Empire, Nature and Agrarian World: A History of Rhino Preservation in the Kaziranga Game Reserve, India (1902–1938)

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ABSTRACT

The greater one-horned rhinoceros or Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) faced extinction in British India at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1908, the Government of Assam established the Kaziranga Game Reserve (KGR, now Kaziranga National Park) to preserve the vanishing rhino. As the twentieth century progressed, creating wilderness – by demonising the presence of the peasants and graziers – became a global panacea for protecting wildlife. Contrary to that belief, this article will show how the rhino population revived amidst human existence dictated by agro-ecological interactions and bureaucratic expediencies. The rhino's ethology and its place in the imagination of rural people minimised its enemies. Moreover, in fluvial geography that constantly transformed the KGR's boundaries, peasants and graziers creatively negotiated their usufruct rights and supported rhino preservation. Locating the KGR in the historical analysis of fluvial agro-ecology, this study illuminates how a critical interaction between different actors, i.e. human and non-human and coloniser and colonised, accentuated the cultural and material contestations amidst which the rhino eventually survived.

KEYWORDS

Kaziranga National Park, rhinoceros, wildlife conservation, Assam

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> The question of Game Preservation in India is one that may appeal, in my judgment, not merely to the sportsmen, but also to the naturalist and the friend of animal life. It is certainly not through the spectacles of the sportsman only that I would regard it, though I yield to no one in my recognition of the manly attractions of shikar (game).
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> I do, however, attach great value to the consideration that wild animal life should not be unduly fostered at the expense of the occupations or the crops of the people. Where depredations are committed upon crops, or upon flocks and herds, the cultivator cannot be denied, within reasonable limits, the means of self-protection.[1]
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> George Nathaniel Curzon, Viceroy of India (1899–1905)

INTRODUCTION

The Kaziranga National Park (KNP) – a UNESCO World Heritage Site – is a home to two-thirds of the world's population of nearly 4,000 greater one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*).[2] The KNP was originally established as the Kaziranga Game Reserve (KGR) under the forest department of Assam in 1908 on the Brahmaputra River's low-lying floodplains to protect the vanishing rhino. It was declared a national park in 1974. Within a decade of its establishment, the KGR underwent two expansions to provide an essential habitat in which the rhino made a slow comeback combating agricultural extension, bureaucratic cynicism and illegal rhino killing (for its horn).[3] The preservation initiative also successfully distanced itself from the objectives of elite hunting or economic gains, which became the hallmark of rhino preservation. Today, the highly protected park is a site of tourism, environmental activism and is enmeshed in a lengthy land conflict.[4] This article outlines the complexities involved in the early years of preserving the rhino in the low-lying floodplains.

The majority of historical scholarship on the wildlife of South Asia focuses on charismatic mammals like tigers, lions, elephants and rhinos.[5] An

1. George Nathaniel Curzon, *Lord Curzon in India* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1906), pp. 435–438.
2. I refer to the greater one-horned rhinoceros as the rhino from now on.
3. The initial size of the KGR was 229 sq. km which was successively expanded to 430 sq. km by 1920. In the last three decades, more area, mainly the bed of the Brahmaputra to the north of the KNP, has been added as a buffer zone to bring it to current size of 884 sq. km. Fig. 1 refers to the KGR when it was 430 sq. km and excluded the buffers.
4. Sanjay Barbora, 'Riding the Rhino: Conservation, conflicts, and militarization of Kaziranga National Park in Assam', *Antipode* **49** (5) (2017): 1145–1163.
5. Mahesh Rangarajan, *India's Wildlife History: An Introduction* (New Delhi: Permanent Black and Ranthambore Foundation, 2001); Mahesh Rangarajan, 'Animals with rich histories: the case of the lions of Gir Forest, Gujarat, India', *History and Theory* **52** (4) (2013): 109–127; Vijaya Mandala, *Shooting a Tiger: Big-Game Hunting and Conservation in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018); Thomas R. Trautmann, *Elephants and Kings: An Environmental History* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black and Ashoka University, 2015); Shibani

overwhelming focus on large species meant that other animals, habitats and surrounding areas often evaded the historians' gaze.[6] In the case of the KGR, which was established to protect the rhino, extant scholarship overlooked how an everyday tussle between the game reserve's authorities and nearby residents extended beyond the protection of the rhino. The contestations were over grazing, hunting (other games), fishing, shifting cultivation and forest passage rights in the KGR.[7] This study re-contextualises the colonial rhino preservation initiative in the interaction between the habitat, i.e. the KGR and the rural world in the Assam region of eastern India.[8]

The wider agrarian links of national parks have received deeper attention from environmental historians who studied famous national parks like Kruger (South Africa), Yellowstone (United States) and Serengeti (Tanzania).[9] This scholarship suggests that drawing well-demarcated park boundaries and removing hunter-gatherers, pastoralists and cultivators have been a precondition to reinventing nature in these parks. The KNP is unique in that it is located on the fluvial floodplains, where the braided course of the river denies a fixed boundary.[10] Since the game reserve days, cultivators, graziers, fishers and animals exploited the fluvial and volatile environment of the floodplain. Scholars have argued that a command over nature and intrusions of the state beyond the cultivated land were fundamental departures of colonial rule in South Asia from previous regimes.[11] The Brahmaputra's floodplains were set to test both.

Bose, *Mega Mammals in Ancient India: Rhinos, Tigers, and Elephants* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2020); Arupjyoti Saikia, 'The Kaziranga National Park: Dynamics of social and political history', *Conservation and Society* **7** (2) (2009): 113–129; Divyabhanusinh, Asok Kumar Das, and Shibani Bose, *The Story of India's Unicorns* (Mumbai: The Marg Foundation, 2018); Arupjyoti Saikia, 'Rhinoceros in Kaziranga National Park: Nature and politics in Assam', in Manisha Rao (ed.) *Reframing the Environment: Resources, Risk and Resistance in Neoliberal India* (New York: Routledge, 2021) pp. 159–203.

6. There are a few exceptions. For Gir Forest National Park, see Rangarajan, 'Animals with rich histories'. For Great Himalayan National Park, see Ashwini Chhatre and Vasant K. Saberwal, *Democratizing Nature: Politics, Conservation and Development in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).
7. Peasants hunted the rhino for its horn. Europeans hunted the rhino mainly for trophies but also for its horn. Both pursued other games and fished for subsistence.
8. Interaction between colonial forestry and the rural world is a distinctive feature of South Asian environmental history. For conceptual framework, see *Studies in History* **14** (2) (1998); Arun Agrawal and K. Sivaramakrishnan, *Agrarian Environments: Resources, Representations, and Rule in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).
9. Jane Carruthers, *The Kruger National Park: A Social and Political History* (Scottsville: University of Natal Press, 1995); Karl Jacoby, *Crimes Against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Roderick P. Neumann, *Imposing Wilderness: Struggles over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
10. For Brahmaputra's braided courses, see Arupjyoti Saikia, *The Unquiet River: A Biography of the Brahmaputra* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 3–41.
11. For a discussion on natural history as a vehicle for colonial command over nature, see John M. MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature: Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism*

The growing convergence in agrarian history and environmental history of South Asia to consider forests, cultivated land and pastures together in a composite unit of analysis is a useful approach to explore the early history of the KNP.[12] From the late nineteenth century, Assam's floodplains and foothills, both peripheral to the settled belt of cultivation, played two crucial roles to sustain the colonial agrarian order, namely an expanding core of settled and taxpaying peasantry.[13] First, the floodplains served as the frontier for agricultural expansion in the valley.[14] Secondly, these peripheral floodplains formed the constitutive other to the settled agrarian core, where there was no room for shifting cultivation, excess livestock and depredating wildlife. In other words, the floodplains were a refuge for the mobile livestock herds, wildlife (including rhino) and shifting cultivation, which were unwelcome in more settled parts of the valley. Fauna preservation had to make room for itself amidst lopsided colonial emphasis on establishing a settled peasantry.

