
THE GREATER ONE-HORNED RHINO OUTSIDE PROTECTED AREAS IN ASSAM, INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

The range of the greater one-horned rhinoceros, *Rhinoceros unicornis*, once extended over large parts of the Indo-gangetic plains. However, the species is now confined to a few pockets of Assam, the northern part of West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Nepal. Numbering less than 2,200, the greater one-horned rhinoceros is a globally endangered species under continuous threat from poachers and encroachers. A detailed account of its distribution, including records of stray rhinos, was documented by Choudhury (1985) but no further reports on the status of the species outside protected areas have been published. This paper presents an account of the present status of the greater one-horned rhino outside the national parks and wildlife sanctuaries in different parts of Assam, as well as providing past records. It is extremely important to monitor the rhino population outside the network of protected areas in order to obtain a comprehensive picture of the overall status of the species.

PERMANENT AND SEMI-PERMANENT LOCALITIES

Burhachapori Reserved Forest: This 44km² grassy tract is located just north of Laokhowa Wildlife Sanctuary, in Sonitpur district. The habitat in Burhachapori and Laokhowa is contiguous and until the "massacre" of rhinos in the latter area in 1983, both areas formed an important rhino habitat. Since then, stray rhinos have appeared regularly, mostly from Kaziranga National Park. In 1989, the author found a lone animal in Burhachapori. At present, three to four rhinos make frequent visits to the area. Burhachapori is in the process of being declared a wildlife sanctuary (only the Gazette Notification is awaited).

Pani-Dihing: This is a complex of ox-bow lakes, marshes and channels with elephant grass, in Sibsagar district, covering about 40km² (21km² is reserved forest). Pani-Dihing was a known rhino habitat, and a small population was always present until the last animal was shot by poachers in April, 1987

(Choudhury, 1991). However, in 1993, two rhinos from Kaziranga travelled to this area and settled down. In about March 1993, one of the rhinos crossed the Burhi-Dihing river and entered the Dihingmukh Reserved Forest of Dibrugarh district.

Kuruwa-Mandakata: Kuruwa is a small grassy tract on the north bank of the Brahmaputra river in Darrang district while Mandakata is a village with an ox-bow lake, a marsh and some grassland in Kamrup district. Both the areas are adjacent to each other. The rhino was a familiar animal of the area until about the late 1980s. At present a couple of rhinos are reported frequently. The area is not far from Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary and a few animals regularly move out of the sanctuary, often crossing the Brahmaputra river to Kuruwa.

Tatimora Chapori: This area is located north-east of Guwahati city and west of the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary. Rhinos in small numbers are seen regularly in the area and originate from the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary.

Matmora: Until the early 1980s, some seven to eight rhinos frequented the grasslands around Matmora, in Lakhimpur district. The last rhino of the area fell to poachers in 1985. This animal was born near Matmora and was reportedly habituated and very tame. A stray rhino passed through the area in early 1995 and was sighted in the Sisi-Kalghar area of Dhemaji district, north-east of Matmora.

Khatonibari Soil Conservation Area: This 4km² plantation of the Soil Conservation Department in Sonitpur district has no resident rhino population. But due to its location, just north of Kaziranga, across the Brahmaputra, rhinos are seen frequently. In November-December 1989, one rhino stayed in the area for more than a month. In September 1990, two rhinos, which strayed up to the border of Arunachal Pradesh, were chased by Forest Department personnel to this area where they remained for a few days. In June-July 1995, one rhino was seen in the area and it moved into the Monabari tea estate.

Kukurakata Reserved Forest: This is a hilly forest located west of Kaziranga (16km² in area). A few rhinos are located within the area. However, it is during the monsoon floods that more than 20 to 25 animals take shelter in the highlands of Kukurakata.

Bagser Reserved Forest: Also located near Kaziranga, towards the south-west, this reserved forest is located mostly on the hills with a patch of flat land towards the north-east (34km² in area). It is located in Nagaon district. Stray rhinos regularly move to the area from Kaziranga. The flat land, which is suitable for a resident rhino population, is heavily disturbed by man and hence there is no permanent rhino population.

