

Reinventing Nature in Kaziranga National Park: A History of Rhinoceros Conservation in Assam, 1948–1974

Biswajit Sarmah

Postdoctoral Fellow, Moturi Satyanarayana Centre for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences, Krea University, Andhra Pradesh, India

E-mail: biswajitsarmah2000@gmail.com

Abstract

A restrictive approach in managing Protected Areas (PA) is often attributed to ‘Western’ ideas of nature. This view claims that national elites embraced Western ideas of nature—which supposedly has no place for humans—to produce pristine wilderness in PAs by banning grazing, fishing, and foraging inside them. This article foregrounds cultural politics as an alternate driver of creating wilderness in the global south. The article explores the history of conservation of the Greater One-horned Rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) in Kaziranga Wild Life Sanctuary (KWLS), the previous avatar of Kaziranga National Park in Assam, India. It shows that Assamese cultural politics pertaining to the rhino not only augmented the Assam Forest Department’s (FD) enduring efforts to sanitise KWLS from human activities but also paved the way for the militarised protection of the rhino, which in turn, reinforced wilderness. By the late 1960s, when a larger debate about wildlife conservation surfaced in India, developments in KWLS subtly informed exclusionary conservation in other national parks and tiger reserves.

Keywords: wildlife conservation, Kaziranga National Park, wilderness, rhinoceros, cultural politics

Abstract in Assamese: <https://rb.gy/givwb>

INTRODUCTION

The Kaziranga National Park (KNP) is home to the ‘big five’—the Greater One-horned rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*), Water buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*), Barasingha OR Swamp deer (*Rucervus duvaucelii*), tiger (*Panthera tigris tigris*), and the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*)—a rare combination in any Protected Area (PA). However, the Greater One-horned rhino (hereafter rhino) is the symbol and substance of the 884 sq. km park (Figure 1).¹ Two-thirds of the world’s 4,000 rhinos are found in KNP. It was first established as a ‘Game Reserve’ in 1908 under the Assam Forest Department (FD) to preserve the extinct rhino. In 1950, the Government of Assam (GoA)

renamed it as the Kaziranga Wild Life Sanctuary (KWLS). Its status was changed to a national park in 1974. This article covers the intervening period—of transition from a wildlife sanctuary to a national park—through a historical enquiry based on various archival and literary sources.

Between 1948 and 1974, Kaziranga transformed from a little-known game sanctuary to a leading national park in India and became home to the largest population of the rhino (Spillett 1966). Towards the end of this period, while tigers were vanishing and experts were still unsure if the lion population had revived in the Gir Forests in Gujarat, the rhino population made a clear comeback (Expert Committee (EC 1970)). Revival of the rhino ahead of the then national animal lion and the more widespread tiger can be explained through a regionally grounded and empirically rich historical analysis.² The rhino also emerged as a global conservation icon, featuring prominently in international conferences and foreign zoos. In 1970, the Expert Committee, appointed to assess the state of India’s wildlife, expressed dismay over general state of wildlife in India, but regarded KWLS as an exemplary PA (EC 1970: 35–36). This transition of KWLS towards an ideal PA distanced it from its agrarian connections—fishing, grazing,

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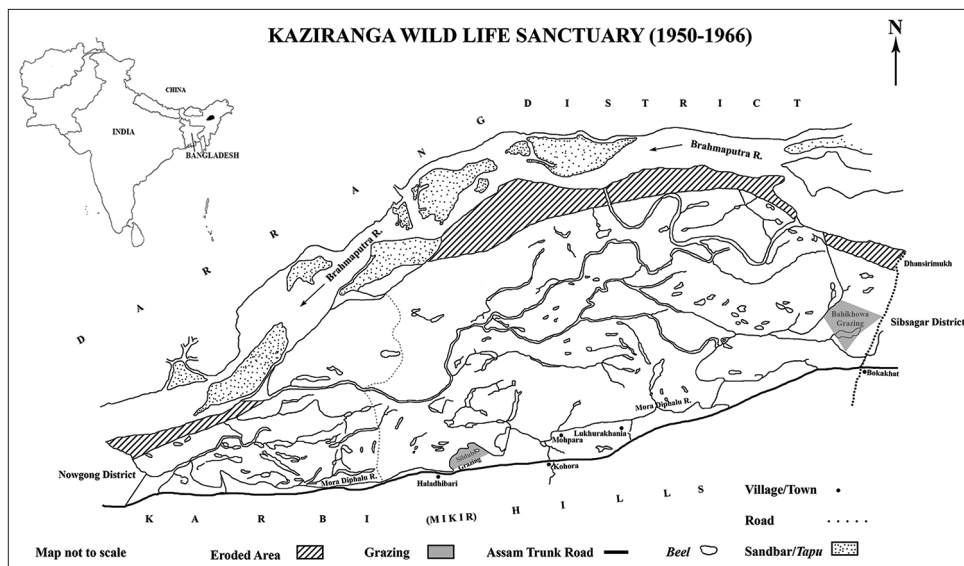


Figure 1
A map of KWLS (for representation only). Traced and illustrated by Ajay Salunkhe from Spillett (1966)

and forest produce collection—marking a shift towards militarised protection.³

By the late twentieth century, despite criticisms, creating wilderness in national parks by banning rural livelihoods (grazing, hunting, and fishing) became the dominant global approach to wildlife conservation (Saberwal et al. 2000; Adams and Hutton 2007; Rangarajan et al. 2017). Scholars argue that such an exclusionary approach is influenced by a ‘Western’ cultural view of nature, which broadly holds that nature exists only where there are no humans. According to this view, international conservation organisations and wildlife biologists, mostly based in North America and Europe influenced national political elites and conservationists in the global south to create exclusionary national parks (Guha 1997; Neumann 1998; Brockington 2002; Jalais 2011). Another body of work calls for attention towards the translation, adaptation, and reinterpretation of such travelling concepts like national park (and as a corollary, exclusion) in the global south (Lewis 2004; Gissibl et al. 2012). Even this scholarship firmly puts the ‘West’ as the ‘exporter’ of exclusionary principles and the global south as the ‘importer’. It does not recognise that regional or sub-national politics in the global south could result in exclusionary conservation with little or no global influence.

To be sure, in India, the exclusionary spirit in conservation as a ‘Western’ import followed from two crucial developments in the 1970s: the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (WLPA) and Project Tiger (1973), both led by the Government of India (GoI). Tiger reserves under Project Tiger were more restrictive than national parks.⁴ The impetus for these developments came from disquiet among Indian conservationists about declining wildlife; the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) General Assembly held in November 1969 in New Delhi; donations collected by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF); and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s environmental commitment (Sankhala 1977: 196–210; Rangarajan 2015:

151–189; Ranjitsinh 2017: 111–157). Thus, Project Tiger and WLPA neatly fitted the trend of ‘Western’ conservationists influencing national elites to open strict nature reserves in India. However, this understanding obscures the fact that exclusionary principles in Indian parks and tiger reserves also emerged from the developments during 1950–1970. During this period, sanctuaries like KWLS marched towards ‘total protection’.