The 'rule of colonial differentiation' also shaped rhino preservation.[15] As the rhino preservation era began, European tea planters, already a formidable force in the province's political and social life,[16] became vocal 'advocates' of wildlife protection. They demonised Indian peasants as reckless hunters and an enemy of the rhino, and lobbied for latter's removal from the KGR's neighbourhood. Contrary to such demonisation, this article illustrates the positive role of the Indians in the rhino's survival. Nevertheless, as the article illustrates, the planters were divided over the critical question of land acquisition for the reserve, and so were the colonial officials. These dissents in the early years of the game reserve led to temporary yet powerful alliances – amongst peasants, graziers, planters and prospectors – which made claims on natural resources that left decisive imprints on the park today.

This article is divided into three sections. The first section contextualises the rhino preservation in the broader history of wildlife preservation within British India. It further locates rhino preservation in the overarching colonial emphasis on agricultural expansion. The second section shows how the conflicting

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(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 36; for the colonial state's intrusion, see Mahesh Rangarajan, 'Environmental histories of South Asia: A review essay', *Environment and History* **2** (2) (1996): 129–143.

12. For a conceptual framework, see *Studies in History* **14** (2) (1998); Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan, *Agrarian Environments*.
13. For a discussion on agrarian order, see Neeladri Bhattacharya, *The Great Agrarian Conquest* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2018).
14. Saikia, *The Unquiet River*, pp. 256–275.
15. It highlights a tendency among the British colonisers to differentiate themselves from the Indian subjects and how they denied equality and democracy. See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994).
16. Amalendu Guha's phrase, *Planter Raj to Swaraj,* aptly captures the planter's preponderance in colonial Assam. Amalendu Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj: Freedom Struggle and Electoral Politics in Assam 1826–1947* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2014).

interests of revenue officials, forest officials, peasants, graziers and planters reshaped the KGR. These debates underscore how the KGR not only redefined the agro-ecological world in a fluvial agrarian frontier, but also complicated the 'agrarian order' in the Brahmaputra Valley. Most importantly, these tussles played a pivotal role in separating the rhino preservation from hunting or utilitarian objectives, the pervasive logic behind colonial preservation. The third section shows that rhino preservation only received due attention within the forest department (preoccupied with timber operations) from the late 1920s onwards. The rhino gradually made a comeback by the late 1930s overcoming the threat from illegal rhino hunting (for its horn) and agrarian expansion. An explanation for this revival was colonial accommodation of usufruct rights rather than strict protection.

BIRTH OF AN 'ASYLUM'

Archaeological records suggest that the rhino inhabited most parts of South Asia in the late Pleistocene and Holocene.[17] By the nineteenth century, the rhino was confined to Assam, North Bengal, Nepal's Terai and parts of northern Uttar Pradesh. In Nepal, the government has protected the rhino in Chitwan since 1846. Only the ruling family and state guests were allowed to hunt.[18] In contrast, around the same time, the Government of Bengal paid a reward of Rs. 5 to kill rhinos in Assam.[19] In the early 1850s, Assam exported an estimated 240 kg of rhino horn annually.[20] This meant that hunters would have had to kill over 250 rhinos annually to meet this volume. However, trade at this scale barely lasted for a couple of decades. Even the European military officials and hunters who ostensibly claimed rhinos for trophies and sport sold their horns.[21] By the late nineteenth century, the rapid expansion of tea and forestry had also severely shrunk the rhino's habitat in Assam.[22]

Although pushed to the verge of extinction, the rhino was relatively late in receiving government protection. This was probably due to its peripheral

17. Rhino fossils from the late Pleistocene were found in Tirunelveli (Tamil Nadu), Narmada Valley and Son Valley. Holocene fossils are available from Middle Ganga Plain and Gujarat. Divyabhanusinh et al., *The Story of India's Unicorns*, pp. 34–35.
18. Hemanta Mishra and Jim Ottaway Jr., *The Soul of the Rhino* (Gurgaon: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 48.
19. Government of Bengal papers, file no. 340, 1848, Assam State Archives (hereafter ASA), Guwahati.
20. A.J. Moffat Mills, *Report on the Province of Assam* (Guwahati: Publication Board, 1984), pp. 527, 650.
21. F.W.T. Pollok, *Fifty Years' of Reminiscences of India: A Retrospect of Travel, Adventure and Shikar* (London: Edward Arnold, 1896), p. 197.
22. By 1901–02, 9,300 sq. km or 15% of the Brahmaputra Valley was brought under tea plantations and forestry. Government of Assam, *Report on the Administration of the Province of Assam for the Years 1901–02* (hereafter RAPA) (Shillong: Assam Secretariat Printing Office (hereafter ASPO), 1903), pp. 16, 19.

position in the colonial ideological and administrative sphere. The rhino was neither considered 'vermin', like the 'man-eating' tiger or the 'savage of the wild beasts' wild boar, which the British colonial government destroyed as 'enemy', nor was it something to be tamed like an elephant for its great value in transport and timber logging.[23] The rhino also did not earn any notoriety as a crop raider because its small home range meant that it was largely confined to its habitat.[24] The elephant was the first wild animal to receive noteworthy government protection in British India. In 1873, Madras Presidency enacted the Elephant Preservation Act. The Government of India soon enacted the Elephant Preservation Act of 1879, applicable to all provinces in British India.[25] Other developments included the Nilgiri Game and Fish Preservation Act of 1879, which made provisions for regulated fishing and a closed season for hunting.[26] Two decades later, the Asiatic Lion (*Panthera leo leo*) faced extinction. The Nawab of Junagarh, a princely state in western India, protected the lion in the Gir Forests from around 1899. It was the first known case of carnivore preservation. Here too, hunting interest was central to protection.[27] Elsewhere in the British Empire, there was growing disquiet among the erstwhile British hunter-naturalists, aristocrats and officials about the rapidly declining wild animals in the African colonies. In 1903, British hunters formed the Society for Preservation of Fauna in the Empire (SPFE). They lobbied the colonial office in London to protect the empire's fauna, primarily aiming to gain access to hunting.[28] The SPFE did not focus on Asia until the 1920s,[29] but it created a buzz around fauna protection in the empire.

Some British colonial administrators in Assam noticed the rapidly dwindling numbers of rhinos in the province.[30] The spectre of rhino extinction loomed large in Assam especially after the Government of Bengal banned rhino hunting in the reserved forests in 1899.[31] However, any financial commitment to a solely natural history cause, with no promise of income, was out

23. For a discussion on tigers, wild boars and elephants, see Mandala, *Shooting a Tiger*, pp. 262–324.
24. Later studies suggest that rhinos stay within 2–6.5 sq. km. See Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya, Studies on Certain Aspects of Biology of the One-horned Rhinoceros. (PhD Thesis, Gauhati University, Guwahati, 1991), 125–128.
25. Mandala, *Shooting a Tiger*, p. 317.
26. Ibid., pp. 287–288.
27. Mahesh Rangarajan, *Nature and Nation: Essays on Environmental History* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2015), pp. 90–93, 100–102.
28. MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature*, pp. 211–215.
29. Ibid., p. 286.
30. C.G. Dingwall-Fordyce, *Progress report of forest administration in the province of Assam for the year 1900–1901* (hereafter *PRFA*), 1901, p. 10; from J.C. Arbuthnot, Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts (hereafter AVD) to the Secretary to CC, 4 Nov. 1902, Revenue–A, Sept. 1905, nos. 75–134, Assam Secretariat Proceedings (hereafter ASP), ASA.
31. A.E. Wild, *Progress report of forest administration in the lower provinces of Bengal for the year 1899–1900* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1900), p. 35. In 1874, Assam was separated from Bengal and governed as a separate province.

of the question.[32] Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India was aware about the vanishing wildlife in British India. In December 1901, he visited Burma, where the Burma Game Preservation Association, a group of European hunters, urged him to take measures to stop the rapid decline in game. In his reply, Curzon underscored the importance of protecting wildlife and noted, 'Rhinoceros is all but exterminated save in Assam.'[33] A year ago, he had refused to shoot a lion in Junagarh state after realising that it would drive the species into extinction. Given the diversity of conditions in British India, he suggested 'some kind of legislation of a permissive and elastic nature, the provisions of which should be applied to the various provinces of India in so far only as they were adapted to the local conditions.'[34] Despite his pretensions of being a hunter-sportsman and naturalist, Curzon was clear in prioritising cultivation over game preservation (see epigraph to this article). After intense discussions over game preservation for a year or so, in 1903, the Government of India circulated a draft of the Wild Birds and Animals Protection Bill to all the provinces in British India.[35] The bill took nearly a decade to become an Act in 1912. Sections 2 and 3 of the Act delegated the responsibility to the provinces to declare closed seasons and frame hunting rules. Meanwhile, the Government of Assam received a stimulus from a source linked to Curzon, to protect the rhino.

