

# SMUGGLING ROUTES FOR WEST BENGAL'S RHINO HORN AND RECENT SUCCESSES IN CURBING POACHING

Esmond B. Martin

c/o WWF Regional Office, PO Box 62440, Nairobi, Kenya

Photographs by Esmond B. Martin

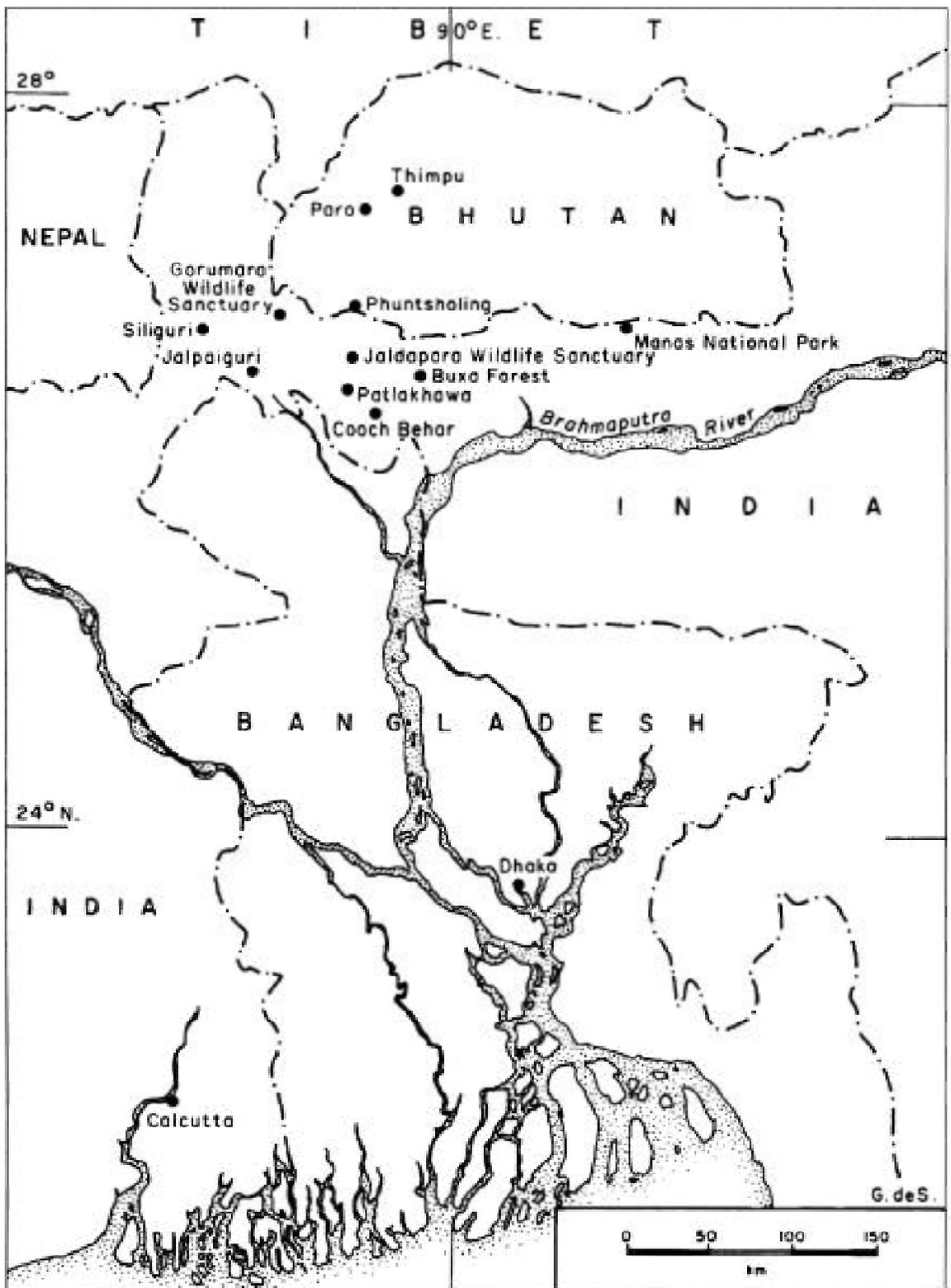
The greater one-horned rhino population in West Bengal is the second largest in India, after Assam. The rhino population in West Bengal declined significantly at the turn of the century, due to legal

hunting; and from 1969 until 1986, nearly all because of poaching. The population is now increasing due to improved conservation efforts (see Table).

