definite policy of Wild Life Preservation was inaugurated. Pitting has been the favourite method employed here and most effective it has been, but this is well under control now thanks to the backing our officers have received throughout from Deputy Commissioners.

By following up the clues obtained by Mr. Simmons, Mr. Miri was able to have the principal poacher arrested in Darrang, a desperate individual, formerly a sepoy in the Assam Rifles, who operated both in the Sanctuary and across the river near Kathonibari, to which the Kaziranga rhino sometimes swim. He has been sentenced for a number of offences and his incarceration should make things very much easier in the same way as the sentencing for *dacoity* of an *ex*-Subadar of the Eastern Bengal Rifles has brought peace to the Monas Sanctuary. There is no doubt that general lawlessness is encouraged when poachers find themselves apparently immune from interference: a factory for making illegal guns combined with a depôt for contraband opium was discovered during the investigation into one poaching case not long ago.

Kaziranga being low-lying contains few herd elephants but solitary males are not uncommon. Bison are found in the higher land to the north-east, Sambhur where there is tree jungle, Swamp Deer and Hog Deer in the grassy tracts. Buffalo are very numerous, though they seem to carry surprisingly poor heads for Assam.

The Rhino are chiefly concentrated in the *bil* country. There certainly cannot be less than 30 pairs and there might easily be as many as 50.

They display themselves in a most gratifying manner once the Jungle has been burnt and the new grass has started coming up, and it is possible to approach with caution on an elephant to very close range in the open provided the wind is in the right direction, for the slightest taint of human smell is sufficient to put them to flight. Their native truculence, however, becomes evident as soon as they are disturbed in cover, when they are apparently prepared to charge anything that comes too near.

It is hoped that the ease with which they can be viewed during certain months and the proximity of their haunts to the Trunk Road will prove attractive to visitors, for whose requirements as regards elephants and guides it should be possible to cater satisfactorily. Carnivora and bear are scarce, and wild dog unknown.

Tame buffalo herds are grazed under control along the Brahmaputra: their presence must deter the Rhino to some extent from reaching the river and crossing to almost certain doom in Darrang, and their continuance here is only permitted on the understanding that the *goalas* actively assist the Department in keeping out marauding parties that may arrive in boats from across the river.

Arrangements have been made for the Veterinary Department to immunize all these tame buffaloes against rinderpest. There were some suspicious deaths amongst the wild buffalo during the year, and Mr. Miri reported that he found several herds in very bad condition, but they seemed to have recovered when the writer inspected the principal buffalo area in April.

119. *C.*—The *Sonai-Rupa Sanctuary of 67 square miles* was constituted during the year out of already existing Reserved Forests in Darrang Division on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. It consists of *bil* and open grassy plain with dense evergreen forest to the east and west (which will remain untouched as "Forest Preservation Plots"), the Himalayan foothills to the north and settled and to the south.

This Sanctuary contains wild elephants, Bison, Sambhur and Barking Deer in abundance, and Pygmy Hog and Wood Duck are not rare. Rhino and buffalo were distinctly fewer than when the writer had last visited the area about 25 years previously, there being only a few pairs of Rhino now left. Tiger, leopard, bear and wild dog are all found. So much interest is taken locally in this Sanctuary that its success seems assured: Messrs. Scott Erskine and Milburne have kindly undertaken to help the staff in their duties, and they can always rely upon the support of the Political Officer, within whose jurisdiction the whole forest lies.

120. Enough has probably been written to show that the measures already taken should ensure for all time the preservation of most of the species to be found in Assam: to achieve this no evictions have been necessary, very little land worth cultivating is included in the Sanctuaries, no repressive legislation of any sort is contemplated, and the annual recurring cost is so small that this will be recouped many times over, indirectly if not directly, by the expected influx of visitors.

So far from public opinion having been antagonised in any way there has been a growing recognition by the more cultured Assamese during the last few years of the fact that Nature has endowed their Province with a large number of magnificent and beautiful animals, which it is the duty of Assam as a civilized country to preserve for the edification and enjoyment of the rest of the civilized world.

191. Eleven years ago the writer was instrumental in having declared Reserved Forest 13 square miles of country in which a number of solitary bull buffalo could always be found; owners of cow buffaloes of Assamese stock were invited to graze their animals here under very advantageous terms on condition that they used no tame bulls for breeding but relied entirely upon the wild blood: this promising scheme came to nothing, however, owing to the complete apathy of the public towards the enterprise.

In July 1935 a Resolution was passed in the Legislative Council asking that better protection might be afforded the wild buffalo in order that the magnificent breed of half-wild Assamese buffalo might be saved from extinction.

This is most a striking example not only of how the public conscience has been awakened recently, but is also an indication of the favourable atmosphere in which those dealing with these matters now find themselves working.

192. Game preservation is carried on in the Reserves, as distinct from the Sanctuaries, for the avowed purpose of affording sport.

The most valuable forests from this point of view are those in the Kochugaon and Haltugaon Divisions of the Goalpara district, and in the Nowgong Forest Division.

Serious game preservation commenced in Goalpara in 1929, and it is pleasing to record that Dr. N. L. Bor, Deputy Conservator of Forests, who re-examined these forests during the year just past in order to write an interim report on the silvicultural results achieved to date as the result of the Working Plan compiled by him, found game distinctly more numerous and very distinctly more confident than he had previously seen it. Messrs. R. N. De, Deputy Conservator of Forests and S. M. Deb, Extra Assistant Conservator of Forests and their subordinate officers have good reason to be proud of the visible success that has followed the anti-poaching campaigns which they have prosecuted with such vigour despite numerous difficulties and hardships. Some deaths during the year of deer and wild elephants have been ascribed to anthrax, but this has not been confirmed.