The Secretary of the Zoological Garden, Calcutta, wrote to the Chief Commissioner of Assam to supply a rhino for Rs. 500–1000.[36] This letter mentioned that Curzon wanted the collections of the Zoological Garden to be 'representative of the varied and interesting fauna of the British India.'[37] A law banning rhino killings was not in sight. Bampfylde Fuller, the Chief Commissioner of Assam, considered 'establishing an asylum for the rhinoceros.'[38] Like his superior, Curzon, Fuller was firm that in no way should the selection of such tracts 'prejudice the development of cultivation'.[39] J.C.

32. In 1901–02, Government of Assam's total revenue receipt stood at Rs. 1,50,25,075 against the expenditure of Rs. 1,97,31,011. Government of Assam, *RAPA 1901–02*, pp. 133–136.

33. Curzon, *Lord Curzon in India*, pp. 435–438.

34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. From the secretary, Zoological Garden, Calcutta to the Chief Commissioner of Assam (hereafter CC), 16 Jul. 1902, file no. 86, 1902, Assam Commissioner's Office, ASA.

37. According to various writings, Mary Curzon, Lord Curzon's wife influenced her husband to preserve the near-extinct rhino. See Nitin A. Gokhale and Samudra Gupta Kashyap, *Kaziranga: The Rhino Century* (Guwahati: Kaziranga Centenary Celebration Committee, 2005), pp. 9–15; Bubul Sharma and Swapan Nath, *Kazirangar Borenya* (The Venerables of Kaziranga) (Editorial committee: Kaziranga, 2015), p. 11. However, there is no material evidence to suggest that Mary Curzon played a role in establishing the KGR. See Divyabhanusinh et al., *The Story of India's Unicorns*; Saikia, 'The Kaziranga National Park'; Kees Rookmaaker, 'Lady Curzon and the establishment of Kaziranga National Park', *Pachyderm* **60** (2019): 110–111.

38. From Secretary to the CC to J.C. Arbuthnot, 18 Dec. 1902, Revenue–A, Sep. 1905, nos. 75–134, ASP, ASA.

39. Ibid.

Arbuthnot, a senior official in Assam, identified Kaziranga and Laokhowa as the rhino-bearing tracts in the Brahmaputra's south bank. These were 'uncultivated and uncultivable waste, destitute of inhabitants.'[40] Similarly, revenue officials selected a tract in the foothills of Bhutan to be reserved as the North Kamrup Game Reserve (present-day Manas National Park). In the next few years, there were careful efforts to exclude any cultivated or cultivable areas from the proposed game reserves.[41] The logic was similar to how only 'worthless land' – understood as devoid of any extractive economic value – was chosen to create the early national parks in the United States in the nineteenth century.[42] When the game reserves were contemplated, the forest department had 8,500 square kilometres or twelve per cent of the province under its control as reserved forests, primarily set aside to extract or regenerate high-quality timber.[43] Reserved forests allowed authorised hunting. In contrast, game reserves in Assam were to ban cultivation, hunting, trapping and fishing. To protect the empire's heritage, the colonial government wanted a neat division between 'nature' (game reserve) and 'culture' (cultivated land).

The low-lying locality chosen for the KGR stood at the periphery of densely cultivated parts of the valley. The proposed locality served as an agrarian frontier and hunting ground. The proposed reserve straddled the Sibsagar and Nowgong districts. The Mikir (Karbi) Hills rose to the south. Floodplain thickets and grasses circled it from three other directions. Beyond this stretch, the Brahmaputra flowed in the north of the reserve. Mid-nineteenth century records suggest that the low-lying locality was sparsely populated and scantily cultivated.[44] From the 1870s, tea planters acquired the land in the foothills, south of Trunk Road (Figure 1). European hunters, mainly planters and military officers from all over the province, shot the buffalo, rhino and tiger in the low-lying locality.[45] Although the peasants did not own firearms, there were noted hunters among them too.[46]

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the locality became more populous. It housed nearly 18,000 people, 7,000 of whom were indentured tea garden labourers (and their families) (hereafter Adivasis) who had recently arrived

40. From J.C. Arbuthnot to the Secretary to CC, 28 Aug. 1903, Revenue–A, Sep. 1905, nos. 75–134, ASP, ASA.
41. From Deputy Commissioner (DC), Kamrup to Commissioner, AVD, 31 May 1904 and DC, Sibsagar to Commissioner, AVD, 4 Jun. 1904, Revenue–A, Sep. 1905, nos. 75–134, ASP, ASA.
42. Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience* (Lanham: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2010), pp. 43–55.
43. Government of Assam, *RAPA 1901–02*, pp. 19, 67. Figures are for the current boundary of Assam.
44. Mills, *Report on the province of Assam*, p. 485.
45. James Willcocks, *The Romance of Soldiering and Sports* (London: Cassel and Company, 1925), pp. 39–41.
46. See the biography of 'Nigona Shikari' in Sharma and Nath, *Kazirangar Borenya*, p. 11.

from central India.[47] A wide range of people tried to make a living in and around these low-lying areas. In the south of the proposed reserve, the Ahoms, Bengalis, Koches, Karbis and Assamese-speaking Muslims lived in several permanent villages. In contrast, in the north of the proposed reserve (along the Brahmaputra), human settlement was sparse and people moved around more. Here, Mishing[48] villages dotted the bank of the Brahmaputra.[49] Their main crops were rice, mustard and pulses. The immigrant Nepali graziers[50] interspersed the Mishing villages. Kaziranga's floodplains promised rich pastures to supply dairy products and draft animals.[51]

In 1905, the Government of Assam proposed to create the KGR.[52] A year later, given the rapidity of the rhino's extinction, the government issued a proclamation banning all human activities like cultivation, grazing, hunting, fishing and foraging in the proposed reserve.[53] Neighbouring peasants protested against the proposed reserve as it would foreclose their agrarian frontier.[54] In 1904, the colonial revenue officials found only two villages cultivating 136 acres inside the proposed reserve.[55] They assumed that the proposed reserve had no other human settlement inside it. However, in 1907, the Forest Settlement Officer (FSO) appointed to settle the rights and claims, was surprised to see two more villages within the proposed reserve's northern part.[56] Forty-seven families had been living there for two to three years and were cultivating 230 acres. Keot and Koch (Assamese lower-caste groups), Kalitas, Nepalis and Bengalis lived on a combination of practices like shifting cultivation, grazing and fishing. The FSO ordered these families to relocate and awarded them compensation.

47. B.C. Allen, *Census of India, 1901. Volume IV–A, Assam, Part II, Tables* (Shillong, ASPO, 1902), pp. 282–284.
48. A tribe that mostly lives in riparian areas. Historically, they descended from the present-day Arunachal Pradesh hills.
49. A map prepared by the Survey of India in 1890 showed several Miri (Mishing) villages along the Brahmaputra. *David Rumsey Map Collection*, https://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY~8~1~328919~90097404.
50. In the 1880s, the Government of Assam encouraged the Nepalis to settle as cultivators. However, they were more attracted to pastoralism.
51. Debeswar Saikia, *Kazirangar Buniyad* (The Foundations of Kaziranga) (Kaziranga: Chidananda Saikia, 1998), pp. 5–6.
52. Government of Assam's Gazette Notification no. 2442R, 1 Jun. 1905, Revenue–A, Sep. 1905, nos. 75–134, ASP, ASA.
53. Government of Assam's proclamation, 22 May 1906, Financial Department, Forests–A, Jan. 1908, nos. 3–15, Eastern Bengal and Assam Secretariat Proceedings (hereafter EBASP), ASA.
54. Financial Department, Forests–B, Aug. 1906, nos. 25–26, ASP, IOR/P/7221, British Library, London.
55. From DC, Nowgong to Commissioner, AVD, 18 Jun. 1904, Revenue–A, Sep. 1905, nos. 75–134, ASP, ASA.
56. All discussions on the original settlement of the KGR follow from the proceeding titled 'Reservation of the Kaziranga and Rangalugarh forest in the Sibsagar and Nowgong districts, respectively.', Financial Department, Forests–A, Jan. 1908, nos. 3–15, EBASP, ASA.

