

Mahanadi Wild Life Sanctuary

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Locality, extent and short history

Mahanadi Wild Life Sanctuary is located in Kurseong Forest Division and covers an area of about 49 sq. miles of Reserve Forest. The Sanctuary is situated within the district of Darjeeling and is named after the river Mahanadi which originates at an elevation of 6500' feet in the hills outside the Sanctuary and finds its passage through the Sanctuary. By and large, the Sanctuary is demarcated by artificial boundaries except for some portion in the East where the river Teesta forms the boundary. The Sanctuary is distributed, more or less equally, in the forests of the plains and the lower hills upto an altitude of 2500' feet. The crop composition varies from riverain forests of tree colonisers like *Khair*—*Sissoo*—*Simul* to edaphic-biotic climax of gregarious *Sal*. The monotony of gregarious *Sal* is broken by dry mixed and wet mixed forests containing *Sal* in various proportions. The variations in altitude and crop have naturally influenced the composition of wild life.

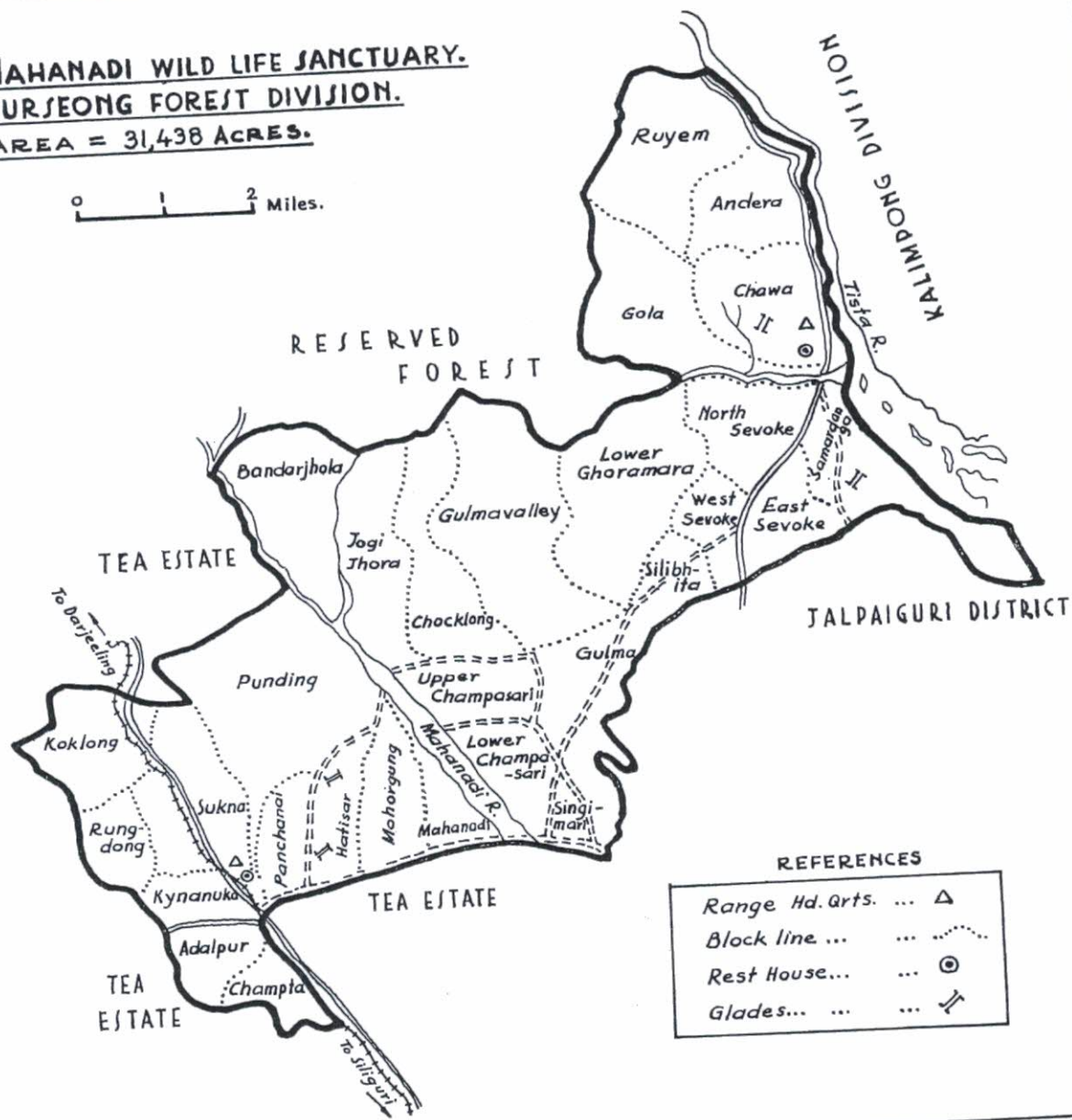
The idea of wild life conservation in the tract is of comparatively recent origin. The Sanctuary was created in the year 1955 only. Initially, in these forests, working schemes were prepared mainly for the purpose of exploitation, even silviculture was little considered but later on measures for improvements of these forests were taken up. These measures included improvement of natural growing stock by silvicultural operations between 1882 and 1918 and thereafter conversion of irregular forests to uniform state by clear felling and planting—a practice which is still pursued. The emphasis being laid primarily on forest improvement and exploitation, the Indian Forest Act, VII of 1878 (later codified as Indian Forest Act, I of 1927) was applied to regulate hunting, shooting and fishing in the area with certain amount of limita-

