

Importance of anti-poaching measures towards successful conservation and protection of rhinos and elephants, north-eastern India

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Abstract

A well-planned and implemented anti-poaching strategy is essential for conserving species endangered by illegal international trade. Illegal trade in wildlife, especially in rhino, elephant, tiger and bear, is flourishing and severely threatening the remaining populations. Monitoring the trend of poaching and international trade is important for assessing the threats and preparing an effective counter-poaching strategy. This paper is based on the research and monitoring of endangered mammals, especially rhino, elephant and tiger, in Assam and other north-eastern states of India. It analyses major anti-poaching aspects and presents a strategy that other conservation managers can use to check poaching and illegal trade.

Additional key words: Assam, endangered species, law, trade

Résumé

Une stratégie bien conçue et bien appliquée est essentielle pour conserver les espèces menacées par un commerce international illégal. Le commerce illégal de la faune, et spécialement des rhinos, des éléphants, des tigres et des ours, est florissant et menace gravement les populations restantes. Il est important de surveiller de façon continue les tendances en matière de braconnage et de commerce international, pour évaluer les menaces et préparer une stratégie de contre-braconnage efficace. Cet article se base sur la recherche et la surveillance continue de mammifères en danger et spécialement des rhinos, des éléphants et des tigres, en Assam et dans d'autres états du nord-est de l'Inde. Il analyse les principaux aspects de la lutte antibraconnage et présente une stratégie que d'autres gestionnaires de la conservation peuvent utiliser pour contrôler le braconnage et le commerce illégal.

Introduction

Economists have estimated global trade in wildlife at more than USD 25 billion annually (Menon and Kumar 1998), over 40% of it illegal. The increase in this trade has been of serious concern (Martin 1990, 1999; Wenjun et al. 1996; EIA 2000; Stiles and Martin 2001). In India, the illegal trade in items such as ivory, tiger skins and bones, skins of other cats like leopard and the clouded leopard, rhino horns, musk of the musk deer and the gall bladders of bears has already caused concern among many conservationists, including those in the government. In response to this threat, the government of India has promulgated many policies and enacted many laws to protect wildlife

and halt wildlife crime. Most of the wildlife in India is protected under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, which is the single most significant statute on wildlife conservation in India (Upadhyay and Kothari 2001). Under it, over 80 national parks and more than 450 sanctuaries are legally protected. Several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have also started investigating the illegal trafficking of the wildlife materials.

A number of anti-poaching efforts have been made in India, especially in Assam, and in other north-eastern states and in Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal, with the aim of minimizing trade in wildlife trophies.

Wildlife officers working in sanctuaries and national parks are more vulnerable and subject to assault with

Niliam Bora



Recovering arms and ammunition is one step in working to reduce poaching.

lethal weapons than are their counterparts who work in urban areas. In a protected area where the number of endangered species is large and the threat of poaching is high, the main goal of wildlife officials and those working in other law-enforcing agencies is to reduce poaching without losing any member of the anti-poaching unit to illness or outright attack. One species particularly threatened by poaching is the rhino. Conserving rhinos in Assam, India, is a relentless fight with poachers and smugglers (Vigne and Martin 1998; Talukdar 2000).

Methods

Through extensive field visits from 1998 onwards I made a study on the trade in wildlife items—in Assam and other north-eastern states of India and in Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal. I visited Myanmar in February 2000, going to the areas of Mandalay and Yangoon and to Mount Popa National Park. I made field visits to Nepal, specifically to Biratnagar, Dholabari, Kakarbhita, Kathmandu, Pokhra and Sauraha in December 1999, March 2001 and June–November 2002. During 1999 to 2002, I made 10 trips to Nepal, and in 2002, 2 trips to Bhutan

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It is important to assess in advance what arms the poachers have.

visiting Phuntshiling and Thimphu. Acting at times as a buyer and at others as a seller, I visited people suspected of engaging in the wildlife trade, working in each country through a tourist guide and a network of intelligence units.

A drive against the wildlife trade was launched among enforcing agencies including forest departments, police, army and customs. I represented Aaranyak, a centre for biodiversity conservation in north-eastern India that has acted as a connecting link among these enforcing agencies for better coordination and execution of the plan prepared for each operation. Aaranyak employed agents to collect vital information, which was verified and then passed by personal oral message to the concerned enforcing agency

carrying out a particular operation in a key site. No other communication system was used.

Anti-wildlife trade strategy

Both an anti-poaching strategy and an anti-wildlife trade strategy are essential to stop poaching and trade in

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Poaching rhinos for their horn is the key threat to the rhino population in Assam.

endangered species. Poachers and their links to wildlife traders within the country and abroad all need to be identified. Wildlife trade is not confined to its country of origin; it cuts across the globe to wherever an illegal market still operates. This field study has amply indicated that poaching endangered species depends on the signal poachers receive from traders in the international market. It is the traders who indirectly determine the rate of poaching. Poachers on the ground will do little if traders do not buy the wildlife materials from them immediately, as storing such items invites risk of arrest and subsequent court trial with fines or imprisonment.