The game reserve proposal in 1905 excluded the permanent villages in the south along Trunk Road. Despite this, eight village headmen stood before the FSO and objected to the ban on grazing, fishing and collection of thatch, bamboo and cane from the reserve.[57] The peasants' objection, however, had more to do with the game reserve impeding the prospects of future cultivation. The FSO rejected all their claims, arguing that these resources were ample outside the reserve – a typical colonial view of an abundant agrarian frontier in Assam.

On 3 January 1908, the Government of Assam formally established the KGR in 229 square kilometres, and placed it under the jurisdiction of the forest department.[58] For the first time, the government established three game reserves (Kaziranga, Laokhowa and North Kamrup) that were completely closed to any form of resource gathering activities. The floodplains, where the KGR was established, were largely under shifting cultivation, grazing and fishing, none of which involved extensive government control. The KGR was an early example of the government intruding directly into a floodplain region in the province.

Game reserves had precedents in Cape Colony (1856), Australia (1879), Canada (1885), Kenya (1897) and Zululand (1897).[59] Game reserves were designed to recuperate the game stock and were of primary interest to the hunter-naturalists.[60] It was only natural that some European planters, who hunted in the locality, welcomed the idea of a game reserve.[61] However, as we will see, rhino preservation opened up new resource contestations in the province.

FENCING THE 'ASYLUM'

Although the KGR precluded cultivation in a large area, the Assamese peasants and Adivasis continued to establish new villages in its neighbourhood.[62] Since the establishment of the KGR in 1908, the Brahmaputra shifted its course towards the north bank. The reserve and its vicinity were less prone to

57. These villages were inhabited by the Ahoms, Bengalis, Koches, Karbis and Assamese-speaking Muslims.
58. Gazette notification no. 37F, 3 Jan. 1908, Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam.
59. Years of creation in parenthesis. Carruthers, *The Kruger National Park*, p. 32.
60. MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature*, 264.
61. From DC, Sibsagar to Commissioner, AVD, 4 Jun. 1904, Revenue–A, Sep. 1905, nos. 75–134, ASP, ASA.
62. S.G. Hart, *Report on the land revenue settlement of the Sibsagar District during the years 1902–03 to 1905–06* (Shillong: Eastern Bengal and Assam Secretariat Printing Office (EBASPO), 1906), pp. 13–14; during 1921–1924, six new villages settled along the Mora-Diphalu. Sub-Deputy Collector (SDC), Kamargaon Circle to Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO), Golaghat, 23 Dec. 1924, file no. X-33, 1925, Revenue, ASA.

annual floods, which helped shifting cultivators move towards settled cultivation.[63] Though the reserve considerably shrank the pastures, they remained a prime attraction. Graziers moved their livestock to the flood-immune foothills during monsoon. However, as in the rest of the province,[64] the expanding tea estates in the foothills shrank the pastures and reduced the prospects of peasant cultivation.[65]

Ironically, as soon as the KGR was established, a few European tea planters along its southwestern boundary, some of whom initially welcomed the idea, were the first to complain about it. They pressed the government to exclude the area between Trunk Road and the Mora-Diphalu River to ensure that their workers had access to it (marked D in Figure 2).[66] In 1911, the government excluded a stretch of 5.83 square kilometres along the reserve's southern boundary.[67] Though the exclusion was intended to suit the interests of the planters, the Mora-Diphalu (the new southern boundary) became open to all. Village women could fetch water and wash clothes, and villagers could catch fish. This was only the beginning of the planters' often conflicting interests in the KGR.

The game reserves in Assam prompted two opposing views on hunting: a critique of hunting and a greater demand for it. In 1909, Lord Minto, the Viceroy of India, bagged a rhino trophy in the North Kamrup Game Reserve. The use of public money to organise a hunt of a vanishing species drew sharp criticisms from a section of the Europeans in the province.[68] Such charges made the provincial government wary of allowing shooting in the game reserves. On the other hand, the continued ban on hunting in the game reserves created greater demand for other hunting avenues among European hunters (planters and military officials). They could still hunt outside the reserve, and an occasional trophy of a rhino fetched them glowing appreciation.[69] However, they lamented that outside the reserve, the *shikaris* (Indian hunters) destroyed the game. Peasants burnt tall grasses annually, and rhinos ventured out of the reserve to relish the new flush of grass. A European hunter, who hunted in the area before the KGR was established, alleged that Indian hunters

63. 'Extracts from the proceedings of the Governor in Council in the Revenue Department', no. 2891R, 25 Oct. 1926, file no. I-62, 1926, Revenue, ASA.
64. Between 1890–1950, tea estates occupied 7–9% of total arable land in Assam (present boundaries). J.F. Richards and J. Hagen, 'A century of rural expansion in Assam, 1870–1970', *Itinerario* **11** (1) (1987): 193–208, 194.
65. In 1908, the Kuthori Tea Grant added 300 acres to its existing 700 acres amidst villagers' protest that it was their pasture. File no. 27, Group III, Collection 2, 1908, Board of Revenue (Eastern Bengal and Assam), ASA.
66. H. Carter, *Progress report of forest administration in the province of Eastern Bengal and Assam, Eastern Circle, for the year 1910–1911* (Shillong: EBASPO, 1912), p. 1.
67. Gazette notification no. 2069F, 18 Apr. 1911, Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam.
68. 'Viceroy's shooting tour', *Times of India*, 18 Feb. 1909; A.J.W. Milroy, 'The North Kamrup Game Reserve', *Indian Forester* **42** (1916): 452–464.
69. 'A Record Rhino', *The Englishman*, 4 May 1909.

indiscriminately killed these rhinos and urged that 'government keeps these outlaws within certain bounds'.[70] As the game grew scarce in the colonies, it was typical of the Europeans to assume the role of wildlife protectors and to deplore colonised peoples' hunting as primitive, unscientific and reckless.[71] At the turn of the twentieth century, although driven by rivalling agendas, the international preservationists agreed on the 'conceptualization of the tropical wilderness as a global heritage to be held in trust for all humankind.'[72] European hunters' prejudiced views inspired a global network of wildlife preservationists to pressure the government to protect the rhino.[73]

Such demonisation of the peasants also begs the counter-question: how did the rhino survive in the swamps surrounded by a ring of villages before the protection began? Though the locality was a nineteenth-century hunting tract for the Europeans, they did not venture too deep into it. The low-lying KGR appeared as an impassable '*terra incognita*' to them until the 1930s.[74] This aversion to swamps was typical of many Europeans. In contrast, the peasants had laid their tracks over many years, with a name for every *beel* (lake-like wetland). The fact that a few rhinos survived well into the twentieth century suggests that peasants were indifferent towards the animal, even if they may not have felt direct empathy towards it.[75] This is not to say that peasants did not kill the rhino for its horn. However, their methods to do so took great effort; digging a pit and removing the earth required several men. After that, came the waiting time to trap the rhino. Even without going into the economic gain of selling the rhino horn, it can be surmised that peasants would have focused on expanding their landholdings and rearing cattle and buffalo. Moreover, before the game reserves were established, the fact that the rhino was 'peaceful' unlike the tiger and leopard, and wouldn't ordinarily attack cattle or humans, nor would it raid crops like elephant or wild boar, may have been its saving grace. Shikaris protecting cattle and crops against wild animals enjoyed a venerable position in forest societies. In contrast, those who killed a nearly innocuous rhino only to hack its horn would have been held in lower regard.[76] Therefore, rhino killing among the peasants was no more than a low-key affair, which only escalated during times of crises. However, the minutiae of social

70. 'The game preserves of Assam', *Forest and Stream*, 25 Dec. 1909.
71. For South Asia, see Mandala, *Shooting a Tiger*, pp. 275, 285–286; for Africa, see Carruthers, *The Kruger National Park*, p. 31; MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature*, p. 81; Neumann, *Imposing Wilderness*, p. 108.
72. Corey Ross, 'Tropical nature as global *patrimoine*: Imperialism and international nature protection in the early twentieth century', *Past & Present* **226** (Supplement 10) (2015): 214–239, 215.
73. William T. Hornaday, *Our Vanishing Wildlife: Its Experimentation and Preservation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), p. 189.
74. A.J.W. Milroy, *PRFA 1934–35* (Shillong: AGP, 1935), p. 19.
75. The rhino appeared in the Assamese imagination only from the mid-twentieth century onwards. Saikia, 'The Kaziranga National Park'.
76. I am yet to come across an Assamese or tribal legend glorifying rhino hunting.