Table. Estimates of West Bengal's rhinos, and numbers poached, 1930 to 1993.

Year	Number of rhinos in Jaldapara	Number of rhinos poached in Jaldapara	Number of rhinos in Gorumara	Number of rhinos poached in Gorumara	Total number of rhinos poached in West Bengal
1930/1		c.50			c.50
1932	40-50				
1936/7			4 or 5		
1940			c.12		
1948	c.20				
1952			3		
1953/4	30-56				
1954/5			c.3	1	1
1555/6		2	c.5		2
1956/7			c.4		
1957	c.50				
1958			c.7		
1958/9	c.65		c.8		
1964	72				
1965			14		
1965/6	75				
1968/9	75		12		
1968-72		28		4	32
1971/2			13		
1972/3		6	7		6
1973/4	21		7		
1975	23				
1978	19	1	8		1
1980	22	2			2
1981		1		1	2
1982		3			3
1983		1		1	2
1984		2		1	3
1985		2			2
1986	14		8		
1988	24				
1989	27		12		
1990				1	1
1991		1			1
1992	33	1		1	2
1993	34	1	15		1
<b>Total</b>					<b>111</b>

Sources: Bist, 1994, and Forest Department of West Bengal.



Map of West Bengal and surrounding region.

In the 1890s there were at least 240 rhinos in what is today the state of West Bengal. The majority were in the Jaldapara and Cooch Behar areas (Bist, 1994). By the late 1950s fewer than a hundred were left in West Bengal. According to Bist (1994), there were an estimated 65 in Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary, with a further 10 in the Patlakhawa region close by; around 10 more survived in the Buxa forest area north-east of Cooch Behar, and eight in the Gorumara Wildlife Sanctuary (see map). The main reason for the decline from the 1890s to the 1920s was legal hunting. One man, the Maharajah of Cooch Behar, killed more rhinos than anyone else: 207 between 1871 and 1907 (Nripendra, 1908). After 1932, with the exception of the Maharajah and his family, nobody was allowed to hunt rhinos. The continued decline in rhino numbers was due mainly to poaching for horn exported to eastern Asia. By 1970 the Buxa population had disappeared, as did rhinos from Patlakhawa two years later (Bist, 1994). By 1986, the number of rhinos in West Bengal had dropped to a mere 22, probably the lowest number ever.

Serious poaching occurred from 1968 to 1972 when 32 rhinos were known to have been killed, 28 of them in Jaldapara (Bist, 1994). During the 1970s, officials raided houses surrounding Jaldapara and Gorumara and some rhino horns were found, but there were very few convictions. The methods used by poaching gangs and trading syndicates were too sophisticated for the Forest Department staff. There were at least three groups involved in rhino poaching in Jaldapara during the 1970s. Their family names were “Karjee”, “Baraik” (both belonging to the Mech community) and “Tamang” (from Nepal), according to S.C. Dey (Additional Inspector General of Forests, Wildlife, Government of India) who was working in West Bengal at that time (pers. comm., 1995). After a poacher had killed a rhino, he would immediately escape from the sanctuary and tell another member of the gang to go and fetch the horn from the carcass. This made it more difficult for the authorities to apprehend all the gang members (B.K. Bardhana Roy, Conservator of Forests, Wildlife, West Bengal, pers. comm., 1980).

The last serious poaching in West Bengal occurred in 1972/3 when six rhinos were killed in Jaldapara. The aftermath of the fighting in East Pakistan (which in 1971 became Bangladesh) was a major cause of this, since the breakdown of law and order encouraged poachers and traders to enter neighbouring West Bengal.