The general attitude of poachers as studied during these past six years of investigation is that they want to sell their product as soon as possible. They work in groups and the group members need their share. If they are able to sell their wildlife materials quickly, it helps them to stay

united and keep their mutual faith intact; if they are not able to sell quickly, cracks begin to open within the group and members lose faith in each other. This is where the first pressure might be put. When these cracks in a poacher group develop, it is easier to get accurate information from one dissatisfied member and thus be able to track down and recover the wildlife products. Tracking down products as they shift from one trader to the other also often provides vital clues. By the time the wildlife products reach the international market they may have been sold up to eight times since they were poached.

The tendency among enforcing agencies is to celebrate whenever poachers are arrested. Such celebration is not warranted, however, because arrest alone does

not stop poaching as long as the market encourages killing animals for their trophies or their organs. To really stop the trade, more emphasis needs to be given

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This anti-poaching squad operation was successful, recovering arms, ammunition and a rhino horn.



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Ivory seized near Shillong in 1999.

to nabbing the traders, as only one or two traders can handle the wildlife products that a hundred poachers bring in—and wipe out an endangered species from a site. Arresting traders creates more of a vacuum in the trade circle than does arresting poachers, as it hampers the swift transit of goods from one trader to another before they reach their ultimate destination in the international market.

Further steps need to be taken to ensure that those arrested are rapidly convicted, and for that legal assistance is of the utmost necessity. It is essential to have good lawyers to fight against wildlife traders.

Uncovering and checking new information on the movement of poachers and smugglers should be the highest priority of the anti-poaching intelligence unit. Receiving advance information on poacher and smuggler activities is extremely important for apprehending criminals engaging in such nefarious activities. Occasionally such information is received from common people in India and

major routes: 1) through Naga-land to Myanmar and 2) through West Bengal to Nepal or Bhutan. They are transported with various other goods, legal and illegal, including drugs. Rhino horn is generally taken out of Kaziranga National Park in Assam in two major routes (figs. 1 and 2) to ultimate known collection points for illegal Asian wildlife markets.



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Ivory products for sale in Mandalay.

other South Asian countries. But most underworld activities are carried out in remote areas and even if someone has information they withhold it from law-enforcing agencies for fear of serious underworld reprisal. It is therefore imperative that clandestine channels of information collection be protected to assist the anti-poaching staff.

The field investigation carried out in illegal wildlife markets in Myanmar showed that products such as tiger bone, ivory, rhino horn and bear bile are imported into Myanmar through the porous western borders of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram and Nagaland in north-east India. Wildlife products from Assam move out of the state through two

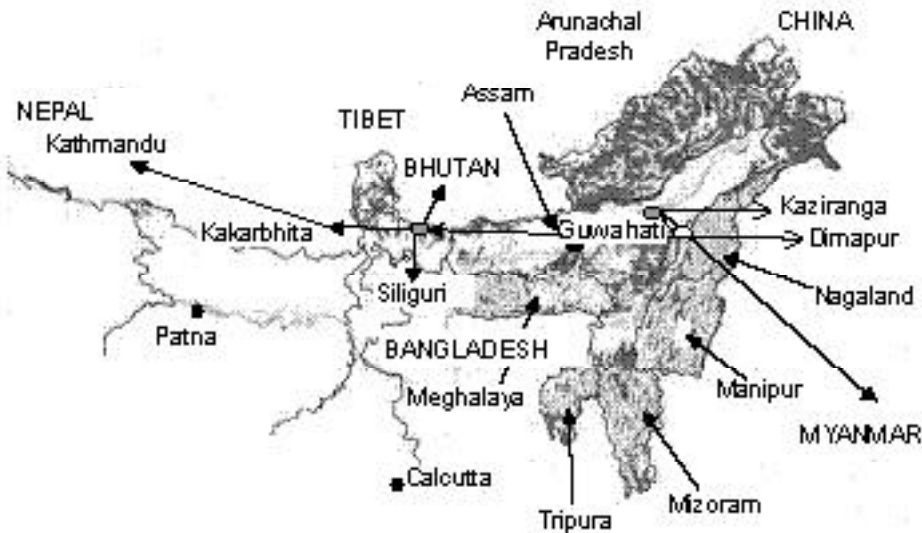


Figure 1. Rhino horn trade routes from Assam to Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal.