STRAY RECORDS

Lakhimpur District: In March 1966, a lone rhino was killed by Mising (tribal) poachers near Merbeel (“beel” means ox-bow lakes and depressions, also marshes) in Dhakuakhana Sub-division. In the late 1970s, one rhino was reportedly seen near Lamugaon, not far from Merbeel. Two rhinos were reported from the Bebejia area of Dhakuakhana in 1985-87. In 1987-88, these rhinos traveled eastwards but no further report was received of their whereabouts.

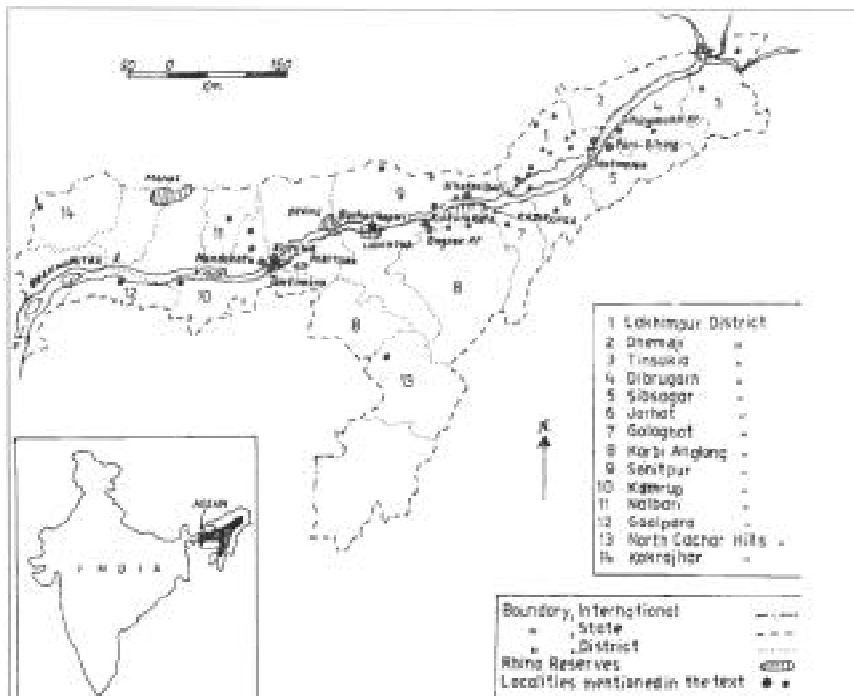
In about 1986, a female with a grown calf came to Pabha Reserved Forest. They traveled north-east to

reach Dulung Reserved Forest from where they traveled south, then south-east. After crossing the Brahmaputra river, they entered Sibsagar district. In the same year, a lone rhino was seen in Kadam Reserved Forest by the locals and forest staff.

In 1987, a lone rhino was recorded near Joihing river in Kakoi Reserved Forest. It then moved up to Panir Reserved Forest of Arunachal Pradesh. In 1988, a lone rhino was sighted again by the locals near the confluence of Korha and Charikaria rivers in Dhakuakhana Sub-division. It traveled up to Thekeraguri.

In 1992, two rhinos appeared near Dhunaguri which were chased back to Kaziranga by the forest staff. A villager was injured in Borchapori in 1992-93 by a rhino. In the last week of January 1995, a lone rhino entered the Narayanpur area and travelled north up to Drupong Reserved Forest of Arunachal Pradesh. Then it traveled south to near Silikaguri where it was speared to death by Mising poachers when it was trapped in a small swamp. Near Silikarugi, a few rhinos are seen during almost every winter. For instance, on 30-31 December 1994, two adults with a calf each were seen in the area.

Tinsukia District: In the early 1970s, a lone rhino was spotted by the villagers in the Kochuoni Pather area near Dighaltarang. The animal had roamed about in the area covering Baghajan, Motapung and Dibru Reserved



A map of Assam, displaying the districts, protected areas and reserves of most localities mentioned in the text.

