

Beyond the Last Village

A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY IN
ASIA'S FORBIDDEN WILDERNESS

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CHAPTER 3

Of Rhinos and Sea-Gypsies

If one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.

—Henry David Thoreau

DURING THE NEXT TWO YEARS I returned to Myanmar more than half a dozen times, organizing training courses for Forest Department staff and working with individuals who wanted to get into the field and do wildlife research. While I was allowed to go farther afield than any foreigner in recent years, my trips were still restricted to the secure, central region of the country. Forest Department staff always accompanied me, and we stuck to a strict itinerary. Side trips were out of the question. Meanwhile, I persisted in my efforts to visit the more remote northern parts of the country, which included some of the wildest areas.

It was clear from the outset that the country's forests were under increasing threat, and that wildlife populations were not doing as well as many believed. Much of Myanmar's natural resources were free for the taking as far as the local people and the local military

were concerned. But reliable data were needed before we could convince the government to better manage their forests and to crack down on the seemingly omnipresent hunting and trade in wildlife.

General Chit Swe, for his part, seemed to be surprisingly active in putting into practice the beliefs that he had expounded during that first meeting. In 1994, the government wrote a National Forestry Policy that complemented the Forest Law of two years previous. As part of this policy, the Forest Department declared its intent to increase the country's system of protected areas to at least 5 percent of the land area, increase forest reserve areas to at least 30 percent of the land area, and protect all the country's critical watersheds. At the same time, a new, stricter Wild Life, Natural Forests and Nature Preservation Law was enacted, prohibiting hunting and trade of thirty-nine rare mammal species, fifty bird species, and nine reptile species. That same year, General Chit Swe attended the Global Forum on the Conservation of the Tiger in India, and declared his intent to push for forestry practices that would promote wildlife conservation.

That year I was also granted permission by General Chit Swe to journey up the Chindwinn River, the main branch of the Ayeyarwady River, to Htamanthi Wildlife Sanctuary, situated more than 1,500 miles north as the crow flies from Yangon. George Schaller, the director of science for WCS and my mentor, was allowed to accompany me. This was the largest and most remote protected area in the country at the time, initially set up by the British when the upper Chindwinn was prime hunting grounds for sportsmen. Now Htamanthi was home to tigers, elephants, and possibly the last viable population of Sumatran rhinos outside of Malaysia and Sumatra. We were to be the first Westerners to visit this site in anyone's recent memory; in fact, no one from the Forest Department had been there in twenty-five years.

Although I'd spent most of my professional life working on carnivores, my interest in Sumatran rhinos began while I was con-

ducting surveys of these animals in Borneo during the 1980s. By chance, I was on hand after an adult male rhino had been brought out of the forest and placed in captivity, as part of an unsuccessful breeding program in the Malaysian state of Sabah. Expecting something big and dangerous-looking, I found myself besides a diminutive, seemingly gentle beast standing about four feet at the shoulders with long, black, bristly hair along its back. When I put my hand atop the rough hardened skin on his neck, he turned his head, as if only just noting my presence, and stared back at me with empty eyes.

It seems a miracle to me that rhinos still walk the face of the earth. No other group of animals has been so highly prized for so long. Our obsession with this species revolves almost solely around a single body part, the horn, a protuberance of hardened hair that has played an important role in traditional Chinese medicine for nearly 5,000 years. Commonly thought to have been used as an aphrodisiac, rhino horn was actually valued more by the Chinese as an antidote to poisons as well as a remedy for headaches, fevers, and colds. Regular consumption of powdered rhino horn, according to a 1597 medical text, *Pen Ts'ao Kang Mu* by Li Shih-Chen, "lightens the body and makes one very robust." Predictably, as numbers of rhinos have steadily declined, the demand for their horn and the price people pay for it has increased.

Of the five living rhino species, the Sumatran rhino is perhaps the most endangered and the most intriguing. A living fossil whose origin makes it the oldest surviving mammal walking the earth, the Sumatran rhino's closest relative is the extinct woolly rhino of Europe. Most of my efforts to find firsthand accounts of this species' behavior in the wild had proven fruitless, perhaps because, as one author put it, the Sumatran rhino was "already considered a rarity by the time of the ages illuminated by books." Yet I was intrigued by one hunter's 1905 report claiming these rhinos to be ferocious animals, sometimes attacking humans without provocation and "vindictive and persevering in pursuit of the object of their anger."

I looked back into the eyes that were still glued to my face, and stroked his head again. What was the true nature of this beast, I wondered.



