

Contemporary Crisis of Rhinoceros in Assam: A Critical Review

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Retreat of rhinoceros in Kaziranga National Park

The changing social aspiration and socio-political understanding the Pachyderm had to face the human society with a new countenance of cruelty. Poaching becomes a major issue that has drawn the attention of Assamese nationalists and conservationists in recent past (Saikia, 2011). Studies on the environmental histories revile the withdrawal of these species throughout the globe due to anthropogenic activities. However, in Assam, the debate drew on, and illustrated, basic attitudes towards wildlife in general and Greater Indian One-horned rhinoceros *Rhinoceros unicornis* in particular for last few years. Apart from the translocated animals of Manas National Park, the Kaziranga National Park, Orang National Park and Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary are lone natural refuge to its Rhinoceros in Assam.

The Kaziranga National Park (KNP) (26°35'–26°45'N and 93°05'–93°40'E) is spared over the floodplain of the Brahmaputra river in the Nagaon and Golaghat districts of Assam, India. The park had been reflected as one of the most successful stories of conservation of Greater One-horned Rhino in the world as a population of a mere dozen rhinos in 1908, when the Kaziranga was declared a forest reserve, the population has grown to 1500 over 90 years of conservation (Talukdar, 2000). Besides, officially highlighted as a success story in conservation, there is a crisis building over the future of the park and the fringe villages. Presently, altogether 1,855 of the world's estimated 2,700 rhinos are inhabitants of Kaziranga National Park. However, the present social crisis over continuous killings of rhinoceros had provoked the social thinkers and conversationalist to put up arguments against the inefficiency of the forest department to save the rhinoceros of the park. The changing trends in poaching and sociopolitical factors had played a major role in the whole scenario. Previous data implies total 534 rhinos were poached in Kaziranga during 1965 to 1993 mostly using primitive methods like using pits (Vigne *et al.*, 1994). Till early eighties pit method was extensively used and nineties start with the use of guns and rifles, including automatic ones. Since 1989, the poachers have also started a new silent method through electrocution. The poachers use the power lines that pass through the sanctuaries or just outside the boundary (Figure 1). Between 1980 and 2003 more than 500 rhinos were killed by poachers in Kaziranga National Park alone. The ruthless killing of rhinoceros continues till the 21st century. Records shows that the intensity of rhinoceros death gradually increase in the last part of nineties as 14 in 1994, 27 in 1995, 26 in 1996, 12 in 1997 rhinoceros died in Kaziranga.

However, the beginning of twenties the rate gradually became stable as 8 in 1998, 4 in 1999, 4 in 2000, 8 in 2001, 4 in 2002, 3 in 2003, 4 in 2004, 7 in 2005, 7 in 2006 rhinoceros died in Kaziranga. Poaching again take its turn from 2007 onwards as 20 in 2007, 16 in 2008, 14 in 2009, 18 in 2010, 5 in 2011 and 25 rhinoceros in 2012 died in Assam with an increasing trend of 28 poached animals up to the first week of the continuing month of July this year (Figure 2). The 'most successful stories of conservation' known as Kaziranga had suffered for poaching for a long span of time due to the lack of proper management skill and imperial bureaucratic attitude of high level forest officials. The lack of proper infrastructures, equipments had affected the morality of the frontline staff working in the remote camps of the park. With floodwaters receding in last flood, altogether 625 animals have perished inside the park and hog deer have suffered the most. The trend of continuous poaching had also put questions on the credibility of few corporate civil societies working for conservation of wildlife in Kaziranga with a huge set up and enormous foreign funds. Lavish projects like The Indian Rhino Vision (IRV) 2020 planed in partnership among the government of Assam, the International Rhino Foundation, the World Wide Fund for Nature, the Bodoland Territorial Council and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to attain a population of 3,000 wild rhinoceros in seven of Assam's protected areas by the year 2020 had been seen as a doubtful plan by the Assamese society. However, the hypothetical calculation needs to be understood with the present population trend before judging the success in true scene. The use of sophisticated weapon like AK 47 in Manas National Park by poachers to kill a translocated rhino as part of IRV programme is of serious concern.