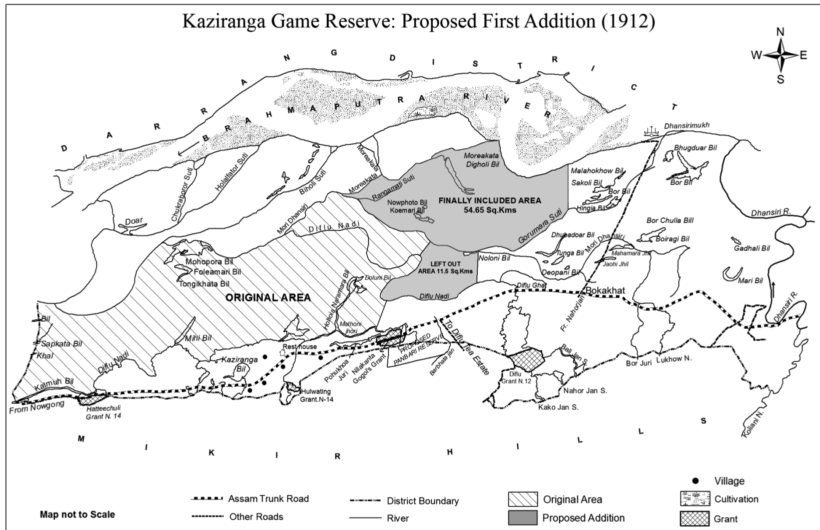

Figure 1: Map showing the settlement of the first addition to the KGR, 1912.

Source: ASA. Illustrations like villages and rest house added based on contemporary sources. Traced by Kiran Sharma.

restraints among the peasants did not matter to the European hunters who were bent on restricting peasant hunting to keep their game stock alive.

The Government of Assam responded to the Europeans' allegations against the peasants with a proposal to add 66.15 square kilometres to the KGR in its north-eastern corner (see Figure 1).[77] Neighbouring planters and cultivators protested against such expansion. However, the Deputy Commissioner of Sibsagar and FSO, A. Playfair, dismissed the objections saying there was still enough land outside the KGR for shifting cultivation and household needs. Ironically, opposition to the expansion of the reserve came from the European planters, who lived in the KGR's immediate vicinity. Many of them were vocal against the peasant hunters. They protested on three grounds. First, expansion of the KGR would shrink their hunting areas. Secondly, their Adivasi labourers who settled near the reserve would move away, resulting in a scarcity of labour. Thirdly, the proposed area had waterways to carry tea chests to the steamer heads on the Brahmaputra. Playfair rejected the first two objections. However, he accepted the third objection – the rights of passage. Accordingly, he excluded a block of 11.5 square kilometres from the proposed addition (Figure 1). In 1913, a remaining 54.6 square kilometres of land was added to the KGR, the first addition to the reserve. Playfair's settlement shows that the

77. See Playfair's 'Note on the Proposed Extension of the Game Reserve near Bokakhat', Revenue–A, Feb. 1913, no. 17, ASP, ASA.

authorities carefully weighed the interests of game preservation against the interests of the tea plantations but not against peasants' livelihood.[78]

As the Government of Assam carried out this first addition, the European hunters' preservation advocacy grew louder. Two men were central to this drive: J. Errol Gray and F.W. Gore. Gray was a planter who gave up his tea business to become a leading elephant catcher and a renowned authority on the health and maintenance of domesticated elephants.[79] Gore was a planter in the Deohal Tea Estate in eastern Assam. He hunted in Kaziranga before the KGR was established. In the early years, the KGR was poorly patrolled under a 'subordinate Forest officer'.[80] Gray sent a letter to the Chief Commissioner of Assam lamenting poor protective measures in the KGR.[81] Gray argued that shikaris used the reserve as a thoroughfare, and grazier's livestock could transmit disease to the wildlife. To Gray, game reserve boundaries must deter wildlife, livestock and humans from crossing. He proposed extending the KGR to the Bokakhat-Dhansirimukh Road in the east, Trunk Road in the south, and the Brahmaputra in the north (see Figure 2). Gore, too, wrote a letter to the Chief Commissioner which reiterated Gray's concerns and remedies.[82] Additionally, he proposed opening the reserve to sportsmen to shoot the wild buffalos and *mithun*s (*Bos frontalis*).[83]

Playfair, reappointed as the FSO, ruled out any further expansion.[84] Playfair had already faced immense objections from neighbouring planters and peasants while settling the first addition. He realised that any more reserve expansion would irritate the peasants who grew dry-season crops in these low-lying areas. However, he was challenged by his superior, D. Herbert, the officiating Commissioner, Assam Valley Districts.[85] Herbert let tea planters' interests influence the official position again. Herbert understood that neighbouring planters would object to extending the reserve towards the east and south as they did during the first addition. However, Herbert saw no problem extending it northward up to the Brahmaputra, where the planters were unlikely to object. Shifting cultivation by the Mishings and grazing by the Nepalis and Mishings were two critical issues in this relatively highland area. Therefore, a stretch of

78. The settlement map, a guide to evaluate each involved party's interests, marked all the land grants for tea and forestry but no villages (see Figure 1).
79. Patrick Donald Stracey, *Elephant Gold* (Dehradun: Natraj Publishers, 1991), pp. 25–28.
80. 'Game laws in Assam', *The Times of Assam*, 20 Jul. 1913, Revenue–A, Feb. 1913, nos. 35–47, ASP, ASA.
81. From J. Errol Gray to the CC, Assam, 25 Apr. 1913, Revenue–A, May 1914, nos. 37–57, ASP, ASA.
82. F.W. Gore to the CC, Assam, 27 Aug. 1913, Revenue–A, May 1914, nos. 37–57, ASP, ASA.
83. Unlike the water buffalo found on the plains, the *mithun* is a hill-dwelling species that descended from Karbi Hills. It still has a considerable presence in the Eastern Himalayas.
84. Playfair to the Commissioner, AVD, 2 Jun. 1913, Revenue–A, May 1914, nos. 37–57, ASP, ASA.
85. From Herbert to the Second Secretary to the CC, 10 Oct. 1913, Revenue–A, May 1914, nos. 37–57, ASP, ASA.

Figure 2: Map showing the second addition to the KGR, 1912–17.

Source: The map was included in a compendium of notifications related to the KNP (1908–1969), downloaded from the previous website of the Assam Forest Department, which no longer exists. Traced by Ajay Salunkhe.

151.87 square kilometres between the Diphalu (reserve's northern boundary) and Brahmaputra River (marked II in Figure 2) became the centre of a lengthy debate.

The colonial officials had contrasting visions of the locality, which shaped their opinions about how best to use the land. Herbert, who argued in favour of including the land in the reserve, described it as being an unruly and primitive by highlighting its pastoral use and downplaying cultivation.[86] He gave tabulated figures for grazing, but summarised acreage in a couple of lines (see Table 1). His figures for livestock, evidently collected during the monsoon season, were the highest numbers in the year. Graziers clustered in this relatively highland stretch as the neighbouring areas were submerged in water. In Herbert's terms, the Nepalis, who formed the two-thirds of the graziers, were a 'nuisance' and 'grasping and bullying moneylenders', 'keen poachers' and

86. Herbert's letter from 10 October suggests that the figures were taken from August and September. Mustard and pulses seeds were still to be sown, and the paddy was to be sown in the riparian areas in February and March and harvested by June-July. Ibid. For colonial view of grazing as 'primitive', see fn 94.

Table 1. Herbert's table showing the population and livestock in the proposal for the second addition, 1913.
Source: Revenue–A, May 1914, nos. 37–57, ASP, ASA.

Community	Number of households	Number of persons	Number of Buffalos	Number of Cows	Total number of Buffalos and Cows
Miri (Mishing)	89	412	388	206	594
Nepali	201	588	3493	1058	4551
Assamese	16	24	12	84	96
Bengalis	2	5	0	2	2
Total	308	1029	3893	1350	5243

Table 2. Playfair's table showing the landholding (in acres) in the proposal for the second addition, May 1915.
Source: Prepared from Revenue–A, September 1917, nos. 181–214, ASP, ASA.