In the late 1960s in the northern part of West Bengal, there was some demand for rhino horn for use in



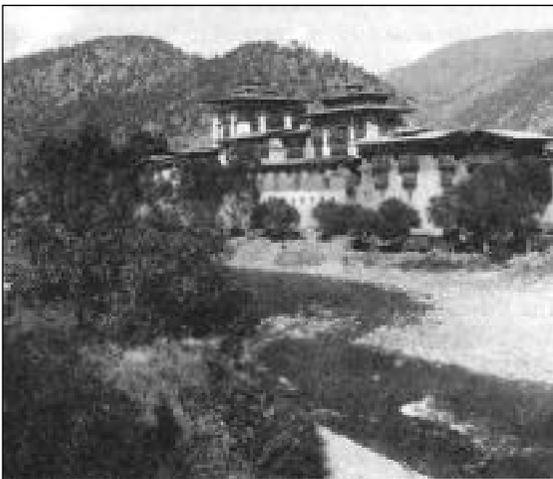
*Signs are seen around the tea plantations near Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary for the purpose of encouraging local concern for rhinos.*

medicines, but this had declined sharply by the early 1970s (Dey, pers. comm., 1993). In the 1960s and 1970s most horn was smuggled by various trading syndicates to Calcutta. It was then exported illegally from Calcutta to eastern Asia (Bardhana Roy, pers. comm., 1980). Demand in West Bengal and elsewhere in India was insignificant compared with such places as Singapore and Hong Kong where also the price for the horn was far higher. Although officials knew that Calcutta was the main exit point for rhino horn during this period, almost no horns were intercepted nor traders convicted. In 1978, however, at Calcutta's Dum Dum airport one horn was seized which had been consigned to Japan, the address of the sender being a Calcutta cemetery. In addition, there was strong evidence that some horn from West Bengal was sent at that time to Phuntsholing in Bhutan, via traders living in and around Hasimara, near Jaldapara (Dey, pers. comm., 1995).

The number of rhinos poached in West Bengal fell to an average of only one a year from 1974 to 1989 (see Table). This was partly because more Forest Department staff were employed to protect the dwindling rhino population (Bardhana Roy, pers. comm., 1980) and because well-trained and armed homeguards and members of the national voluntary force were brought in and deployed in the Jaldapara Sanctuary to support the field forest staff in patrolling



*Greater one-horned rhinos exist in three areas in India Assam with about 1,400, northern West Bengal with 47, and Dudhwa National Park in Uttar Pradesh with a re-introduced population of 12.*



*The Government of Bhutan strictly limits the number of foreign visitors to the country in order to maintain the people's traditional Buddhist culture. Few foreign conservationists are thus aware of Bhutan's trade in wildlife products.*

(Dey, pers. comm., 1995). Employing local people ensured co-operation from the community, some of whom knew the secret plans of the poachers (J. T. Mathew, Divisional Forest Officer, Wild Life Division II, Jalpaiguri, pers. comm., 1993).

During the early 1990s, rhino poaching continued at low levels in both Jaldapara and Gorumara, with a total of five animals killed from 1990 to 1993 (see Table). Illicit hunters today are mostly West Bengalis, Bangladeshi refugees (often landless) and sometimes inhabitants of Assam. Both sanctuaries are surrounded by a huge and impoverished human population, which increases poaching pressure on the two small areas (in 1994 Jaldapara covered 216km<sup>2</sup> and Gorumara a mere 8.5km<sup>2</sup>). The poachers are organised into gangs by middlemen from West Bengal, Nepal and possibly Bhutan. The gangs usually kill rhinos in the early morning or late afternoon but sometimes hunt at night during a full moon. A typical gang consists of five

people: one shoots the rhino (using a muzzle-loader or modem rifle), the others remove the horn and hooves; on rare occasions (such as in 1991) the male reproductive organs are removed (V.K. Yadav, formerly Attached Officer, Wild Life Division II, Jalpaiguri, pers. comm., 1993). There are no records of meat being taken from a rhino. The poachers then bury the carcass to avoid detection.