This article foregrounds the role of sub-national cultural politics around the rhino in the creation of wilderness in KWLS. Following Amita Baviskar, “cultural politics suggests that natural resources have value within a larger economy of signification which crucially shapes their modes of appropriation” (Baviskar 2003: 5052). From the mid-twentieth century, Assamese-speaking people⁵ began to see the rhino as their cultural pride and a global envoy. Paradoxically, it never featured in their folklore and literature hitherto (Saikia 2009: 125; Barbora 2017: 9). The rhino and its habitat KWLS provided the Assamese-speaking people with what Baviskar called “the resources for collective representation that exceed the concern with immediate material use” (Baviskar 2003: 5052). Baviskar’s framework is helpful to go beyond the economic determinism of political ecology, which considers categories like the FD, graziers, and fishers as pre-given and often contentious, driven by their material interests. Instead, Baviskar’s formulation views them as emergent categories capable of forging alliances by overcoming differences. I use Baviskar’s framework to show how rhino’s cultural significance led to alliances between conflicting parties, such as the FD and graziers. I further her argument by showing that while cultural politics disdains the immediate materiality of a resource, its cultural, economic, and political worth is constantly negotiated. Extricating materiality from a natural resource was a gradual process mediated by changes in ecology, economy, and politics. The following discussion makes this argument more evident.

For most people in India and abroad who knew KWLS, it meant the rhino. However, the surrounding population ascribed a range of other material and cultural meanings to the sanctuary. For instance, the *beels* (wetland) of KWLS were famous for fish, a delicacy and an essential source of protein in northeastern India.⁶ Commercial fishers pressured the post-independent government to lease the *beels* as the colonial government did. Graziers had negotiated with the colonial government to graze their buffalos along the southern and northern edges of the sanctuary (Sarmah 2023). After Independence, these material connections with the sanctuary began to be tailored to the rising cultural value of the rhino.

The rhino's growing cultural value disdained its immediate materiality (horn or flesh). However, the rhino was also a promise of economic development of Assam through tourism and export of rhinos to foreign zoos. In this context, the legitimacy of grazing and fishing had to exceed their materiality, and required supporting the protection of the cultural icon rhino. For example, while the FD ruled out commercial fishing in KWLS, it allowed local educational institutions to fish to support themselves. Fishing meant socio-economic progress of the nearby villages, which would supposedly garner more support for rhino conservation. Similarly, by allowing graziers to keep their livestock inside the sanctuary, the FD made allies against illegal rhino killers. Thus, in the 1950s, the nascent cultural politics of the rhino accommodated rural livelihoods like grazing and fishing. As the cultural politics of the rhino matured, it shunned these seemingly 'narrow' material issues, but encapsulated the economic questions of wider significance such as tourism.⁷

When and how did the alliance between rhino conservation and graziers or peasants become untenable in KWLS? The rhino came under pressure of large-scale illegal hunting beginning circa 1960. Rhino killing not only troubled the Assamese middle-class that considered the rhino as its pride, but also threatened the promise of Assam's economic development through rhino tourism. Moreover, these killings cast doubt over the loyalty of the heterogeneous groups of peasants and graziers to protect the rhino. Political elites viewed fishing and grazing concessions as petty material gains against which a cultural symbol and wider development of the province was being sacrificed. It further strengthened the view that the rhino can be protected only when the FD was its sole guardian.

Existing scholarship on KNP discusses the rhino's natural history (Gee 1964; Divyabhanusinh et al. 2018); resource conflict around the park (Shrivastava and Heinen 2007; Crémin 2011); and law implementation and militarisation in the recent times (Simlai 2015; Borbora 2017; Smadja 2018). The historian Arupjyoti Saikia took a *longue durée* view of rhino conservation in Assam in his two essays. Saikia (2009) found the role of bureaucracy overvalued in the success of rhino conservation. Instead, he attributed the success to the social and political history of Assam marked by increasing appreciation for wildlife during the twentieth century. In another essay, Saikia (2021) demonstrated how the cultural politics of the

rhino has increasingly decontextualised KNP from its fluvial floodplain context that served as agrarian frontier. I am in broad agreement with Saikia's historical analysis of cultural politics of the rhino. However, he overemphasised resource conflict and overlooked the fact that forest department accommodated rural rights for several decades before the era of strict protection. This article resonates with Jacob Dlamini's (2020) argument in his recent book. Dlamini shifts the gaze from 'denial' of Africans' entry into Kruger National Park to their very 'presence' there giving meanings to their lives. In similar vein, this article locates the park in its agro-ecological milieu to foreground how rhino conservation was compelled to accommodate peasants and graziers for decades. Further, it analyses when and how cultural politics consolidated the exclusion of rural livelihoods by supporting securitised protection of the rhino. Today, the rhino appears analogous to the 'cosmopolitan' tiger, in Annu Jalais' words. The cosmopolitan animal is laden with 'universal' ideas of wildlife protection, obscuring a host of other local complexities—ecological changes, landlessness, and resource conflict—around its habitat (Jalais 2011). While Jalais's observations on the tiger are from post-1970s, the rise of the rhino belonged to the 1950s and 1960s. During the 1950s and 1960s, while the universal ideas of nature conservation were slow to penetrate, sub-national cultural politics played a decisive role in untying the rhino and KWLS from grazing and fishing.

The article is divided into two sections. The first section outlines the vital actors, ideas, and debates, which influenced wildlife conservation in KWLS. The key actors were the political elites, forest officials, conservationists, neighbouring peasants and graziers,⁸ and the Assamese middle-class. After Independence, the GoA invested heavily in popularising the rhino giving it a unique place in the Assamese imagination. Indian conservationists advocated creating wilderness as an approach to conservation. The FD was in tune with these ideas, but it had to comply with the priorities of the popularly elected government to deal with the pre-existing rights in KWLS. The political elites of Assam were reluctant to place conservation above agrarian issues. The FD allied with peasants and graziers by allowing them in the sanctuary's edges in return of the latter's loyalty to protect the rhino. However, the FD persistently worked to create a pristine wilderness by restricting rural livelihoods.