tions. Apparently, this was not adequate and the experts advised the Government about the creation of the Sanctuary. Till the year 1958, the Sanctuary was called a Game Sanctuary but in pursuance of the recommendations of the Indian Board for Wild Life, the Game Sanctuary has been renamed as the Wild Life Sanctuary in 1959.

Mr. E. O. Shebbeare, Conservator of Forests, in the All India conference for the Preservation of Wild Life in 1935, indicated that rhinoceros has been protected throughout Bengal and Assam by legislation but he mentioned that as far as other games are concerned, Bengal is very much worried about all species of grass-jungle animals (which, of course, includes rhinoceros) and the bison, which is a tree-jungle animal. Rhinoceros has received some amount of protection, inspite of attacks of rinderpest and poaching in certain parts of forests, but for other animals, hunting and shooting were not always regulated to the desired level. In North Bengal, which comprise of the hilly regions of the Himalayas and the plains of the Terai and Duars, with the extension of tea cultivation and spread of human settlement to the very fringe of the forests, the fauna suffered considerably. The most outstanding animal, the one-horned rhinoceros got protection in the sanctuaries of Gorumara and Jaldapara, but other important animals like bison, spotted deer, barking deer, hog deer, sambhar, apart from tiger and panther, also needed careful attention. By far the most important consideration that led to the creation of Mahanadi Wild Life Sanctuary was, perhaps, protection of Indian bison which was found to traverse these forests and adjoining erstwhile private forests of Baikunthapur Raj Estate. Creation of certain carefully demarcated forest areas as Sanctuaries was also in keeping with the general policy followed all over India.

MAHANADI WILD LIFE SANCTUARY.
KURSEONG FOREST DIVISION.
AREA = 31,438 ACRES.

0 1 2 Miles.



REFERENCES

Range Hd. Qrts. ...	Δ
Block line ...	⋯
Rest House ...	⊙
Glades ...	//

N. N. S.

MAP 15—Mahanadi Wild Life Sanctuary.

Wild Life, environment and census

Bison, spotted deer, tiger and elephants comprise the main fauna in the sanctuary. *Barking deer* are also fairly common. *Wild dogs* too have been spotted, but it is rather difficult to specify its actual locality. *Jungle cat, leopard cat, the civet cat, porcupines and scaly anteaters* are other animals worthy of mention. Recently, *baboons* and *black capped langurs* have been introduced in the Sanctuary and now find company with *red-faced* and *black-faced monkeys*.

Jungle fowl, pea fowl, pigeons, doves are common feathered games, in association with birds like *herons, egrets, storks, King-fishers, rollers, swifts, barbets, wood-peckers, swallows, babblers, thrushes, warblers, robins, orioles, drongoes, sunbirds* and *flower peckers*—to name some only of a host of feathered specimens.

In association with the existing plant community which comprises primarily of tree growth, there does not appear to be any difficulty for propagation of Indian bison and elephants, but wide grassy areas being rather uncommon, the grass-favouring species like deer remain more or less confined in the riverain areas of Mahanadi where growth of the vegetation tends to be rather thin.

No adequate efforts have been made to carry out census of animal population in the Sanctuary. Annual reports suggest the figure of bison as sixty which is likely to be contested by many with valid reasons. There is, nevertheless, no doubt about the gradual increase in bison population and on present indications, it will be safe to predict a population of twenty five to thirty. Spotted deer are more common among the deer community and are becoming conspicuous with their increasing numbers. Tigers, though one of the chief attractions of North Bengal, continue to be rather scarce.