Poachers are paid for each horn they obtain rather than by weight. In 1993 the price per kilo was from \$640 to \$896. Usually the killer, who is often the gang leader, will receive twice as much as the others. Sometimes the middleman who organises the gang pays up to half the money in advance and may supply the gun and ammunition.

From the 1960s even until the early 1980s, most rhino horn was exported to eastern Asia via Calcutta. This important smuggling route lessened progressively from the 1980s as officials increased their vigilance, with several forest check posts along the main road leading to the city (Mathew, pers. comm., 1995).

A second route for the movement of rhino horn from West Bengal then developed through the town of Siliguri (where several of the traders live) to Nepal. In 1985, the Indian authorities arrested a man with a rhino horn, who was on a bus in Siliguri ready to depart for Nepal. This has not become a major smuggling route, however, as Nepal is not an end market for rhino horn, and the authorities there are alert to the problem, having to control their own country's rhino poaching and rhino horn smuggling.

So through which route has most of West Bengal's rhino horn been leaving India in recent years? From confidential sources in West Bengal, Assam and Bhutan, it appears that traders in Bhutan from at least the mid-1980s to the present have been buying the majority of West Bengal's horns. Usually the horns are taken overland from Siliguri to Phuntsholing on the border with India in south-west Bhutan (see map). Phuntsholing is a trading town and, unlike other parts of the country, Indians can go there without a visa. Many Indian businessmen, especially Marwaris, as well as traders from Nepal and Bhutan, visit Phuntsholing in order to buy and sell various goods. Rhino horns from West Bengal are brought to Phuntsholing sometimes by people of the Bodo tribe (originally from Assam) living in West Bengal (where they are called "Mech"). In 1992 they sold the horns to Bhutanese for around \$8,600 a kilo. Bodos also bring to Phuntsholing horns from rhinos poached in Assam, especially from Manas National Park.



*In the northern part of West Bengal elephants are responsible for considerable crop damage so electric wires are put up as a deterrent Rhinos, however, cause very little damage compared with elephants.*

There are three main pieces of evidence verifying Phuntsholing's role in the rhino horn trade. First, there have been several seizures of Indian horns in and around this town. There has even been some trade in African rhino horn. In 1984, one African horn weighing 2.2 kilos was confiscated by Indian officials. Second, the state governments of India pay informers who have reported on this trade route. And third, a Bhutanese Princess educated at Cambridge University, Dekichoden Wangchuck, aunt of the present King (the King's father's half sister) was arrested at Taipei's Chiang Kai-shek airport in September 1993 with 22 Indian rhino horns, the biggest consignment of Asian horns ever intercepted in Taiwan.

The Princess's 22 horns ranged in weight from less than 100gm to over one kilo with a total weight of 14.9 kilos. Nearly all the horns would have originated from Assam, especially Manas, but a few could have come from West Bengal. In an interview carried out by Joe Loh of TRAFFIC Taipei on 20 September 1993, she claimed to have obtained these horns from Indian traders coming to Bhutan during the previous year. She explained that she owned a company (Dezany Beverages) near Phuntsholing and that businessmen periodically offered

---

her horns. She denied buying any horns directly from poachers. This Princess had bought the horns for \$6,666 a kilo on average. She said she knew there was a major demand for them in Hong Kong, so first she flew there with the horns, but she did not have “reliable” contacts among Hong Kong’s medicinal traders and after 15 days failed to find a buyer. She then went to Taipei where she was arrested after officials found the horns, using a routine x-ray machine.