The second section illustrates that the Assamese cultural politics around the rhino was crucial in disengaging KWLS from its agrarian connections to reinvent nature in KNP from the late 1960s. Cultural politics supported militarised protection of the rhino and lent discretion to the FD to use violence, which was crucial in reinforcing restrictions on the graziers, fishers, and foragers. Such an avatar of KWLS, which provided 'total protection' to wildlife, subtly informed India's future tiger reserves and national parks.

NATIONALISING NATURE

The rhino received immense attention after India's Independence. In 1948, the GoA made the rhino Assam's state

emblem (Saikia 2009: 125). It invited Sálím Ali (1896–1987), an ornithologist in the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), to report on Assam’s wildlife sanctuaries. Soon after Ali’s visit, the BNHS received an invitation to the International Technical Conference on the Protection of Nature held in the United States (US) in August 1949. For a heavily represented Indian delegation, the rhino was the only specifically ‘Indian’ case on which a resolution was passed to enhance its protection (International Union for the Protection of Nature (IUPN) 1950: 139, 470–472). Nevertheless, Ali’s visit helped KWLS and the rhino register an international presence even before they came to the national limelight.

Soon, the GoA launched an ambitious mission to protect the rhino and make KWLS a tourist attraction. It enacted the Rhinoceros Preservation Act, 1954, which punished unauthorised killing, injuring or capturing the rhino. Every case of rhino death was thoroughly investigated and reported to the government.⁹ The GoA built a modern tourist lodge near KWLS and placed elephants for the safari.¹⁰ The government also widely advertised the rhino and KWLS, primarily to attract foreign tourists. E.P. Gee (1904–1968), an Assam planter-turned-naturalist of British origin, was deeply attached to KWLS since its opening to visitors in 1938. Much of the rhino’s natural history in the 1950s came from his writings (Gee 1949, 1952, 1954, 1964). During 1950–1954, there were few tourists in KWLS, mostly foreigners (Gee 1956: 4). Among the Indians were the politicians, bureaucrats, and army officials. From the year 1955, Indian tourists began to swell considerably to outnumber the foreign tourists (Gee 1956: 4). Very soon, KWLS, or ‘Kaziranga’, as it is referred to in Assam, became an attractive destination for the educated middle-class: government servants, journalists, teachers, and students.¹¹ The Assamese-speaking people formed the bulk of the new rush to the sanctuary. As we will see, this ever-expanding cluster played a decisive role in shaping KWLS.

Emerging fame of the rhino was an answer to some of the enduring concerns of the Assamese-speaking people. Whether Assam was amply known to the rest of India and the world was a question that had long troubled them. From the early twentieth century, the Assamese intelligentsia focused immensely in showcasing their rich cultural and political

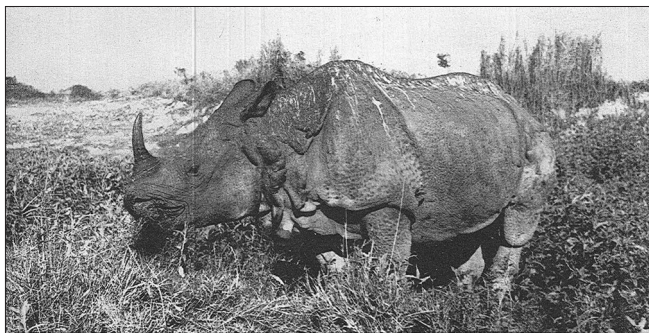


Figure 2

‘Burha Gunda’ photographed by E.P. Gee near KWLS. Source: Gee (1954), Rhino Resource Centre. Efforts have been made to trace the copyright holder but without success

heritage by discovering ancient Assamese texts; and antiquity and heritage (Saikia 2023: chapter 6). Between 1947 and 1961, the FD exported 25 rhinos to zoos worldwide, earning more than INR 250,000.¹² For the Assamese elites, rhino was a living heritage whose value far exceeded the economic gains. Hem Barua (1915–1977), a renowned Assamese litterateur and parliamentarian, toured the US in the early 1950s.¹³ Barua was dismayed at the near-absence of Indian artefacts in the American art galleries. However, he was proud to see two Assam rhinos in the Washington DC zoo.¹⁴ The rhinos were the emissaries of a modern nation’s ‘little-known’ corner to the Western world.

The newfound place of the rhino in the Assamese imagination did not extend to a claim of shared history or kinship observed elsewhere. For instance, the forest-dwellers of the Sundarban delta believe they have a shared history with the tiger (Jalais 2011) and the Mishmis of Arunachal Pradesh view the tiger as their brother (Aiyadurai 2021). Until the mid-twentieth century, the local peasants around KWLS saw the rhino with certain indifference but without hostility. Rhino’s unusually small home range (2–6 sq. km) meant that it seldom went too far to raid crops. Thus, unlike the crop-raiding elephants and Wild boars (*Sus scrofa*), the rhino was a ‘peaceful’ beast.¹⁵ The rhino horn had no known use in Assam and killing the rhino began to be associated with the material greed for the horn. The rhino killers enjoyed a lowly social position, unlike the venerated carnivore hunters who protected humans and cattle.¹⁶ Such attitude of the local peasants could have left a few rhinos alive in the locality that was going to be the future KWLS.¹⁷ It is not to say that peasants did not kill the rhino. Even after protection began, low-scale hunting existed that escalated during times of crisis. The following example illustrates social restraint against rhino killing.

‘Burha Gunda’, meaning an old bull in Assamese, grazed on the sanctuary’s edge alongside domestic cattle for at least 14 years (1939–1953) (Figure 2). Gee, who photographed it on foot, wrote that it was “on near-friendly terms with hundreds of people” (Gee 1954: 366). When Burha Gunda died in 1953, ‘Kan Kata’, meaning torn ear, replaced him for several years. Gee noticed several such old bulls pushed by younger males to sometimes totally unpatrolled edges of KWLS. The survival of the solitary bulls suggests three things. First, the rhino could survive in semi-modified landscapes like floodplains as opposed to the view that only wilderness can protect them. Secondly, although the sanctuary meant certain irritation due to restrictions and wildlife depredations, most peasants preferred the rhino alive than dead. Thirdly, the FD could combine such social restraint with rhino’s promise of global attention and economic development of the locality to effectively enlist local support for its protection without extensive patrolling.¹⁸ For instance, between 1951–1957, R.C. Das (?–1962), a school-teacher-turned-sanctuary-official, precisely did this to keep rhino killing under check.¹⁹