Village	Community	Number of households	Area under annual lease	Area under Encroachment	Total area under peasant occupation
Lotabari Bahoni	Miri (Mishing)	13	39.4	8.2	47.6
Latabari Charigharia	Miri (Mishing)	16	47.2	43	90.2
Arimara	Miri (Mishing)	14	41.3	0	41.3
Ahom Chapori	Assamese	6	47.5	11.7	59.2
Total		55	175.4	62.9	238.3

hence, 'should receive no consideration'.[87] Likewise, he found the 'nomadic' Mishings undeserving of consideration, and wanted them to go. Herbert's derision exceeded the general colonial dislike towards these mobile people. Herbert, a police officer, was trying to bring 'order' in the frontier province.[88]

In contrast, Playfair viewed the locality as an agrarian mosaic.[89] He found four villages, three Mishing and one Assamese, who cultivated 238 acres, almost seven times Herbert's figure (see Table 2). Playfair's visit in early May 1915 gave him the most expansive glimpse of acreage, possibly due to the standing rice (*ahu*) crop. However, Playfair reported numbers of only 2,277 cows and buffalos, which were two-fifths of Herbert's count. Playfair's numbers came from the cattle census held in March, the driest month of the year

87. From Herbert to the Second Secretary to the CC, 10 Oct. 1913, Revenue–A, May 1914, nos. 37–57, ASP, ASA.
88. Herbert was the then Inspector General of Police of Assam, temporarily officiating a revenue office.
89. 'Proceedings in connection with the proposed addition to the Kaziranga Game Reserve', 29 Jul. 1915, Revenue–A, Sep. 1917, nos. 181–214, ASP, ASA.

when the graziers dispersed to various low-lying sandbars of the Brahmaputra. He reported that the Mishing shifting cultivators would suffer if they were to relocate. Moreover, he found no suitable place to relocate nearly 6,000 cattle dependent on the area during monsoon. He reiterated his stand to rule out extending the reserve to this area. To be sure, the government did not worry much about relocating the shifting cultivators. Instead, it was the highly complicated question of grazing that prolonged the discussion.

Before turning to the contestations around grazing, I will first illustrate the nature of grazing. The expansion of cultivation, tea gardens and forestry – in relatively flood-immune areas of the Brahmaputra Valley – increasingly pushed the graziers to the floodplains.[90] Generally, as the spring progressed, graziers shifted their *bathans* or livestock camps to the higher grounds until August or September to escape the floods. Floods brought them enormous troubles: congestion, pests, mosquitoes and lack of forage and water.[91] The centrality of these highlands to floodplain grazing made the stretch in question one of the most important pastures in the valley. With access to the steamer heads in Gamiri, Behali, Silghat and Dhansirimukh, the proposed area was also vital from the graziers' standpoint to market their dairy products.[92] The 'unruly' nature in the graziers, described by Herbert, derived from their mobility, through which they stayed afloat amidst changing use of land, agrarian conditions and the volatilities of floodplains.

The long debate over grazing reflected the anxieties of maintaining the agrarian order of the valley. Conflict between grazing and cultivation was a burning question in the 1910s. Simultaneous to the discussion on expanding the KGR, the Government of Assam ordered an enquiry on the issue in the Assam Valley Districts. The enquiry officer cautioned that dispersing the graziers from the area risked conflict with cultivation elsewhere.[93] The stability of the settled agricultural belt depended upon not upsetting its constitutive other, the peripheral floodplains. In the colonial discourse on material progress, grazing was 'primitive' and an inefficient use of land, whereas settled cultivation was 'modern'.[94] Playfair's reluctance to disperse the graziers from the pasture in question was tied to this vision of the colonial agrarian order.[95] However, the forest officials

90. Two examples of reserved forests in the reserve's neighbourhood were: Panbari Reserved Forest (created in 1913, see Gazette Notification no. 677R, 22 Feb. 1913, Government of Assam) and Behali and Biswanath Reserved Forest (created in 1917–18), see A.W. Blunt, *PRFA 1917–18* (Shillong: ASPO, 1918), p. 1.

91. W.J. Arbuthnot, *Grazing in Assam* (Shillong: ASPO, 1916). For an excellent literary illustration, see Lil Bahadur Kshattry, *Brahmaputra ka Chheu-chhau* (Around the Brahmaputra) (Lalitpur, Nepal: Sajha Prakashan, 2016, first published in 1986).

92. Arbuthnot, *Grazing in Assam*, pp. 21–22, 31–32.

93. Ibid., p. 32.

94. Vasant K. Saberwal, *Pastoral Politics: Shepherds, Bureaucrats and Conservation in the Western Himalaya* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 206.

95. 'Memorandum of a conference held at Government House on June the 8th, 1916', Revenue–A, Sep. 1917, nos. 181–214, ASP, ASA.

were unrelenting on the graziers. They arrived at an uneasy consensus: the graziers were to relocate to the sandbars, north of the proposed addition, although these sandbars submerged during monsoon. Despite this compromise among the officials, P.R.T. Gurdon, the Commissioner of the Assam Valley Districts, rejected the proposal on the grounds that compensation was 'difficult to justify, especially during present time of war'.[96] Ironically, Archdale Earle (the Chief Commissioner of Assam), reversed Gurdon's decision, and ordered the inclusion of the stretch to the KGR.[97] Earle was stewarding the empire's heritage by creating room for nature that required him to pull rank on such administrative complexities. In doing so, Earle shared planters' prejudices that the rhino cannot be protected in the presence of the 'unruly' graziers and cultivators.

During the official deliberations, Gore, the planter, visited the provincial capital Shillong to lobby the government and expedite the expansion. Gore's influence can be measured by the fact that on 27 June 1916, Earle met his top officials in Gore's presence.[98] Gore urged to extend the reserve and open it for shooting (though not the rhino at this stage). In the previous year, Earle gave the Darrang Game Association, a group of Europeans, the privilege of hunting and shooting for ten years in two unreserved tracts in the Darrang district.[99] Perhaps Gore wanted similar concessions. In response to Gore's proposal to open up the KGR for sportsmen, a top forest official said, 'it would be well that animals should have some place where they could be quiet.'[100] His refusal to allow planters in the game reserve is explicable given a long history of acrimony between the forest department and tea planters over land.[101] In 1916, the government renamed the reserve Kaziranga Game Sanctuary.[102] The term 'sanctuary' signified an end to sports hunting. The paradigm shift in preservation and disunity among the imperial entities further separated the rationale for game reserves and rhino preservation from hunting. However, the most decisive separation came after the protests and critiques against the game reserve expansion.

Chabilal Upadhyay (1882–1980), an influential Nepali grazier, led a strong protest against the government's decision to expand the KGR by removing

96. From Commissioner, AVD to the Second Secretary to the CC, 3 Dec. 1916, Revenue–A, Sep. 1917, nos. 181–214, ASP, ASA.
97. From the Chief Secretary to the CC to the Commissioner, AVD, 23 Jan. 1917, Revenue–A, Sep. 1917, nos. 181–214, ASP, ASA.
98. 'Extract from the copy of the memorandum of the proceedings of a meeting held at Government House on June the 27th 1916 (hereafter Extract)', Revenue–A, Sep. 1917, nos. 181–214, ASP, ASA.
99. Arupjyoti Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam, 1826–2000* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 268.
100. 'Extract', Revenue–A, Sep. 1917, nos. 181–214, ASP, ASA.
101. Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam*, pp. 87–88.
102. Ibid., p. 274.

the graziers.[103] The government's decision also invited bad press and opened up a discussion on resource use in the frontier province. But in gestures of solidarity, unlikely friends spoke out for the graziers. A European sawyer, whose timber trade was at risk from the reserve expansion, condemned the government over 'the constant and unjustifiable acquisition of land'.[104] An editorial in *The Times of Assam* – the only English-language newspaper in Assam that would otherwise publish European planters' tirades against the shikaris – backed these protests.[105] The editorial also speculated that the KGR was being expanded to allow the First World War veterans to hunt once the war ended. These criticisms were indicative of how the KGR complicated a rapidly depleting resource frontier. Nicholas Beatson-Bell, the new Chief Commissioner, Earle's successor, took the press seriously but did not reopen the question. He stressed through a resolution that the sanctuary was 'in the interest of animals and not a preserve intended to provide sport for the hunter.'[106] This resolution decisively foreclosed hunting as an objective to preserve the rhino, an early attempt in the history of wildlife conservation in India.