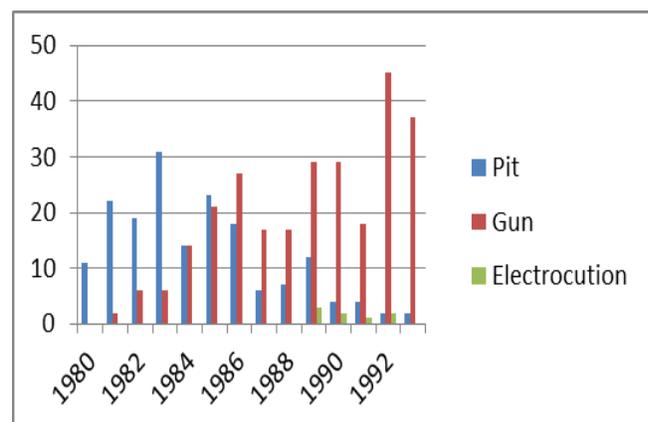


Figure 1. A chart showing the Rhinoceros poaching intensity and methods used (1980-93): (Source: Sen, 1993).

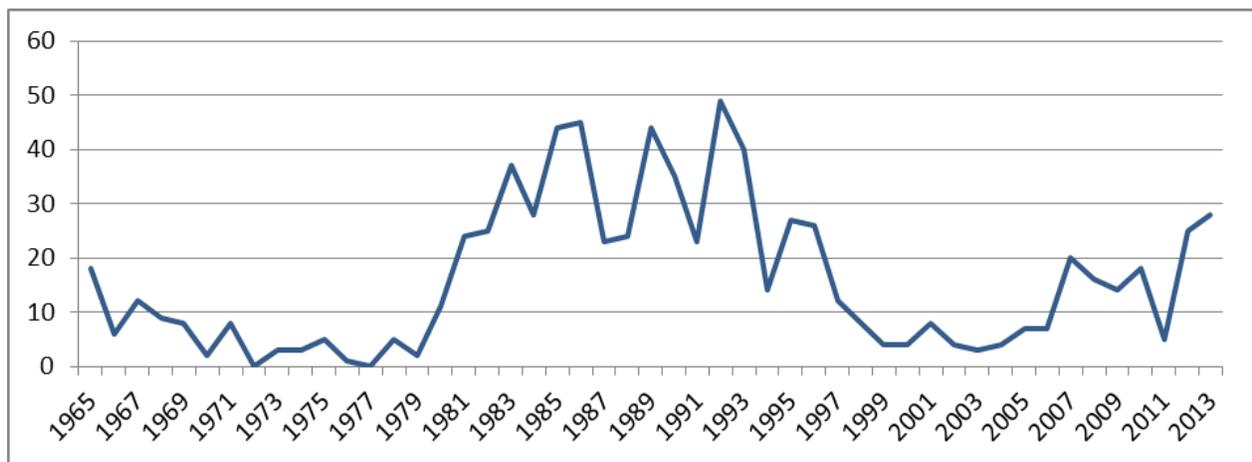


Figure 2. A chart showing the Rhinoceros poaching intensity since 1965 to 2013.

How to think beyond the trend?

The Poaching will remain as a major threat to the rhinoceros population. Therefore, anti-poaching efforts have to be improved and maintained. Receiving information in advance on the movement of poachers and wildlife smugglers is extremely crucial in apprehending illegal wildlife traders and disrupting their activities (Talukdar, 2000). This management technique needs enormous community participation and faith. In the same time the natural calamities like flood had also added as a chance for poaching due to restricted movement of Rhinoceros. The new possibilities of Forest Rights Act 2006 can be a help to draw the community faith and to minimize the gap between forest department and the fringe society. The recent technological intervention used in terms of unmanned aircraft to monitor the park has been measurably failed and is criticized as loss of public money. Before that some NGOs had also tried to use imported sniffer dogs to trace the movements of poachers. These practices were found to be a short term measure as both the government authority and NGOs has very limited links to the grass root abnormalities of the park, that lies in connection with the problems of local communities. If we are serious enough and want to save the park from the poachers, vested interest politicians and so-called NGOs, legal authorities have to create a people's participatory approach that will take local villagers into confidence (Soud, 2012). It is impossible to success in protecting Pachyderm is any conservation discourse

which identifies people as a powerful enemy of nature. Without achieving the community faith and concern, conservation would have a long way to go before it can achieve its goal.

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