Poring over maps with U Uga, a deputy director of the Wildlife Division, who would accompany us to Htamanthi, Schaller and I decided that we should hike the length of one of the major waterways through the center of the sanctuary to search for signs of rhinos and other wildlife. Surveying along a waterway was the best strategy during the dry months, since any large mammals in the area would come to the river to drink or to use it as a travel corridor. Even species not easily seen would leave evidence of their presence in the form of tracks, scratches, or feces in the soft mud along the river. We just had to figure out how to work around the twenty-one soldiers who were being sent along to protect us.

U Uga and his staff arranged all the logistics of our trip. After flying to the town of Khamti in the Sagaing State of northern Myanmar, we traveled more than 100 miles down the Chindwinn River in small motorized boats to reach the village of Homalin. There we switched to small motorized dugouts and traveled up the Uyu River to Yebawmi, a village on the east side of Htamanthi Wildlife Sanctuary. We then hiked inland, westward across the sanctuary.

The forest inside the sanctuary was beautiful, with a high, closed canopy that showed few signs of human disturbance. But despite reports of fresh rhino tracks in this area three years earlier, we found no sign of them. Even more disturbing, within this seemingly intact forest, there were few or no signs of tigers, elephants, or the other large mammal species that reportedly had once been here in abundance. The reason became obvious not long after we began the survey.

While we were camping along the Uyu River, three Lisu

hunters appeared at our fire just before dark one day. Because most of the soldiers in our party were out of uniform, the Lisu thought they were walking into an encampment of local villagers. I don't know what surprised them more—seeing two Western faces among the group or finding out that they were being arrested. Their packs were filled with metal cables for use in making animal snares, along with the skins, penises, and gall bladders of river otters. But their primary quarry, they explained, was tigers.

In the days that followed, I took every opportunity to talk with these Lisu through a translator. They answered my questions readily, still not quite sure why they were being detained. They had been coming to hunt in this area every year for nearly a decade, and no one had ever stopped them before or told them they were doing anything wrong. They came from the district of Putao, an area where most of the more than 35,000 Lisu in the country lived, more than a week's walk north from where we were. Such distances meant little to these tough, sturdily built men whose nomadic wanderings and hunting abilities were legendary among the Myanmar people and whose talents had made them prized by the British as foot soldiers.

The Lisu I spoke with were not out to stalk game with their traditional crossbows for the cooking pot. They came to Htamanthi for body parts—particularly the highly valued rhino horns, bear gall bladders, otter skins, and tiger bones, which they sold across the border in China, where the majority of their tribe still lived. Unfortunately, the rhinos were all gone from this area, they said, and the otters were scarce now. Both were easy to kill. The men were still getting at least one tiger a year and an occasional bear from Htamanthi, usually with snares, sometimes by setting out a poisoned carcass of a wild animal for other carnivores to feed on. When we told them to show us their trap sets so that we could dismantle them, they readily agreed.

Game trails leading downhill to the river were favored trapping locations for tigers. The snare was made from metal cable and

attached to a sturdy tree that was bent over and fastened, ready to spring back into place when the animal stepped on a trigger mechanism under the snare. To ensure that the tiger wouldn't escape, the hunters placed bamboo spikes under the tree where the tiger would dangle. As he fought the snare, his body would be punctured repeatedly by the spikes until the loss of blood weakened or killed him.



After hiking for twelve days across the sanctuary, we met up with our boats at the village of Htamanthi, about 30 air miles from the border with India. The village was populated by a people called the Taman, a tribe considered to have characteristics of both the Bamar and the Naga ethnic groups. In the past, other villages feared these people because of their reported ability to transform themselves into the infamous "Htamanthi tigers," mythical were-creatures with five toes on their front paws. No one in the village claimed such powers now, though.

When we mentioned the lack of any rhino sign on our journey, the villagers weren't surprised. Most of the remaining rhinos were killed during the politically turbulent period of the 1980s, they said. If any still lived in the sanctuary, they were the last of their kind.

When Marco Polo visited Burma in the thirteenth century, he described a vast jungle teeming with wild beasts and unicorns. The "unicorns" he was talking about were rhinos. Five hundred years later, when the Swedish naturalist Linnaeus developed what is still the accepted taxonomic classification for distinguishing different animals and plants, Myanmar gained the distinction of having more rhino species (the Indian rhino, the Javan rhino, and the Sumatran rhino) than any other country in the world. Now, less than 300 years after Linnaeus, nearly every rhino of all three species in the country was gone.