In this Sanctuary, near accurate census is not an easy proposition in view of constant migration of animals from the Sanctuary to the adjoining forests outside the Sanctuary, and difficult terrain over part of the Sanctuary. There is, however, a proposal for a scientific census in the near future and a clear picture is likely to emerge after that.

Benefits for animals, amenities for visitors

The fundamental needs of any animal are food and shelter. While in a Sanctuary shelter

does not pose any problem, food may do. The food of carnivores like tiger, will depend on the biological relationship of tiger and deer population. The scarcity of tiger, even in a Sanctuary in North Bengal can, therefore, be attributed to the inadequate deer population. A census may open up the question of balancing the number of different species through their introduction. It is in this context that man's contribution in the management of a Sanctuary is most important. In the case of herbivorous animals, human effort can be more easily directed. With this in view, several glades have been created at convenient spots within the Sanctuary. These glades also have artificial salt licks and are cultivated with agricultural crops and palatable forest seedlings for the benefit of the herbivorous animals whose search for food is no less tiresome than the carnivores. All over the Sanctuary, artificial water troughs have been made to augment water supply which becomes very scarce in dry months except for the stream of water through the river Mahanadi. A natural salt-lick, on the fringe of a stream, does not attract many animals now for its inadequate subsoil stock of salt and dry nature of the stream during winter months.

The Sanctuary has well-laid out forest roads, which cover about 50 kilometers. Apart from the internal forest roads, two highways cut across the Sanctuary. A drive or trek on these forest roads, also opens up places of magnificent beauty and gives one a glimpse of excellent natural and man-made forests. A visitor can see grazing animals in the glade from the observation and watch towers. Two Rest Houses within the Sanctuary are in constant demand of the officials and non-officials alike, who would prefer to relax in the midst of beautiful Nature.

Existing water resources within the Sanctuary continue to be inadequate for the animal population. To augment that, a weir will be constructed on the river Mahanadi, to pool water. A preliminary feasibility survey indicates that the pool may extend over an area of 10-11 acres. This pool, in the heart of the Sanctuary, is bound to improve the surrounding vegetation as well and will mean incalculable benefit to the wild life. A tourist bungalow, in the adjoining hillock, overlooking the water pool, is expected to attract visitors from within and outside the State.

Merits and short-comings

This Wild Life Sanctuary is very much in its infancy, having been created only in the year 1955. The forest crop in the Sanctuary is extremely valuable from economic viewpoint. The exploitation of this wealth has become, as such, unavoidable. The passage of heavy vehicular traffic for extraction of timber is a detriment to unhindered animal movement. Two very important highways have cut across the Sanctuary and an obligatory railway alignment to Assam does, not only carry railway traffic, but has also necessitated construction of small railway colonies to accommodate staff within the Sanctuary. A well-laid army cantonment has started coming up just on the fringe of the Sanctuary. In other words, necessities of an economically developing nation are infringing on the basic concept of isolation required for optimum development of animal life. The working plan of Kurseong Forest Division is under revision and it will be worthwhile considering creation of a 'sanctum sanctorum' away from the roadways, railways and habitation within the Sanctuary where operation of any kind should be abandoned for a period of fifteen/twenty years to facilitate development of wild life in virtually virgin conditions of plant community. Due to disturbances within the Sanctuary, the animals are constantly migrating to adjoining forests of Baikunthapur and Bamanpokri. Certain amount of restriction of movements can be achieved in the 'sanctum sanctorum'. Fire hazards in the foot-hills of the Sanctuary continue unabated. While in certain areas

nearby the river Mahanadi, natural fire favours plant growth suitable for association of various types of deer, this uncontrolled fire does more harm than good to the animal life. With the building of weir across Mahanadi water sources within the Sanctuary will improve. Adequate provision of water, in the present circumstances, has become imperative.

With reference to Darjeeling district in general, Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong towns in particular, as the centres of tourist attraction, this Wild Life Sanctuary is of special significance. Being very close to the rail-heads of Siliguri and New Jalpaiguri stations and the airport at Bagdogra, this Sanctuary will continue to draw visitors, if necessary facilities are provided in the proposed tourist bungalow close-by the weir site in the river Mahanadi.

To most of us, the conception of forests is not quite clear. We usually take it to be burden on the land it covers, in the face of growing demand for more arable land in the world. The role of forests as an integral part of sustained agriculture is not quite understood. But, people of our country especially in the urban areas—are becoming conscious of the necessity of healthy atmosphere and recreation in an outdoor life. This desire of the people will be partly met in the easily accessible man-made and natural forests of the Mahanadi Wild Life Sanctuary, apart from, of course, providing an opportunity for an usual encounter with an animal, say bison, elephant, deer or tiger.