Sporadic reports of rhino killing did not make a buzz in the 1950s. However, multiple layers of contestation were building up at the policy level and in the everyday life around the sanctuary. First, we will discuss the emerging ideals of wildlife

conservation in independent India. Sálím Ali's report on KWLS was an early articulation from conservationists. Ali's report was a scathing attack on the domestic livestock grazing in the sanctuary. He urged the GoA to "stop this grazing completely and *without delay*" (IUPN 1950: 470–472).²⁰ However, a wildlife conservation framework in India had to wait until the GoI established the Indian Board of Wild Life (IBWL) in 1952. Wildlife conservation proponents such as the erstwhile princely state rulers, natural historians, and forest officials were its key members. E.P. Gee was the Secretary. These conservationists feared that unless the GoI governed the wildlife, the latter would be hostage to states' electoral politics (GoI 1952). However, as forest and wildlife were listed under the 'State List' of the Indian Constitution, the GoI or IBWL could only *advise* the states and their guidelines were not binding. In the 1950s, when national development and industrialisation were the slogans, any curb on resource exploitation was going to be a non-starter. On the other hand, leaving nature untouched was ruled out because, unless burnt or removed, the dead vegetation and un-removed logs obstructed visitors from watching wildlife. Thus, the IBWL advised the states 'prudent' and regulated use of natural resources but remained persistent in getting the GoI more say in wildlife matters.

The IBWL advised the GoI to add a subject 'national park' in the 'concurrent list' of the Indian Constitution.²¹ By definition, national park denoted an area set aside "to conserve the scenery and natural and historical objects of national significance" (GoI 1952: 38). The state governments and the GoI both dealt with the subjects under the concurrent list. However, in case of divergence, the GoI's view would prevail. The issue got bundled with the GoI trying to transfer 'Forests' to the concurrent list. The GoI argued that it cannot divest itself from managing the forests given the national needs for the railway, communication, and defence. The governments of Assam, Madras, Travancore-Cochin, West Bengal, Mysore, Madhya Pradesh, Hyderabad, and Bombay, all with rich forest and wildlife, vehemently opposed the GoI's proposal.²² These states feared losing their freedom to manage their natural resources.

The IBWL was still able to influence the conversion of a 'wildlife sanctuary' to 'national park'. The crucial difference between the two was that the former was created through a notification of the state government and the latter, through an Act of the state legislature. While a notification could be withdrawn anytime, an Act gave stability to a national park. Otherwise, national parks, envisioned as 'unimpaired' zones, were just the 'better' ones like Kaziranga and Gir among the wildlife sanctuaries. The IBWL wanted a common pattern of legislation to be followed to ensure the 'national character' of the national parks.²³ By 1961, states needed the IBWL's approval to convert wildlife sanctuaries to national parks (Gee 1962: 460–463).

For the IBWL, upgrading a sanctuary to national park essentially hinged on the creation of wilderness. In Gee's words, "the very presence of domestic animals at the centre or show-place of a sanctuary, where a visitor expects to see wild

life, is veritable eyesore" (Gee 1955: 727–728). According to this view, nature should cater only to its aesthetic consumption, and it could exist only where there is no human presence. In 1955, R.S. Dharmakumarsinhji (1917–1986), the vice-chairman of IBWL and a prince of the erstwhile Bhavnagar princely state, visited KWLS. He saw KWLS "on its way to become" India's foremost national park if it could control livestock grazing.²⁴ Gee's and Dharmakumarsinhji's views were typical of the planters and Maharajas who disallowed grazing and livelihood usages in their estates/preserves (Hughes 2013: 231; Ranjitsinh 2017; Bhattacharya 2018: 405–408). As the 1950s entered the 1960s, the conservation paradigm in India increasingly shifted from the regulated use of resources to the creation of wilderness (Botteron 2000: 292–334).

How did the GoA respond to Ali's and IBWL's recommendations? The FD, already attuned to closed forest reserves, was keen on continuing restrictions on grazing and fishing in KWLS. However, in independent India, it had to comply with the priorities of the popularly elected government. P.D. Stracey (1906–1977), a keen wildlife enthusiast, headed the FD from 15 August 1947 until February 1955.²⁵ Based on Ali's suggestions, Stracey carefully reviewed grazing and fishing rights in the sanctuary. He looked at grazing expediently. However, he disapproved of fishing in KWLS, which became a bone of contention with his departmental minister.²⁶ As for the IBWL's advisories, the GoA declined every suggestion if it challenged Assam's federal freedom and agrarian priorities. For instance, the GoA declined IBWL's suggestion to have a GoI representative in the proposed national park management authority, fearing that "this will tie the hands of the state legislature".²⁷ The GoA also refused to confiscate the crop protection guns and remove the graziers from the sanctuaries.²⁸ The Assamese middle-class eagerly anticipated national park status to KWLS, which would mean national and international recognition for the rhino. However, the GoA did not actively pursue it until 1968 probably fearing the GoI's interference.

The IBWL conservationists were frustrated at the general ignorance and apathy towards wildlife among state forest officials in India (Editorial 1966). Though keen on popularising and protecting the rhino, the GoA hardly showed any interest in an ecological study of the rhino-inhabited areas. The IBWL members pushed for creating hard evidence through animal census to draw political attention to the declining wildlife in India. In 1965, Gee recruited J. Juan Spillett, an American graduate student, to survey several sanctuaries in Assam, West Bengal, and Nepal through a WWF-funded project (Spillett 1966: 492–493 and 557–572; Lewis 2004: 63–66). Spillett's census showed that the rhino population in KWLS rose to nearly 400, a landmark in the conservation history in India. Echoing Ali and Gee, Spillett wrote, "... visitors to Kaziranga are not willing to pay ... for the opportunity of seeing domestic livestock or grass cutters inside the sanctuary" (Spillett 1966: 521). He recommended a complete ban on livestock inside KWLS. In the next few years, KWLS stood closer to human-free wilderness, long espoused by conservationists. However,

as the following section shows, cultural politics around the rhino paved for the wilderness in KWLS.

WILDERNESS IN AN AGRARIAN WORLD

In the early twentieth century, KWLS and its adjoining areas stood at the horizon of the agrarian expansion in the Brahmaputra Valley (Sarmah 2023). By the 1940s, the land became scarce even in these not-so-attractive low-lying areas. After the 1950 earthquake, the Brahmaputra River began to carry more sediment, its bed rose, and flood and erosion became fierce, leading to massive landlessness in the state (Saikia 2019: 378–390). Rhino conservation in KWLS competed with several such complex agro-ecological issues.

Assam's political leadership was careful that its efforts to conserve the rhino should not aggravate agrarian concerns. This position is most evident in its ambivalence towards the corridors and buffers around KWLS. In May 1949, the FD proposed to acquire 1,670 acres near the Haladhbari village to provide safe passage for the animals to the Karbi Hills during floods.²⁹ It took the FD 17 years to finally acquire an area of 151 acres, less than one-tenth of what was initially proposed.³⁰ We will turn to the buffers in the sanctuary's east to better understand the government's predicaments.