Bhutanese smugglers usually transport rhino horn by road from Phuntsholing to the only airport in the country at Paro. The airport was opened in the early 1980s, but only the national airline, Druk Air, is allowed to use it, due to the hazards of landing and taking off in the high mountains. The airline at first used two small German-made aeroplanes (Dorniers) to fly to Calcutta, Dhaka and Kathmandu. In the mid-1980s one BAE 146 aircraft (with four jet engines,



*Farmers living near Jaldapara sit on “machans ‘or elevated platforms, such as this one, scaring away wild animals at night from their fields.*



*In the dining room of the Maharajah of Cooch Behar's Palace, rhino heads decorated the walls until the Palace was abandoned by the family in the early 1970s.*

---

carrying 70 people) was introduced to fly to Kathmandu, Dhaka, Calcutta, Delhi and Bangkok in order to replace the smaller Dorniers. In 1992, Druk Air obtained another BAE 146. From 1985 to the present, nearly all the horns from Bhutan have been transported by Druk Air, probably to Dhaka and Bangkok. Other trade routes from Bhutan are unlikely. It is very improbable that rhino horn sold in Bhutan would be sent back by road to neighbouring India or to Nepal as neither country is an end market and there would be more chance of the horns being detected. Rhino horns would not be moved northwards through Tibet, due to the lack of a modern transport system to Tibet, nor to China because the Chinese cannot afford to buy Asian rhino horns, which are ten times the price of African horns.

A few knowledgeable officials in the Indian state governments have known that influential Bhutanese have been exporting rhino horn at least since the mid 1980s. Some of these Bhutanese have diplomatic passports which notoriously assist them to move rhino horn from one country to another as their luggage is rarely inspected. (Bhutanese do not have diplomatic immunity in Taiwan, however, as their government does not recognise Taiwan as a country; this explains the Princess's 1993 arrest.) In 1994, one trader from Bhutan's capital, Thimpu, even had the audacity to use a business card stating that he was a trader in rhino horn.

With the continuing demand for rhino horn, the government of West Bengal in the last few years has improved its intelligence gathering and law enforcement efforts concerning rhino poaching, and the Forest Department has increased the budget for both Jaldapara and Gorumara. In 1993 Jaldapara employed 105 staff, and had 48 firearms, four vehicles and at least 12 domestic elephants. The total budget for the financial year 1993/94 (including capital costs and an eco-development scheme to help improve the standard of living for villagers surrounding the sanctuary) was \$847 per km<sup>2</sup>, one of the highest budgets in Asia. In 1993 the Gorumara sanctuary employed two foresters, six forest guards and 15 casual daily labourers who also helped to protect the area. The staff possessed at least four guns and two domestic elephants. This tiny sanctuary spends even more money per km<sup>2</sup> than Jaldapara.

The recent improvement in intelligence gathering and the increase in money allocated to Jaldapara and Gorumara have been effective in curbing rhino poaching. The rhino population of Jaldapara has increased from 14 animals in 1986 to 34 in 1993, an annual increase of 13.5% which is one of the highest recorded in the world. Gorumara had eight rhinos in 1986 and 15 in 1993.

In order for the Jaldapara and Gorumara rhino populations to continue expanding, the West Bengal Forest Department will have to keep spending relatively large amounts of money to protect the sanctuaries and maintain its intelligence network for identifying poachers, traders and trade routes. Appropriate action must be taken against all those involved in this illicit trade, from the poor poacher to the top trader.

## Postscript

By the end of 1995 the rhino population of Jaldapara had increased to 35 and Gorumara had 18. West Bengal's rhinos include two sub-adult males which were introduced in October 1995 from Assam to improve the gene pools of the two rhino populations. Gorumara was made a National Park in 1995 and was increased in area to 79.45km<sup>2</sup>.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to WWF International and the Wildlife Conservation Society for funding this research in India in 1993, and to B.K. Bardhana Roy, S.S. Bist, S.C. Dey, A. Kumar, J.T. Mathew, V. Menon, M.K. Nandi, J. Williams and V.K. Yadav, for their valuable information. S.C. Dey and J.T. Mathew and Nigel Leader-Williams were very helpful in reading the original manuscript and for giving their important comments.

## REFERENCES

- Bist, S.S. (1994) Population History of Great Indian Rhinoceros in North Bengal and Major Factors Influencing the Same. *Zoos' Print*. IX, No. 3-4, 42-51.
- Nripendra Narayan Bhupa, Maharajah of Cooch Behar (1908) *Thirty-seven Years of Big Game Shooting in Cooch Behar the Duars, and Assam. a, Rough Diary*. Times Press, Bombay.