Despite repeated government orders, the Nepalis and Mishings refused to relocate. While the colonial view branded them as nomadic peoples, they lived in households and villages, much like the villagers in more settled parts of the valley, albeit for fewer years due to the volatilities of floodplains.[107] Years of petitioning and occasional stays probably gave them hope of a favourable outcome, but in 1920, the forest department evicted them by burning their livestock camps. It was the first time humans were evicted to protect nature in the province. Some Mishings went to the north bank, and others relocated a few miles to the east.[108] The Nepalis shifted their buffalos to the sandbars north of the newly included area. Eviction from the game reserve became a rallying point among the irate Nepalis to join Gandhi's nationalist movement under Upadhyay's leadership.[109] The removal from Kaziranga's pastures left indelible imprint on the Nepali and Mishing public memory.[110]

With the end of hunting prospects in the game reserve, the European planters silently withdrew from the rhino preservation concerns. Consequently, the

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103. Chabilal Upadhyay and others' petition to the Chief Secretary to the CC, 24 Mar. 1917, file no. 160R, 1918, Revenue (IIIF), ASA.
104. O.A. Byrne's 'Letter to Editor', *The Times of Assam*, 24 Aug. 1918, in file no. 223R, 1918, Revenue (IIIF), ASA.
105. 'A public grievance of the first magnitude', *The Times of Assam*, 31 Aug. 1918, in file no. 223R, 1918, Revenue (IIIF), ASA.
106. 'Resolution on the constitution of the Kaziranga Game Reserve', 29 Oct. 1918, file no. 223R, 1918, Revenue (IIIF), ASA.
107. Average family size of the Mishings was 4.63, and the Nepalis 2.93. See tab. 1.
108. Sishu Ram Pegu, *Mor Jivan Drishti: An Autobiography* (Guwahati: Angik Prakashan, 2004), p. 4.
109. Omeo Kumar Das, *Jivan-Smriti* (Guwahati: Publication Board, Assam, 1983), pp. 172–173.
110. For the Nepalis' memories, see Gita Upadhyay, *Janmabhumi Mero Swadesh* (Birthplace is my Home Country) (Guwahati: Anurag Prakashan, 2013); for Mishings' memories, see Pegu, *Mor Jivan Drishti*, pp. 4–5.

pressure for further expansion of the sanctuary ended too. Revenue officials, who primarily arbitrated land allocation, no longer had a serious business in the sanctuary. It left the forest department to mediate the usufruct rights of the graziers and peasants.

After the second expansion, the area of the sanctuary nearly doubled in size. The expansions shrunk the commons for a rapidly growing chain of villages. The new villages closer to the sanctuary were more prone to wildlife damage than the previous ones further south.[111] In 1924, irate villagers sent a mass petition to the Governor of Assam about wildlife depredation, increased penalisation for violating game laws and their indebtedness. They pleaded to move back the reserve's southern boundary by four miles.[112] The petition came after years of pleading with local bureaucracy. Imperial pressure to expand agriculture compelled the government to review game preservation and usufruct rights. The forest department agreed to keep a stretch of the sanctuary along its southern boundary clear of the jungle through livestock grazing. This stretch would supposedly deter wild animals from raiding the crop fields.[113] Accordingly, the forest department issued grazing permits to the villagers.[114] These concessions were crucial for the forest department to earn the peasants' goodwill to revive the rhino population. In hindsight, though the sanctuary was envisioned as off-limits to grazing and fishing, such accommodations kept these human activities alive, creating new contestations. Nevertheless, the rhino and the sanctuary ultimately cemented its place amidst rapid agrarian expansion as the following section shows.

THE DARK CLOUDS

During 1910–1930, nearly 4,400 square kilometres of woodlands and grasslands in Assam made way for cultivation.[115] Fifty kilometres downstream from the KGR, the Laokhowa Game Reserve faced the brunt of agricultural expansion.[116] Ironically, despite growing concerns over rhino protection, the government extended the ban on rhino hunting outside the game reserves and

111. SDC, Kamargaon to the SDO, Golaghat, 23 Dec. 1924, file no. X-28, 1925, Revenue, ASA.
112. K.C. Saikia and others' petition to the Governor of Assam, 12 Aug. 1924, file no. X-28, 1925, Revenue, ASA.
113. From SDO, Golaghat to the DC, Sibsagar, 17 Jan. 1925, no. 1521R, file no. X-28, 1925, Revenue, ASA.
114. From Deputy Conservator of Forests, Sibsagar to the DC, Sibsagar, 3 Mar. 1925, no. B–468, file no. X-28, 1925, Revenue, ASA.
115. Richards and Hagen, 'A century of rural expansion in Assam', 197.
116. The Bengali Muslim peasants demanded its opening for cultivation. From Divisional Forest Officer, Nowgong to Conservator of Forests, Assam, 3 Feb. 1927, file no. X-26, 1927, Revenue, ASA.

reserved forests only in 1914.[117] Meanwhile, European hunters shot the rhinos that stepped outside the KGR, once, for instance claiming that they found a record size horn.[118] Hunting was so embedded within the logic of imperial rule that the preservation era could not undo it easily.[119] Such a paradox of simultaneous protection and killing is striking for a vanishing species.

Even after two decades of the game reserves' creation, preservation was not an entrenched idea in official circles.[120] Rather, it was an object of some revenue officials' continued cynicism. A senior official asked: 'whether the continued reservation of such a large game sanctuary can be held justifiable.'[121] For a colonial revenue official, it was onerous to think beyond defending the sources of revenue. The forest department – preoccupied with timber extraction – began to play an active role in wildlife preservation only from the late 1920s.[122]

Amidst these dark clouds, in 1928, A.J.W. Milroy (1883–1936) became the Conservator of Forests, the top official in the forest department.[123] Widely credited with humanising the elephant catching operations, he was Assam's most knowledgeable and enthusiastic forest officer on wildlife.[124] For the following seven years until his death, Milroy successfully embedded the wildlife issues into the anti-colonial political climate and introduced several changes. To Milroy and other colonial officials, the impending political changes – which would mean greater political power for the Indians – forebode a major threat to wildlife.[125] Milroy's approach to preservation responded to rapid agrarian expansion in the province and the fear that future politics would favour it.

From 1928–29, there were reports of widespread rhino killings in the North Kamrup Sanctuary, in the foothills of Bhutan, 'by bands of Cacharis armed with unlicensed guns'.[126] In 1930, the Civil Disobedience Movement swept India. In a turbulent political climate, reports of armed groups were enough to alert the Governor of Assam.[127] The forest department launched a vigorous 'anti-poaching campaign' in North Kamrup and the Goalpara forests. In 1931,

117. Notification no. 2140R, 18 May 1914, Revenue Department, Forest–A, Apr. 1921, nos. 14–63, ASP, ASA.
118. 'A Record Rhino', *The Englishman*, 4 May 1909.
119. MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature*; Mandala, *Shooting a Tiger*.
120. In contrast, in the 1920s, South Africa geared towards converting the Sabi Game Reserve to the Kruger National Park. Carruthers, *The Kruger National Park*, pp. 60–64.
121. From the Officiating DC, Sibsagar to the Commissioner, AVD, 6 Mar. 1925, no. 3768R, file no. X-28, 1925, Revenue, ASA.
122. The forest department's annual report only devoted a couple of paragraphs to discuss wildlife.
123. Milroy joined the forest department of Assam in 1909 and worked there until his death in 1936.
124. Stracey, *Elephant Gold*, pp. 17, 30–33.
125. A.J.W. Milroy, 'Game preservation in Assam', *Journal of the Society for the Preservation of the Fauna of the Empire* **16** (1932): 28–40.
126. F.H. Cavendish, *PRFA 1928–29* (Shillong: AGP, 1929), p. 19; A.J.W. Milroy, *PRFA 1929–30* (Shillong: AGP, 1930), p. 4.
127. Governor in Council's resolution, in A.J.W. Milroy, *PRFA 1930–31* (Shillong: AGP, 1931).

a unit of Assam Rifles camped in North Kamrup for six weeks.[128] Milroy's subtle branding of the rhino killing as a spin-off of the political movement – even though the killings had been there for a couple of years – brought illegal hunting to a halt in North Kamrup.