The Bahikhowa Professional Grazing Reserve (PGR), spread over 2,100 acres was a buffer between the sanctuary and the crop fields in its east (Figure 1). This low-lying thicket was one of the largest pastures in the district, primarily used by the Nepali and Assamese graziers during the dry months.³¹ From the late 1940s, the PGR became a contested site between landless peasants, graziers, and the sanctuary. The flood-affected Assamese and Mishing peasants demanded cultivable land in the PGR with support from Rajendra Nath Baruah, a Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA).³² Despite graziers' opposition, the government opened 660 acres of the PGR to resettle the landless cultivators.³³ As the river further eroded the riparian Mishing tribal villages, they continued to settle in the pasture (Pegu 2009), until it was entirely turned into homesteads and fields by the early 1960s. Erosion of buffers, which would bring more humans to KWLS, was among the FD's worst fears. However, it was to wish away the most inevitable. From the 1940s, the GoA legalised landless peasants' encroachment of the pastures to address landlessness.³⁴

Floods and its mitigating measures like embankments divided the sanctuary and peasants. The low-lying villages in KWLS's eastern vicinity were flood-prone. Therefore, this locality saw a slew of embankments. In reality, embankments remained an unfinished project for peasants until the 1970s. Forest officials opposed an embankment passing through the sanctuary's north. They argued that flood was essential to regenerate the sanctuary's *beels* and grassland (Spillett 1966: 520). Through the sanctuary's un-embanked stretch, floodwater inundated the villages.³⁵ Flood and water-logging destroyed crop and drove people to acute poverty. From the 1940s to 2000, the eastern neighbourhood of KWLS lost an estimated

60 sq. km to erosion (Pegu 2009: 47). Such a scale of ecological dispossession is noteworthy to comprehend the ways in which peasants looked at rhino conservation.

In 1961, the Assamese press reported widespread rhino killing by digging pits in KWLS.³⁶ Rhino killing went unabated throughout the decade.³⁷ The FD underplayed these reports (Spillett 1966: 497). Whatever the truth was, the disagreement underscored the rhino's symbolic eminence in Assam's cultural politics. It is tempting to fault the weak patrolling and international demand for rhino horn³⁸ to explain this sudden rise in rhino killing. However, what brought an increasing number of men to kill rhinos to KWLS? Besides the floods and erosion that destroyed neighbouring areas to KWLS throughout the 1950s, a cattle epidemic devastated Assam in 1957–1958.³⁹ The year 1959–1960 was a drought year that destroyed an estimated 70% of paddy crop in Assam.⁴⁰ As a result, a great food shortage was already building up from 1959.⁴¹ As the 1960s progressed, the general scarcity of land, dearer agricultural inputs,⁴² and soaring prices of essentials⁴³ increased peasants' dependence on livelihoods outside cultivation. As a result, begging, theft, illegal fishing and hunting, and killing rhinos became commonplace. Rice, the staple to life, was the leitmotif behind one's engagement in these activities. In 1963, a *shikari* (hunter) engaged a labourer to dig a rhino-trapping pit by paying INR 100 and one *seer* of rice.⁴⁴ In the 1960s, a section of peasants in nexus with the local petty traders led the rhino killing as opposed to an international racket running it today.⁴⁵

The rhino killing of the 1960s tested the limits of community engagement in protecting the rhino which was championed by officials like R.C. Das. Over time, it was not easy for the sanctuary officials to build similar intimacy with villages coming up every year. The FD was unsuccessful in securing conviction from the courts, even in the infamous cases from 1960–1961. Worse still, 29 rhinos fell to rhino killers from 1966 to 1968 (Barua and Das 1969: 12). There was growing popular pressure on the political class to act. On January 9, 1968, several MLAs and local leaders met villagers seeking their support against rhino killing.⁴⁶ Six weeks later, alleged rhino killers shot dead a young on-duty guard. It enraged the Assamese people, media, and political elites.⁴⁷ Increasing use of guns by rhino killers gave wide credibility to the theory that only armed guards can protect the rhino.

The GoA sent a team of 11 armed home guards to KWLS.⁴⁸ It was a decisive break from the earlier approaches to rhino protection. The government also enacted the Assam National Park Act, 1969 and initiated the process to convert KWLS to a national park. On the eve of the IUCN General Assembly in New Delhi in 1969, the FD issued a booklet titled *Kaziranga: The Rhinoland in Assam*. The booklet underscored the securitised protection KWLS had already entered. Since the arrival of home guard, exchange of fire was common with suspected rhino killers (Barua and Das 1969: 12 and 20–24). The FD estimated that 45 million rupees was needed to build 'anti-poaching works' such as roads and wireless network. The funds were not immediately forthcoming, but the FD now had wide political and cultural support to move in a new direction of militarised conservation.

So far, rhino conservation in KWLS accommodated rural rights of grazing and fishing. The colonial government issued grazing permits to Assamese cultivators to graze up to a mile inside the sanctuary's southern boundary as a reconciliatory measure against wildlife depredation (Sarmah 2023). Following Sálím Ali's visit, Stracey revoked these rights. The villagers protested with support from Rajendra Nath Baruah.⁴⁹ Fearing a backlash, the FD allowed grazing along the sanctuary's southern edges until its renaming as a national park in 1974.

In the northern riparian edges of KWLS, the graziers put the ecological volatilities to good use to stay closer to the sanctuary. In 1920, the colonial FD removed the Nepali and Mishng graziers while extending the sanctuary up to the Brahmaputra River. However, the Nepali graziers with their permanent houses in Darrang district (opposite bank) continued to graze in the *tapus* (riverine sandbar island), north of the sanctuary. The Brahmaputra's braided course blurred the boundary between the sanctuary and these *tapus*.⁵⁰ Eventually, the colonial government allowed the Nepali graziers in these *tapus* in return of their loyalty to protect the rhino. After Independence, forest officials worried that wild animals crossing over to the *tapus* were vulnerable to hunters. In February 1950, Assam's topmost forest official Stracey camped in the locality and decided to include seven *tapus* in the sanctuary.⁵¹ However, he realised that graziers' support was crucial in checking illegal hunting in the unpatrolled riparian edges.⁵² He decided to respect the existing rights of graziers and disallow new entrants.