The Kokilabari and Kahitama Reserves in North Kamrup adjoin the Monas Sanctuary and benefit accordingly from the vigilance of the Sanctuary staff. The Darranga Reserve requires better protection.

Game preservation in the Reserved Forests of the Balipara Frontier Tract was put on a sound basis by Dr. Bor, Deputy Conservator of Forests, during the period he was also in political control; co-operation between the Political and Forest Departments and the planting community should prevent any return to previous conditions.

North Lakhimpur probably requires examination: it is understood that information will be forthcoming from some Assamese gentlemen interested in the matter regarding localities where wild buffalo protection could be effected following forest reservation. It is not absolutely certain that there are no Rhinos in North Lakhimpur.

Game is preserved in the North-East Frontier by executive order of the Political Officer, a method that can never permanently preserve either forests or wild animals, however effective control may be under individual officers.

The South Lakhimpur forests are mostly of the heavy evergreen type that provide very little fodder for game away from the river banks. Mr. J. L. Harrison, Deputy Conservator of Forests, has been able to take action which should ensure the survival of the wild buffalo in the Dibru Reserve.

The Sibsagar forests, apart from Kaziranga, are also evergreen, but it is probable that there is still game that might be better looked after on the Naga Hills border.

Some of the Nowgong forests should well re-pay efforts to prevent poaching, as they contain game in fair numbers but the Reserves are scattered, which means many animals wander outside and are liable to be killed.

Game preservation by executive order was once remarkably successful in the North Cachar Hills, which formed an animals' paradise when the writer first knew them in 1910, but the inevitable period of neglect followed,

The proposed transfer of the northern forests of this region to the adjacent Nowgong Division, and the possibility of further reservation in the interests of flood-control provide hope that control may be closer and more effective in future. The country is ideal for wild animals and is only sparsely inhabited.

The evergreen plains forests of the Surma Valley are not adapted for carrying a good head of game, and the surrounding hills are at the mercy of the omnivorous and well-armed Kuki and Lushai.

123. Proposals are up before Government to differentiate between the better-stocked Reserves and the rest, higher fees to be charged in the former in return for more intensive game-keeping. It is necessary to be prepared for an increasing demand for the provision of shooting facilities in our Reserves now that the Unclassed State Forests are being settled with cultivators and also rapidly shot out.

124. It is expected that valuable help in Game and Wild Life Preservation will follow from the appointment of gentlemen interested in natural history as Honorary Forest Officers in accordance with one of the Resolutions passed at the Delhi Conference.

II.—ELEPHANT CONTROL.

125. A portion of the Darrang Division was opened to *kheddahs* and, in one area on the west, to *Mela shikar* under the general supervision of Mr. P. D. Stracey, Assistant Conservator of Forests.

Thirty-nine elephants were caught in stockades and 58 by *Mela shikar* making a total of 97, of which 10 were released before being brought to the depôt and 3 died on the way, 4 were released from the depôt, and 1 died in the depôt.

The average price per elephant rose to Rs. 725, the highest it has been for some years, and it was a pity that so few were caught in the *kheddahs* owing to most of the stockades being badly sited by the Managers and their *Sirdars*.

Government's share at annas 5-3 amounted to Rs. 18,762-3-0 and expenses to Rs. 4,855-15-0 leaving a surplus of Rs. 13,906-4-0.

126. Twenty *koonkies* operated in Jaintia Hills *Mahal* No. II, catching 35 elephants without any casualty occurring. Royalty was charged at Rs. 85 for *Mukhnas* and Rs. 150 for other elephants, the total revenue amounting to Rs. 4,860.

127. *Minor Mela shikar* operations were arranged in Nowgong yielding 5 elephants caught, of which one died, and revenue Rs. 555.

Minor Mela shikar is the name given to the system under which a few *koonkies* are stationed with fixed camps near paddy fields which are likely to be raided by herd elephants. Permanent protection can only be given to crops by the removal of the offending herds by means of *khedda* operations, but *mahals* can only be opened in rotation on account of the market for elephants being limited. *Koonkies* stationed nearby are a positive safeguard to crops, but this new system is unpopular with the elephant catchers, who naturally would prefer to go and seek for the herds instead of waiting, without any certainty, for them to approach the fields.

128. Similar operations in the Central Range of Sibsagar Division yielded 13 elephants (no casualties) and Rs. 1,820 revenue.

129. Nineteen elephants were caught in stockades and 9 by *Mela shikar* in the Dibru Reserve of Lakhimpur Division out of which one large tusker had to be shot, 6 were released and 3 died. Royalty amounted to Rs. 2,780.

130. Thirty-six elephants of which 2 died, were caught by *Mela shikar* in Sadiya Division, producing revenue of Rs. 4,685.

131. Complaints regarding depredations by wild elephants have become more numerous during recent years consequent on the reduction of area of the waste lands following increase of population, and on the greater sophistication of the villagers: Deputy Commissioners usually ask for *kheddah* operations in these circumstances and it has usually been possible to arrange for these (although the damage is mostly attributable to large males), but the greatly reduced market for elephants has made it unprofitable to catch as many as formerly. This being so and in recognition of the fact that solitaries are generally the real culprits, the Local Government have sanctioned an Elephant Control Scheme for the reduction in number of these: approved and suitably armed sportsmen will be encouraged to shoot male elephants by being allowed one tusker free for every corresponding *Mukhna* destroyed. It is hoped that these measures will bring relief to tea gardens and to the villagers.

DATED SHILLONG,
The 19th August 1935.

A. J. W. MILROY,
Conservator of Forests, Assam.