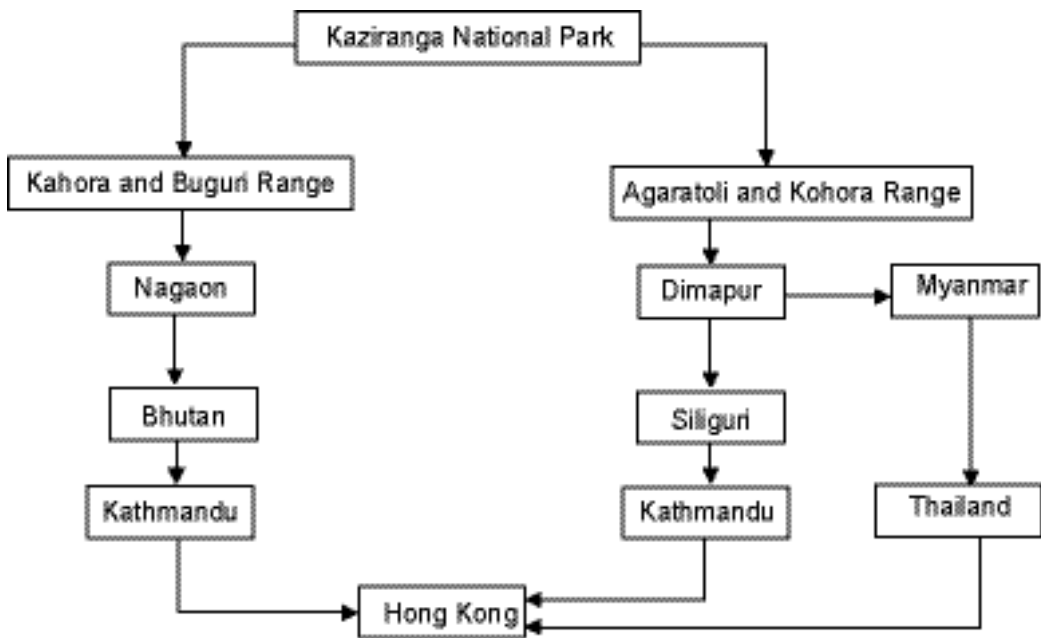


Figure 2. Routes for smuggling rhino horn from Assam to Hong Kong.

The current investigation showed that these two routes are the major routes for smuggling rhino horn from Assam to the international market. The buyer groups that operate from Dimapur in Nagaland have agents in various districts of Assam, mainly in Golaghat, Kamrup, Karbi-Anglong, Nagaon and Tezpur (fig. 3). When poachers in the eastern part of Kaziranga National

Park kill a rhino, it is most probable that the horn will be transported to Dimapur. Hekte Sema and Chettan Subba in Dimapur are the big buyers. The horns are then sent to Kathmandu through Siliguri with some portion sent to Myanmar through the Nagaland–Manipur border with Myanmar. Not as much rhino horn is transported from Assam to Myanmar as to Nepal.



Figure 3. Assam state showing districts.

This study found that poaching elephants for their ivory has increased in the forest, especially outside the protected area network. From 1998 until 2002, more than 17 elephants were poached in various parts of Assam exclusively for their ivory, including one big elephant at Laokhowa Wildlife Sanctuary. In parts of Meghalaya in north-eastern India, elephants are also killed for their meat, which is dried and stored. The agents involved in the project have determined that some 14 elephants were killed for meat along the Assam–Meghalaya border, especially in Kamrup and Goalpara Districts. According to available records, 18 elephants were killed in Assam in 1997, 20 in 1998, 12 in 1999, 20 in 2000, increasing to a loss of 61 in 2001 and 39 in 2002, making a total of 170 killed over the six-year period. Maintenance of records on elephant poaching is poor, however, especially in the forest areas outside the protected area network. Poor record-keeping occurs throughout India. It is possible that poachers have killed many more elephants in the reserved forest areas of Assam without the forest staff having noticed.

In Manas National Park, which is also a World Heritage Site, records show that from 1990 to 2002, poachers taking advantage of ethnic unrest in the area killed 38 elephants. Such ivory is taken to Siliguri and sold in Kathmandu. On two occasions, the ivory was sent to Myanmar through Assam and Nagaland. In 1999 about 30 tusks were seized near Shillong in Meghalaya on their way to Myanmar through Meghalaya and Mizoram. Much more ivory than rhino horn is transported to Myanmar from north-eastern India, because Myanmar towns such as Mandalay still have big ivory-carving industries.

Conclusion

With this kind of well-organized chain of connection among poachers and smugglers involved in wildlife trafficking kept in mind, it is essential to prepare an action plan to break the chain poachers and smugglers follow. Hence it is imperative that a state like Assam in India, which has many endangered species, adopts both an anti-poaching strategy and an anti-wildlife trade

strategy. The rationale for an anti-poaching strategy is to minimize the killing of endangered wildlife and for an anti-wildlife trade strategy it is to pinpoint those involved in illegal wildlife trade. In a situation where little funding is available, the limited resources should be used to search for traders rather than poachers. Poaching will be cut back if the market with traders is not there. More vigorous investigation and more severe penalties will aid anti-poaching and law-enforcing agencies in halting wildlife crime and keeping endangered species alive for future generations.

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