Grazing was no longer solely a material claim; graziers were now the FD's allies in protecting the rhino. Nepali graziers supported the sanctuary officials by testifying against illegal hunters and fishers on several occasions.⁵³ Sometime rhinos died due to old age in obscure locations. Assamese graziers collected the horn from these carcasses and handed them over to the FD.⁵⁴ However, record rhino killings in the 1960s illustrated the limitations of such alliances to protect the rhino. The FD, thus, firmly pushed for the acquisition of the *tapus*.⁵⁵ In 1966, 39 graziers carried grazing permits from KWLS to graze nearly 1,500 buffalos and 300 cattle in the *tapus* adjoining it (Spillett 1966: 518–519). In 1972, while converting KWLS to a national park, the FD added seven *tapus* despite the graziers' pleas that these were their last pastures.⁵⁶

If grazing made a gradual and nearly quiet retreat from the *tapus*, the conflicts around fishing were highly politicised and often violent. These contestations still echo from KNP. On the eve of important festivals like *Bihu*, to this date, villagers forcefully attempt to enter KNP en-mass to fish.⁵⁷ In the 1950s, Assam's leadership drew selectively from the IBWL's conflicting positions to justify or oppose fishing in KWLS. In the same article where Gee wanted an 'inviolable' KWLS, he quoted the IBWL resolution in 1955 that read "it is not an essential condition of National Parks that there should be no human intervention" (Gee 1956: 2–5). This pragmatic view on resource extraction was invoked by the Forest Minister Ramnath Das to auction the KWLS *beels*.⁵⁸ However, Stracey

was unrelenting on commercial fishers.⁵⁹ KWLS *beels* were famous as spawning ground for fish. Annual floods restocked fish in the nearby channels and water bodies.⁶⁰ When the colonial government briefly leased the *beels* in the 1940s, the lessees reportedly overfished and blocked the mouth of the channels, which reduced fish on the Brahmaputra.⁶¹ But why was Stracey unrelenting on the commercial fishers while still allowing the Nepali graziers in the northern edges of the sanctuary? The resident graziers were more 'pliable' to regulations than the itinerant fishers.

Although Stracey prevailed over Das, eventually the FD allowed a high school and a college to finance themselves by fishing in the two *beels*, Hahaya and Kalmua.⁶² Thus fishing privileges also exceeded the materiality of the fish to achieve the socio-economic development of the locality. Subsistence needs and commercialisation of commons provided strong justification even for unauthorised fishing in the sanctuary.⁶³ Forest officials viewed grazing and fishing in the sanctuary as excuses to kill rhinos.⁶⁴ Therefore, they treated the alliances with graziers and fishers as temporary or fleeting anomalies, which they persistently tried to remove. However, the FD lacked the support from political brass to sanitise KWLS from the graziers and fishers.

The situation changed by the late 1960s. The rhino was not only a pride of the Assamese people, but also symbolised Assam.⁶⁵ Besides the press, popular culture, such as Assamese films, tapped into the concerns of rhino protection (Deb 1971). Rhino protection increasingly became a politically sensitive issue for the government. Throughout the 1960s, concerns over the Assamese language, identity, Assam's territorial fragmentation, and illegal immigration fuelled Assam's politics (Baruah 2001: 69–114). Amid these anxieties, the murder of a forest guard trying to protect rhinos added fuel to the fire. The opposition cornered the government for its failure to protect the animal.⁶⁶ Assamese political elites were convinced that the rhino needed more protection.

To better protect the rhino, the government revived the long-shelved plan to convert KWLS into a national park. While discussing the national park bill, the government emphasised harnessing tourism potential of the rhino for Assam's wider economic development.⁶⁷ The FD's argument that the rhino was too precious to be left unattended in the remote *tapus* had greater purchase among political elites.⁶⁸ While converting KWLS into a national park, the FD proposed to include the Mora Diphalu River (hitherto the sanctuary's southern boundary) in the park.⁶⁹ The FD argued that if people were to have rights over the river, rhino killers in the guise of fishers would interlope the park. By now, the political elites came closer to the FD's view that fishing and grazing were 'petty' and 'short-sighted' material concessions at their best and a cover to kill rhinos at worst. Mahendra Mohan Choudhury was the Forest Minister when the killing of a forest guard rattled Assam. It is likely that his officials briefed him well over the need to sanitise KWLS. When Choudhury became the Chief Minister during 1970–1972, he endorsed the FD's view.⁷⁰ The villagers considered the

Mora Diphalu a source of fish and water and a natural barrier against the wildlife. Despite their protests and memorandums, it became part of the park in 1974.⁷¹ The announcement of the national park in 1974 banned fishing, grazing⁷² and other forest produce collection.

The FD could not have severed the park's agrarian connection without the legitimacy to use violence. Rhino's popularity not only debased the rhino killers, but also made the use of violence to protect nature unquestionable. From the 1970s, park guards shot at suspected rhino killers with greater frequency than ever before.⁷³ Incidentally, in 1975, the year after the national park was finally declared, drought and hunger ravaged Assam.⁷⁴ Facing a complete ban on vegetables, thatch, fish, and firewood, the Mishings exclaimed, "we are left to choose between dying hungry or to the bullets."⁷⁵ It reflected the prevailing fear among villagers that park guards might shoot them while fishing or collecting vegetables. The FD successfully fused all kinds of forest dependency with rhino killing. Armed protection restrained illegal rhino killing in the 1970s, only to be resumed in the 1980s at an unprecedented scale (Yadava 2014: 127–128). However, it proved successful in reducing the graziers, fishers, and foragers to a bare minimum.

How did the new avatar of KWLS redefine conservation in India? To say that armed protection in KWLS gave a template for the future national parks or tiger reserves in India will be an overstatement. Its import in India's future conservation was subtler than that. KWLS emerged as a success story when conservationists were alarmed over the vanishing tigers in the late 1960s. There was wide credibility to the idea that only 'total protection' can restore the 'balance of nature', which meant attaining a healthy predator-prey relationship and restoring a population that had declined severely (EC 1970: 5–8). KWLS exemplified total protection. The Expert Committee that assessed the state of India's wildlife praised KWLS's "extensive, self-contained eco-units" and was "impressed" with the armed protection of the rhino (EC 1970: 35–36). These characteristics resonated strongly with the tiger reserves to be created under Project Tiger (Sankhala 1977: 196–210). The Expert Committee members included Kailash Sankhala, a forest official who became the first director of Project Tiger. KWLS gave Sankhala a visualisation of how to achieve total protection in tiger reserves to be managed by state governments.