There is ample literature decrying the decline of Sumatran rhino numbers throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first

century. Sadder, however, is the fact that the international conservation community, while paying lip service to the need for strong action to save the species, continues to put most of its efforts into politically expedient strategies that have little to do with the real reasons behind the rhino's decline. Captive breeding, which has repeatedly proven unsuccessful in the past but is a high-profile and easily funded activity, has often been a higher priority than habitat protection and the control of hunting and trade activities.



I returned to Yangon, depressed by the plight of the Sumatran rhino but encouraged by the almost pristine nature of Htamanthi's forests and the potential for protecting the rest of the wildlife there. When the minister read my report and saw my photographs, he authorized the building of a ranger station for Htamanthi Wildlife Sanctuary and named U Thein Aung, a senior wildlife officer and an ornithologist who was with us on the survey, as the first park chief. U Thein Aung was instructed to hire forest guards and to work with the local people in protecting the sanctuary. It was an important start. But it wouldn't be enough to stop the lucrative trade in animal parts that was spreading like a cancer across much of Asia. The Lisu would just be more careful now, entering and leaving the forest like ghosts. Nothing short of the Htamanthi tigers would stand a chance against these hunters.

Several months after I returned from Htamanthi Wildlife Sanctuary, General Chit Swe summoned me again. He had just returned from a reconnaissance flight over the Mergui Archipelago, a group of more than 800 islands off the coast of southern Myanmar. One island in particular, Lampi, had caught his attention because it was the largest and most pristine piece of real estate in the archipelago. He was almost childlike in his enthusiasm, extolling the beauty of its undisturbed beaches and the teeming life beneath its waters. There were no protected areas off the mainland, he commented;

this could be Myanmar's first marine park. If it were worth conserving, he would spearhead the effort.

Pleased with my work in Htamanthi, the minister asked me to join a survey team and make a candid appraisal of Lampi. The team consisted mostly of Myanmar marine biologists, but General Chit Swe wanted me along as the advisor. He trusted me to be honest with him, he said.



I kept telling myself that this was a unique opportunity as I paced the decks of a retired Navy minesweeper moving at a snail's pace through the Andaman Sea. Looking as if it could have been built in the same era as the *Monitor* and the *Merrimack*, this was the only military vessel that General Chit Swe could arrange, due to my presence aboard. Four long, monotonous days on the boat, which sailed from Yangon, were made much worse by my sleepless nights in a tiny, sardinelike bunk bed, trying to keep scurrying rodents and cockroaches off my sweat-drenched body. The most exciting event was when the crew manned the big gun on the top deck in order to pull over an unlicensed Myanmar fishing trawler that, somehow, was moving slower than we were.

On the morning of the fifth day, I woke to the sight of mist-enshrouded rock walls rising straight up from the sea, interspersed by forested coves and long, unbroken stretches of white sand beaches. Through my binoculars, I could see thick stands of mangroves shielding the mouth of a large freshwater river flowing out from the forested interior. It looked like something out of the television series *Fantasy Island*. The boredom and inconveniences of the previous days were immediately forgotten. We had arrived at Lampi.

We spent a week surveying the island. While it was mostly uninhabited, as the minister believed, there were two small villages on

the western side occupied by a dark-skinned people of medium height. Called Sea-gypsies by the British and Salon by the Myanmar people, they referred to themselves as Maw Khen (often written Moken). W. J. S. Carrapiett, in his 1909 book about the Salon, claimed that the term *Maw Khen* means "submerged people," a pathetic but seemingly appropriate term for a group thought to be of Khmer origin with a history of being persecuted and enslaved by other ethnic groups. According to Thai legend, the Maw Khen once lived on the mainland of the Malay Peninsula, but after refusing to ferry a monk across a river, the tribe was cursed forever, becoming homeless wanderers on the sea.

The British discovered the Salon in 1826, two years after the first Anglo-Burmese War provided them with territory in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea. They stated that all attempts to "civilize" them were complete failures. While a 1901 Burma census listed 1,325 Salon within the country's borders, only small remnants of these people still survived at the time of our trip. Lampi Island, they claimed, had always been one of their favored retreats, where they kept semipermanent habitations during the rainy season.

Although the Salon once fished only to feed their families, and were said to reject any accumulation of wealth, these Lampi inhabitants now scoured the coastal waters for increasingly rare and endangered species such as marine turtles, sea cucumbers, and sea urchins. Valued as Asian culinary delicacies, the species were sought after by Thai merchants, who exchanged cheap kitchenware and gold necklaces for these biological treasures.