Forest (now part of Dibru-Saikhowa Wildlife Sanctuary). In 1971-72, a rhino had strayed up to the Nagaon village of Sadiya sub-division.

Dibrugarh District: In about the mid-1980s, two rhinos were seen in Namdang Reserved Forest. A lone rhino which had crossed over from Pani-Dihing area of Sibsagar, was still roaming in Dihingmukh Reserved Forest until mid-1994 (and may still be there).

Sibsagar District: One person was injured by a stray rhino in Putai village near Mathurapur in January 1979. The forest staff then chased the rhino to Diroi (Rangoli) Reserved Forest.

Jorhat District: Because of the close proximity to Kaziranga National Park, a few rhinos wander into the riverine areas of the Brahmaputra river, especially Majuli, every year. In January 1993, the carcass of a rhino was found in the Luit suti of Majuli. In January 1994, a lone animal appeared at the fringe of Jorhat town while three were seen in Majuli.

Golaghat District: Part of Kaziranga is located in this district and hence rhinos in small numbers regularly move out to the neighbouring paddy fields and tea plantations. In February 1993, a lone rhino entered a tea plantation near Ghiladari. In January 1994, one such stray animal was shot dead by poachers near Barua Bamungaon.

Karbi Anglong District: Since Kaziranga lies in the north of this district, a few rhinos often wander into the area, especially during the floods. The rhinos also climb to the hill-tops of the northernmost range of Karbi Plateau, while foraging.

Sonitpur District: Rhinos regularly cross the Brahmaputra river and enter different parts of Sonitpur District, especially Panpur Reserved Forest, Khatonibari and even Tezpur town (the latest to appear near the town was seen in July 1995). In 1978, a female with a calf were seen in Soni-Rupai sanctuary (not a notified protected area) by the forest staff (T. Nath, pers. comm.). In April-May 1990, a rhino traveled through Nameri Wildlife Sanctuary. In September 1990, two rhinos from Kaziranga traveled to Behali and Biswanath Reserved Forests along the Borgang river up to Arunachal Pradesh. Later on the forest staff chased them to Khatonibari, opposite Kaziranga National Park.

Kamrup, Nalbari, and Goalpara Districts: In December 1983 and January 1984, a lone rhino traveled from Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary to near Nalbari town. Then it moved south-west and crossed the Brahmaputra river. The author observed the animal near Nagarbera, in Kamrup district, on 23 January 1984. After that, the animal moved west and reached

the vicinity of Goalpara town from where it was captured in mid-March 1984, and flown to Dudhwa National Park under a translocation programme (Choudhury, 1985).

In March 1992, two people were killed by a rhino in Kamrup District, one near Kamalpur and the other near Rangiya. The rhino then moved towards Nalbari.

North Cachar Hills District: In the early 1970s, a stray rhino was spotted by the villagers in the northwestern part of the district. The site was in Sikilangso village, a Karbi (tribal) hamlet near Garampani (Umrongso). The animal apparently came from Nagaon District and had followed the Kopili river valley.

Kokrajhar District: E.P. Gee in 1964 had estimated that two to three rhinos were left in the Sankosh river valley (in the Kochungaon Reserved Forest). There has been no recent report from this area and perhaps no rhinos remain now.

CONCLUSION

Although the rhino population in Assam has increased in numbers since the beginning of this century, the population outside the protected areas has declined sharply. This is mainly due to poaching for rhino horn rather than habitat loss. Of the permanent and semi-permanent localities, it is only in Burhachapori and Pani-Dihing that rhinos can flourish again, provided sufficient protection measures are taken. While Burhachapori has already been declared a wildlife sanctuary, there is a proposal to develop Pani-Dihing as a wildlife sanctuary for water-birds.

As far as stray animals are concerned, it is very difficult to give adequate protection, since individual animals often wander as far as about 200km (Choudhury, 1985).

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