In the following decades, the rhino increasingly became a celebrated cultural symbol in Assam, overshadowing the magnificent specimen of natural history. Such celebration decontextualised the park from its ecological milieu of the fluid floodplains (Saikia 2021).⁷⁶ Thus 'Kaziranga' came to be associated solely with the rhino, and people living here were rather aberrations. Golap Khaund, a local teacher, journalist, and conservationist, exclaimed, "it is not true that only rhinos and elephants inhabit Kaziranga; there are human too" (Khaund 1983). Cultural politics produced wilderness, which global ecologists long cherished. However, cultural politics and ecology were at loggerheads regarding

the initiative to create an alternate home for the rhino. In the early 1980s, the Assamese nationalists vehemently opposed the 'scientifically-backed' rhino reintroduction project from Assam to Dudhwa National Park in Uttar Pradesh.⁷⁷ A similar sub-nationalist Gujarati claim over the Gir lion has stalled the initiative to create a second home for the lion (Rangarajan 2013: 124–125).

CONCLUSION

Exclusionary principles in wildlife conservation are often attributed to the Western-dominated ideas of nature conservation embraced by national elites. This article has illustrated that sub-national cultural politics is another potent driver of reinventing pristine nature by excluding rural livelihoods.

Conservation success of the rhino shifts the timeline of India's environmental restoration further back from the 1970s to the 1950s and corrects our understanding that environmentalism in India trickled down from national elites to regional states (Chhatre and Saberwal 2006: 234; Ranjitsinh 2017). Popular demand for better rhino protection legitimised the FD's argument that rhinos cannot be protected if graziers and fishers were to have continued rights in the sanctuary. Under pressure to protect the rhino, Assamese politicians, who long stood for agrarian rights, not only supported the FD's argument to exclude rural rights, but also condoned its use of violence. It took several more decades to completely exclude rural rights, but by the early 1970s, there was a paradigm shift in its favour and some decisive steps were taken in this direction. Cultural politics of the rhino successfully distanced its habitat (KNP) from its material connections like grazing and fishing. However, cultural politics remained impregnated with the wider materiality i.e., the goal of achieving Assam's wider economic development through tourism.

The 'total protection' in KWLS gave it a semblance of 'self-contained eco-unit', where 'balance of nature' would take place. Such a view of KWLS subtly informed Project Tiger and the WLPA, both of which were premised upon separating humans and nature. As for the rhino, it remained a cultural symbol in Assam rather than a specimen of natural history in need of scientific interventions.

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There is no competing interest in the conduct of this research.

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Research ethics approval

Not applicable

NOTES

1. The colonial government initially selected 229 sq. km of floodplain grassland of the Brahmaputra River. Subsequently, it added more adjoining areas, and the reserve became 430 sq. km by 1917. KNP's present area includes its buffers added after 1950 (Yadava 2014: 63).
2. The tiger replaced the lion as the national animal in 1973.
3. Militarisation is used in the following sense here. In KNP, foot-based patrolling through the dense grasses and swamps developed as the key modus operandi of protection. Over time, KNP has increasingly focused on extension of communication (roads, wireless, informant network), firearms, forest camps, and violence against suspects. However, it still falls short of the air surveillance and deployment of national army as in the Kruger National Park.
4. National parks and tiger reserves were created under the same legal framework of the WLPA. However, Project Tiger aimed to attain "total environmental preservation" through the guiding principle of "do nothing and allow no one else to do anything" (Sankhala 1977: 196–210). This spirit got the momentum because Project Tiger was a Union government-funded flagship mission initiated specifically to protect the vanishing tiger.
5. Assamese-speaking people are concentrated in the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam, a northeastern state of India.
6. Many rivulets drain into the low-lying area keeping its water bodies alive even during the driest month of the year.
7. Tourism was of wider significance because the revenue generated would supposedly benefit the whole state.
8. In the 1950s, Assamese, Nepali, Mishing, Adivasi (central-Indian tribes), and Karbi peasants lived around KWLS. In this agrarian frontier, their professional identities were often fluid. For instance, many Assamese cultivators whose villages ringed the sanctuary's southern boundary had permits to graze inside KWLS. Nepali and Assamese cultivators grazed their buffalos in the east of the sanctuary. Nepali graziers, most of whom were cultivators in the villages across the Brahmaputra River, had grazing permits in KWLS's northern riparian edges. Around the sanctuary's western boundary, Karbis practised shifting cultivation. Adivasis worked as labourers in the tea gardens dotting the southern edge, but many also took to cultivation after their contract expired. KWLS's fish was an attraction to nearly all the communities, but leaseholders were often distant townsmen.
9. File no. For/WL/12/61, 1961, Forest, Assam State Archives (hereafter ASA), Guwahati.
10. 'Kaziranga Tourist Lodge', Press Note no 146, April 18, 1955, file no. For/WL/39/55, 1955, Forest, ASA.
11. See file no. For/507/57, 1957, Forest, ASA.
12. *Assam Legislative Assembly Debates (ALAD)*, Vol. II, No. 2, September 28, 1961, Pp. 60–61.
13. Barua emphatically asserted Assam's claims to natural resources and economic development as an opposition member in the Lok Sabha (1957–1970).
14. Hem Barua, 'Sagar Dekhisa', *Natun Asamiya*, January 10, 1954.
15. In contrast, for the contemporary views of tiger as 'cruel' and 'outsider', see Smadja (2018).
16. I am yet to come across an Assamese or tribal legend glorifying the rhino hunters.
17. For peasants' attitude that helped the rhino's survival, see Sarmah (2023).
18. Until Independence, only seven men patrolled the 429 sq. km KWLS with tall grasses and porous boundaries (Saikia 1998: 19). By 1960, the number of guards increased to 55. From the Conservator of Forests (CF) to the Assistant Secretary, FD, March 25, 1960, file no. For/WL/146/60, 1960, Forest (Wild Life), ASA.
19. Das played an active role in local *bhaona* (religious plays) (Sharma and Nath 2015: 137–139); he tried to induce the schoolboys towards conservation (Pers. Comm. 85-year-old resident, Sepenakobowa, February 4, 2018); Gee (1964: 167–168) praised Das's efforts.
20. Emphasis in original.
21. From Under Secretary, Ministry of Food and Agriculture, GoI (hereafter MFA), to Secretary, FD, September 8, 1955, file no. For/WL/361/55, 1955, Forest (Wild Life), ASA.
22. From Secretary, FD to Under Secretary, MFA, February 9, 1956, *ibid*.
23. IBWL resolutions passed in the Calcutta Session, 1955, file no. For/WL/37/55, 1955, Forest (Wild Life), ASA.
24. 'A Special Note on Kaziranga Sanctuary', file no. For/WL/224/55, 1955, Forest (Wild Life), ASA.
25. He was an Anglo-Indian and the first non-European head of the FD. He contributed seminal texts like *Elephant Gold*, *Nagaland Nightmare* and *Wild Life in India: Its Conservation and Control*, reflecting his profound insights on elephant catching, wildlife conservation, and politics in North-east India.
26. Fishing leases were a source of revenue and political patronage, which the political brass could not divest.
27. From CF to Secretary, FD, April 18, 1955, file no. For/WL/37/55, 1955, Forest, ASA.
28. From CF to Secretary, FD, November 7, 1958, file no. For/WL/368/58, 1958, Forest (Wild Life), ASA.
29. From the sub-deputy collector (SDC), Dergaon to the sub-divisional officer (SDO), Golaghat, January 4, 1951, file no. RSG/92/1950, 1950, Revenue, ASA.
30. Gazette Notification no. For/WL/512/66/17, April 7, 1967, GoA.
31. About 100 graziers in the PGR supplied milk to Jorhat and Golaghat and contributed about forty per cent of the grazing tax of the Golaghat sub-division (now district). SDC's (Grazing) report, November 3, 1951, file no. RSG/181/51, 1951, Revenue-Settlement, ASA.
32. Baloram Hazarika and others to the Revenue Minister, Assam (RM), August 22, 1951, *ibid*.
33. From the SDO, Golaghat to the Under Secretary, Revenue Department (Settlement), GoA, November 17, 1952, *ibid*.
34. *ALAD*, Vol. I, No. 4, March 10, 1953, Pp. 220.
35. 'Result of the Incomplete Embankment on the Dhansiri', (Hereafter, all headlines from the Assamese newspapers (*Dainik*