The activities of the Salon were not the only disturbance we found on the island. Timber poachers from the mainland and nearby islands had already cut down the largest trees on Lampi. Many of the surrounding coral reefs had been destroyed by people using explosives to kill fish, and by passing boats anchoring in the area. Still, there was much to be said for what remained on Lampi. In time, if protected and undisturbed, the coral reefs could reestab-

lish themselves and the smaller trees would become big ones. General Chit Swe was right. The beauty of Lampi and its potential as a national park were undeniable.

On returning to Yangon, I worked with the survey team to design a plan that would protect Lampi Island and the surrounding waters. The Salon could continue to live on the island, we believed, but neither they nor anyone else should be allowed to harvest marine resources within the boundaries of the protected area. The minister was pleased with the survey and supported our recommendations. Almost eleven months later, on February 28, 1996, the cabinet would approve Lampi Island as Myanmar's first marine national park.



I waited in the departure lounge of the Yangon airport for a flight to Bangkok. It was April 1995 and my emotions were in turmoil. The last two years in Myanmar had been some of the most productive of my career, and I felt I was only just beginning here. I had hired a young, dynamic forestry graduate, U Tint Lwin Thaug, to coordinate our efforts with the Forest Department in Yangon. Forest staff were getting trained, new research projects were starting up, and General Chit Swe was starting to trust my judgment more and more. Recently he had even asked me to move to Yangon.

But I was no longer a full-time field scientist, nor was I a bachelor, as I had been less than five years earlier. My home now was in New York, where I had to return in order to resume my administrative duties as director of Asia programs, a job I was finding increasingly unsatisfying. I also needed to spend more time with my wife, Salisa. We had been married for less than three years, after having met when she was a university student in her homeland of Thailand. She now worked with me at WCS as a geneticist, but much of the time we had known each other I had been in the field, far from our home. I loved her deeply and wanted our marriage to

work, yet the thought of tearing up my plane ticket to New York and not going back at all kept popping into my mind ever since I had returned from Lampi.

Thus conflicted, I picked up a copy of the local English-language newspaper, *The New Light of Myanmar*, which had been left on the seat next to mine. The first article I read was to change the course of the next few years of my life. A few months earlier the Japanese mountain climber Takashi Ozaki, after a thirty-day walk, had nearly reached the north face of Mount Hkakabo Razi, more than 19,000 feet high, before unstable snow and poor weather conditions forced him back. Deep in the farthest reaches of northern Myanmar, Ozaki, who had raced against the famous climber Reinhold Messner to scale all fourteen Himalayan peaks higher than 26,000 feet, had stood before a mountain that had long been off-limits to foreigners and remained one of the highest unclimbed peaks in the eastern Himalayas. That had been only a reconnaissance trip, however; he was planning his first real assault on the peak in the next few months.