The emphasis on rhino protection proved favourable to changing the outdated game laws. The penalty for killing a rhino inside the reserved forest was a maximum of Rs. 50, while a horn fetched around Rs. 1,200 in 1931.[129] Milroy revised the punishment to imprisonment up to six months or a fine of up to Rs. 1,000, or both.[130] A rhino could be shot only with the special permission of the government. However, the law was still silent on what would happen to the rhinos' horn, hide and meat and the elephants' ivory once killed.[131] Mirroring progress in the neighbouring Bengal, Milroy pushed for the government's ownership of the carcasses, hoping it would deter killing.[132] In 1933, the Assam Legislative Council criminalised the possession of rhino horns.[133] Dead or alive, the rhino belonged to the government now.

The rhino killing in the North Kamrup Sanctuary prompted these government initiatives. However, restrictions in North Kamrup shifted rhino killings to the Kaziranga Game Sanctuary.[134] During 1931–1933, Brahmaputra Valley's peasants reeled under agrarian distress and soaring unpaid land revenue.[135] The attractive price of a rhino horn was probably a strong lure for some peasants to earn the much-needed cash to repay their debts and taxes. However, M.C. Miri, an Indian forest officer, brought rhino killings in the Kaziranga Game Sanctuary to a halt through intense patrolling.[136] Illegal rhino killings, counteractions and regulatory changes brought game preservation within the grip of the forest department who were otherwise preoccupied with timber extraction.

Reports of rhino killing did not bode well for the neighbouring peasants. In the Kaziranga Game Sanctuary, Milroy viewed grazing and fishing rights as 'cover to kill rhinos'.[137] He cancelled the grazing concessions given to the villagers along the sanctuary's southern boundary, although the ban did not

128. Milroy, *PRFA 1930–31*, pp. 4–5. For a contemporary account of breach of game laws and government response in Assam, see Gitashree Singh, Hunting to Conservation: A study of British policies towards wildlife in Assam 1826–1947. (PhD Thesis, Assam University, Silchar, 2014), 161–164.

129. Conservator of forests' (Western Circle) notes on p. 1, Revenue (Forest), B–Proceedings, Jun. 1931, nos. 18–19, ASA.

130. J.S. Owden, *PRFA 1931–32* (Shillong: AGP, 1932), p. 5.

131. See notes on pp. 1–2 in file no. 632, 1930, Revenue (Forest), ASA.

132. From conservator of forests (Eastern Circle) to the Chief Secretary, 4 Aug. 1930, no. A/190, Revenue (Forest), B–Proceedings, Jun. 1931, nos. 25–30, ASA.

133. *Assam Legislative Council Debate (ALCD)*, 22 Mar. 1933, pp. 785–794.

134. A.J.W. Milroy, *Note on Game Preservation in Assam* (Government of Assam, 1934), p. 4.

135. The unpaid revenue in the *ryotwary* districts rose from Rs. 2 lakh in 1928 to Rs. 7 lakh in 1930 and Rs. 37 lakh in 1933. Guha, *Planter Raj to Swaraj*, p. 143. (1 lakh = Rs. 100,000)

136. Milroy, *PRFA 1934–35*, p. 19.

137. Milroy, *Note on game preservation in Assam*, p. 9.

last long.[138] In the northern riparian portion of the sanctuary, the ever-changing channels of the Brahmaputra brought back several sandbars – used by the Nepali graziers evicted in 1920 – next to the sanctuary. Milroy permitted these Nepali graziers access to the northern fringes.[139] This exception was made to win the graziers' support to keep the illegal hunters away from the porous northern periphery. In a poorly patrolled sanctuary, these concessions proved critical in winning peasants' and graziers' support to recover the rhino population.[140] In 1939, Miri estimated that there were 100 greater one-horned rhinos in the Kaziranga Game Sanctuary, which was an early sign of their revival.[141] However, two other unprotected varieties of rhinoceroses, found in the hilly parts of Northeast India, vanished: the Sumatran rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) and Javan rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*).[142]

In the Kaziranga Game Sanctuary, the rhinos defied the belief that they could not survive next to human beings. Bull rhinos often drove out the older bulls to the sanctuary's edges. One such old bull, 'Burha Gunda', lived on the sanctuary's edge next to a livestock pasture for at least fourteen years (circa 1939–1953).[143] Despite colonial speculations that Indian self-rule would doom the sanctuaries, the late 1930s saw a widening social base among the Assamese for wildlife conservation.[144] In 1938, the government opened the sanctuary for visitors for the first time. However, the Second World War soon interrupted these plans. The government neglected the sanctuaries during the war. However, when it ended, forest officials noted a satisfactory increase in wild animal population in them.[145] In the post-independence years, Assam's political leaders zealously worked to promote the rhino and the Kaziranga Game Sanctuary towards worldwide fame.

CONCLUSION

From 1920 onward, the Kaziranga Game Sanctuary covered 430 square kilometres through two successive expansions and remained that size until the end of the twentieth century. Colonial prejudice against graziers and shifting cultivators were central to these expansions. Though the rhino was relatively

138. Milroy, *PRFA 1934–35*, p. 20.
139. Ibid.
140. During the colonial period no more than seven men patrolled the sanctuary, which eventually became 430 sq. km. Saikia, *Kazirangar Buniyad*, p. 21.
141. M.C. Miri, 'Note on the rhinoceros captured during last October for the American zoo', *Indian Forester* **65** (4) (1939): 207–210.
142. Patrick Donald Stracey, 'The vanishing rhinoceros and Assam's wild life sanctuaries', *Indian Forester* **75** (1949): 470–73.
143. E.P. Gee, 'The most famous rhino', *Natural History*, New York, (1954): 366–369.
144. C. Mackarness, *PRFA 1940–41* (Shillong: AGP, 1941) p. 26.
145. H.P. Smith, *PRFA 1944–45* (Shillong: AGP, 1947), p. 21.

late to receive protection, it was one of the earliest protected animals whose justification for preservation eventually escaped the goal of hunting or economic extraction. The fact that rhino hunting did not enjoy a venerable place in peasant society, and the further separation of rhino preservation from elite hunting, played a pivotal role in the revival of the rhinos.

The KGR defied the colonial zeal of creating distinct zones of 'nature' and 'culture'. The fact that less than one per cent of the Brahmaputra Valley that was set aside for rhino preservation could threaten the agrarian order appears to be baffling prima facie.[146] However, when we posit the creation and consolidation of the KGR in the agrarian transformation of the valley, it becomes evident that the resource contestations around the KGR were indices of a much wider spatial and temporal matrix. Discussions on the game reserve expansion opened up multiple and contested visions – each having considerable purchase within the colonial administration – of how the agrarian frontier should be utilised.

Decisive changes in rhino protection came in the 1930s when the forest department began to play a more active role in wildlife preservation. It could considerably monopolise the rhino through laws and regulations, but could not sanitise the Kaziranga Game Sanctuary from the graziers and peasants. The floodplains routinely challenged the colonial order. The local complexities – changing river courses, peasant discontent and bureaucratic predilections – compelled the colonial government to accommodate the graziers and peasants in the sanctuary's periphery. These concessions proved vital in reviving the extinct rhino in a poorly guarded sanctuary. However, on the face of the 'universal' wisdom that nature can be protected only when separated from humans,[147] the forest department saw these concessions as fleeting anomalies which needed to be removed to recover nature.

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146. Frictions between the forest department and peasants were more widespread when the forestry operations interacted with a wider cross-section of population and area. In 1912, reserved forests occupied 7,800 sq. km of the 62,165 sq. km Brahmaputra Valley (one eighth of the total area). Saikia, *Forests and Ecological History of Assam*, p. 76. In contrast, the three game reserves (in Kaziranga, Laokhowa and North Kamrup) covered only 550 sq. km, A.V. Monroe, *PRFA 1911–12* (Shillong: ASPO, 1912).

147. Ross, 'Tropical nature as global *Patrimoine*', 233.