- Asam, Natun Asamiya, Janambhumi, and Dainik Janambhumi* are translated into English by the Author). *Dainik Asam*, June 20, 1966.
36. 'Rhino Killing in Kaziranga', *Natun Asamiya*, July 31, 1961.
 37. During 1965–1970, at least 55 rhinos fell to the rhino killers (Yadava 2014, chapter 7).
 38. Japan's rhino horn import doubled in the 1960s from the 1950s amidst its booming economy (Martin 1982: 294–301).
 39. 'Cattle epidemic beyond control in Assam', *Natun Asamiya*, June 23, 1958.
 40. '70% Crops destroyed in Assam due to drought', *Natun Asamiya*, May 5, 1960.
 41. 'Flood of shortage', *Natun Asamiya*, August 11, 1959.
 42. 'Rise in Bullock Price', *Dainik Asam*, May 10, 1968.
 43. 'Price-index of consumer goods for last ten years', *Janambhumi*, July 14, 1966.
 44. Sibsagar S.R. No. 27/63, Report no. II, June 12, 1963, file no. HPL/251/1963, 1963, Home, ASA.
 45. *ALAD*, Vol. II, No. 2, September 28, 1961, Pp. 60–61.
 46. 'Discussion on Curbing the Anti-social Activities in Kaziranga', *Dainik Asam*, January 18, 1968.
 47. 'Editorial: Bloody Kaziranga', *Dainik Asam*, February 27, 1968.
 48. 'Home Guards Sent to Kaziranga', *Dainik Asam*, April 1, 1968.
 49. Lukhurakhania and Mohpara villagers to the CF, February 11, 1950, file no. For/WL/146/60, 1960, Forest (Wild Life), ASA; *ALAD*, Vol. I, March 27, 1950, Pp. 610–612.
 50. See Sarmah (2023).
 51. 'Decision of a conference on Kaziranga Game Sanctuary', file no. RSG-92/50, 1950, Revenue, ASA.
 52. From CF to Assistant Secretary, FD, Assam, March 24, 1950, file no. For/WL/146/60, 1960, Forest, ASA.
 53. From Chabilal Upadhyay to the CF, December 13, 1954, file no. For/WL/224/55, 1955, Forest (Wild Life), ASA.
 54. From Range Officer to CF, November 24 and 29, 1961, file no. For/WL/12/61, 1961, Forest (Wild Life), ASA.
 55. From Deputy Commissioner, Darrang to Under Secretary, FD, August 12, 1965, file no. RSG.286/66, 1966, Revenue (Grazing), ASA.
 56. Note on Pp. 1, file no. RSS-502-75, 1975, Revenue, ASA.
 57. 'Tension in Kaziranga around Fishing on Uruka', *Dainik Janambhumi*, April 14, 2021.
 58. From Forest Minister, Assam to the President, Assam Pradesh Congress Committee, January 7, 1953, For/70/55, 1955, Forest, ASA.
 59. From the CF to the Secretary, FD, May 11, 1953 (no. C-231), *ibid*.
 60. Anonymous's 'Letter to Editor', *Natun Asamiya*, October 22, 1955.
 61. From Chabilal Upadhyay, Behali to Chief Minister, Assam, December 22, 1952, file no. For/70/55, 1955, Forest, ASA.
 62. 'Letter to Editor: Fish of the Kaziranga Beels', *Dainik Asam*, March 21, 1972.
 63. 'Bokakhat Residents' 'Letter to Editor', *Natun Asamiya*, October 13, 1955.
 64. From CF to the Assistant Secretary, FD, March 25, 1960, file no. For/WL/146/60, 1960, Forest, ASA
 65. A special issue of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* on Assam carried an image of rhino on its cover page. See Vol. LXXXVIII (17), May 1967.
 66. *ALAD*, Vol. I, No. 27, March 19, 1968, Pp. 8–14.
 67. *ALAD*, Vol. I, No. 29, April 3, 1968, Pp. 115–150; during 1956–1969, the number of tourists to KWLS increased from 925 to 10,106 (Das 1969, 788).
 68. For a brilliant literary portrayal of the Assamese imagination about the *tapus* in the north of KWLS as haven for crime, see Sarma (1996); also, see MLA Gaurishankar Bhattacharya's speech in *ALAD*, Vol. I, No. 32, April 6, 1968, Pp. 525–527.
 69. Debeswar Barua's 'Letter to Editor', *Dainik Asam*, August 21, 1973.
 70. *ALAD*, Vol. II, No. 1, October 25, 1971, Pp. 8–11.
 71. GoA's Gazette Notification no. For/WL/722/68, February 11, 1974.
 72. In 1966, there were 66 villagers holding grazing permits to rear 450 buffalos along the KWLS's southern boundary (Spillett 1966: 519).
 73. 'Encounter with Poachers in Kaziranga', *Dainik Asam*, March 3, 1972; *ALAD*, Vol. I, No. 29, June 20, 1978, Pp. 18–20.
 74. '20 leaves of *paan* for a rupee', *Dainik Asam*, April 19, 1975.
 75. 'Hungry Tribal People's Defiance', *Dainik Asam*, November 6, 1974.
 76. Besides serving as an agrarian frontier for cultivation, these floodplains hosted grazing, fishing, and foraging.
 77. 'Rhinos arrive at Dudhwa Park', *The Times of India*, April 2, 1984.

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