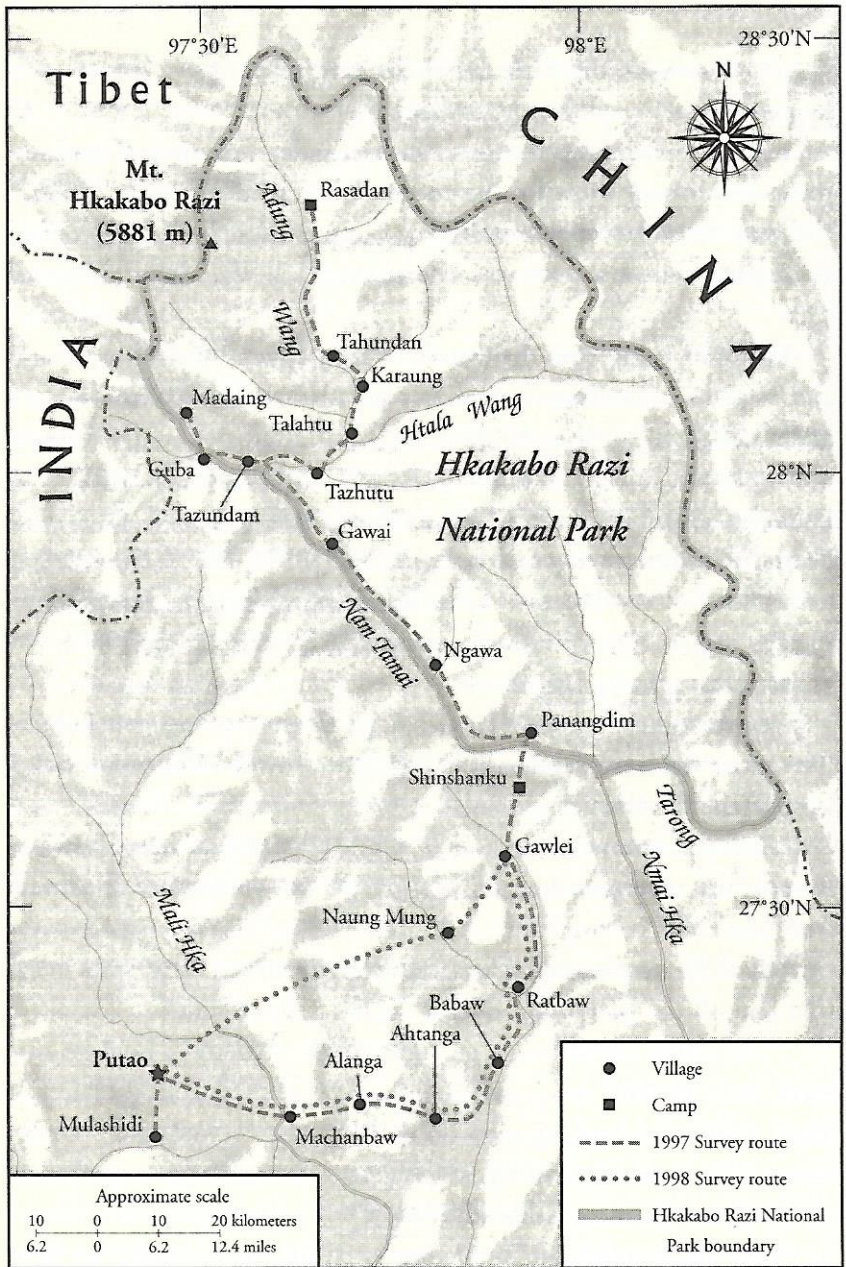
I lowered the newspaper to my lap, no longer concerned about other news. All that mattered to me now was that Ozaki was the first outsider I knew of in nearly half a century to penetrate the heart of Myanmar's most remote, unexplored wilderness. His trip had set a precedent that perhaps could help me get permission to travel to the place I had most wanted to go since my arrival in this country. Ozaki had gone to conquer a mountain. I wanted to probe the region's biological mysteries.

I hadn't dared to ask permission to attempt such a trip before. Only in 1994 had a cease-fire agreement finally been signed between the government in Yangon and the Kachins, who controlled the area I sought to visit. But the news about Ozaki could change everything. Riding on my successful trips to Htamanthi and Lampi, and all the work I had done with the Forest Department up to this point, I decided it was time to call in my chips. On the plane to Thailand, I drafted an urgent request to General Chit Swe.

here. The other tributary, called the Nmai Hka, literally translated as the "bad waters," bent sharply to the east and flowed down through country that, earlier in the century, was described as so "wild and savage" that even the Kachin avoided it for fear of attack by less civilized tribes. Between these wild rivers, spawned from the snow-covered mountains of the far north, lay the rugged Shan-ngaw Mountain Range, part of an area known to early explorers as the Triangle. Until the 1930s, much of this terrain was unexplored, and the source of these larger tributaries, far to the north, was regarded as one of the great unsolved geographical mysteries of its time.

Before leaving for Putao, we also visited Pidaung Wildlife Sanctuary, an hour west of Myitkyina, accompanied by seven soldiers and a captain. Pidaung was the first protected area established in the country, set up in 1911 to encompass pristine forest, salt licks, and open grasslands and containing substantial populations of rhinos, tigers, elephants, and wild cattle species. Expanded several times until it was nearly 300 square miles in area, Pidaung was touted in the 1930s as "one of the most rewarding places in Burma for viewing big game," a model park that would one day rival South Africa's famed Kruger National Park. Instead, it became an example of the desecration and abuse that could be perpetrated on even the best and most prominent of a country's protected areas. A wildlife survey in 1960 by two American scientists found the wildlife in Pidaung to be "a forlorn remnant" of what had once been there, finding evidence of only two tigers, two leopards, two bears, two wild dogs, and forty-nine elephants. All the rhinos were dead.

Now, in 1996, I stood atop a rise looking over an open, empty plain, much of it recently cleared, within the heart of the Pidaung Sanctuary. Having talked with the park's chief, I already knew that within the sanctuary's boundaries there were two villages containing 640 people, 5,000 acres of illegal rice fields, a train station, a major through road, and a military compound with a shooting range that occupied more than 1,400 acres. Much of the former open grasslands were gone, and 6,000 additional acres of grassland



Routes of the author's northern Myanmar explorations and the subsequent boundaries established for the Hkakabo Razi National Park.