

## Green cry: NGO wants steps to save one horn rhino in Kaziranga



Comments 10



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Since its inception Nature's Beckon has been working with dedication for the protection of the wildlife of Assam as well as for their conservation. The organization has persistently worked to prevent poaching of wild animals and to stop the illegal trade of wildlife and their parts.

The organization has stopped the illegal mobile zoos and handed over the animals to forest department. Illegal wild animals of circus party, like, tigers, lions, elephants, monkeys etc; have also been handed over to the forest department by Nature's Beckon.

Further, the trade on non-human primates has been stopped totally in Assam through community conservation programmes and by people's involvement in anti-poaching campaign in Assam.

Nature's Beckon produced various communication tools like books, booklets, brochures, posters, stickers, audio-visuals, slides, photographs etc, and extensively used those throughout the state to create awareness vis-à-vis to prevent poaching of wildlife in Assam.

Nature's Beckon has also exposed the involvement of some of the government employees in poaching and who were subsequently arrested and prosecuted.

Every year the activists of Nature's Beckon from different districts of Assam unearthed wild animals kept under illegal confinement and handed over these animals to the forest department. Such illegally confined animals are usually Python, Monitor lizard, Hornbill, Burn owl, Bear cub, Hillock Gibbon, Leopard cub, Dear and migratory birds. Unearthing of wild animals from the illegal confinement and handing them over to the proper authorities by Nature's Beckon, have often been reported in local newspapers.

International Primate Protection League (IPPL), USA, has highly motivated Nature's Beckon in their anti-poaching campaign.

Nature's Beckon is also deeply involved in preventing the poaching of other big mammals of the forests of Assam, particularly, rhinos, elephants, tigers and leopards.

From 1st July to 15th July 2007, the organization undertook a survey in the fringe villages of Kaziranga National Park to know about the problems of protecting the wildlife of Kaziranga and also to assess the villagers' socio-economic problems and their attitude towards Kaziranga National Park. We walked through muddy roads in incessant rain to visit the peripheral villages of Kaziranga National Park, namely, Sildufi (I), Kohora(II), Baghmari, Englepathar, Haldibari, Moukhowa, Dagaon, Bezgaon, Gosanibor, Panbari, Bamungaon, Dhowa Ati, Sarogaon etc. In these villages we observed that most of the villagers are living in great hardship and they have been exploited and deprived by the Kaziranga National Park authorities.

Almost every day, the crops of the poor villagers are destroyed by wild elephants, water buffalos, rhinos, deer etc. Wild elephants also enter the villages and destroy their houses and other properties. Almost in every village, we saw crippled villagers and came to know that they were victim of the attacks of some wild animals of Kaziranga National Park. Cattle population and other livestocks of the villagers are often destroyed by the predators of the Kaziranga National Park.

It is sad episode that none of the villagers living in the periphery of Kaziranga National Park were compensated by the Park authorities of Kaziranga, inspite of having the strict provisions for providing compensation to such villagers by the forest department.

Shri PP Verma, Principal Secretary to the Government of Assam, Department of Environment and Forest, Dispur, in his circular No. FRW. 63/2003/10 dated 19.1.2004, directed the Chief Conservator of Forest (Wildlife) to give ex-gratia grant for loss of human lives and damages to crops and properties caused by wild animals under the Centrally sponsored scheme 'Project Elephant'. In this circular it is also mentioned that persons affected by the depredation of wild animals would be entitled for ex-gratia grant for the loss of life, damage to crops and property.

In response to our enquiry, Shri SS Bist, Inspector General of Forest (IGF) and Director Project Elephant, Govt of India, Ministry of Environment and Forest, informed us officially vide his memo dated 6.7.2004, that from 'Project Elephant' a sum of Rs.116 lakh has been paid to Assam in the year 2002-2003.

On 28th July 2006 a big public meeting was organized by Nature's Beckon in Kohora, which is the main centre of Kaziranga. All the village heads and prominent citizens of the area participated in this meeting. Prof Jawaharlal Dutta, Chairman, Pollution Control Board, Assam, Nava Thakuria, Secretary, Guwahati Press Club, Lohit Deka of All India Radio, Dibrugarh, Apurba Ballabh Goswami, Senior Journalist, Manju Pujari, Principal, Kaziranga National Park School, youth leader Subhas Dutta, Akhil Gogoi of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti and others took part in this meeting. In this meeting all the speakers demanded that the villagers living on the periphery of Kaziranga should not be deprived of and the forest department should work in close cooperation with the fringe villagers honestly for the protection and conservation of wildlife of the Kaziranga National Park.

On 14th August 2006, we formally informed Shri Rakibul Hussain, the

Minister of Forest and Environment, Assam, about the actual situation of the Kaziranga National Park and the peripheral villages. Unfortunately, the forest minister did not pay any interest for the protection of Kaziranga National Park.

This indifferent attitude of the forest minister towards Kaziranga National Park compelled the villagers to protest and sit on dharna in front of the main gate of Kaziranga. Nature's Beckon also took part in this dharna held on 11th September 2006. A huge amount of grants and donations are received every year for the welfare of wildlife and maintenance of the Kaziranga National Park. But almost all these funds are made to vanish by the corrupt forest officials and the politicians under whose guidance the officials operate.

After the random poaching of 18 rhinos in Kaziranga National Park in the year 2007, Nature's Beckon organized hunger strike at the Guwahati Press Club, as a protest and to draw the attention of the ministers and officials of the forest department. But most unfortunately, Shri Rakibul Hussain, the Forest Minister of Assam did not take any step to prevent poaching of rhinos in Kaziranga National Park.

On 5th November 2007, we appealed to the CCF, Wildlife under the Right to Information Act 2005, to inform us about the number of rhino horns which are kept in the custody of the forest department. We are surprised to know from him that only 1,498 horns are there in the custody of Assam forest department.

From 1980 to 1995 during the period of 15 years 1,509 rhinos died in Assam. From this estimate it can easily be imagined that during the period of 35 years i.e. from 1972 to 2007 few thousands of rhinos might have died in Assam. But only 1,498 horns are there in the custody of Assam forest department, which is abnormally low.

Such abnormally low figure compels one to think that quite a huge number of rhino horns are missing from the forest department's custody.

We suspect that rhino horns from the custody of the forest department some how reach to the international rhino horn traders. Unless this hidden trade of rhino horns is stopped, the poaching of rhinos will continue in Assam.

In 1972 Government of India has prohibited hunting of wildlife and their trade by enacting Wildlife Protection Act 1972. India is a party to Conservation on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora 1976 (CITES). Hence it is bound by all its efforts to eliminate international trade in rhino and rhino horns.

We have authentic information that in 1972 and thereafter forest department of Assam sold rhino horns. Our source reveals the following numbers of rhino horns were sold.

Years :1971- 72 (29), 1972-73 (13), 1973-74 (19),1974-75 (40),1975-76 (18), 1976-78 (27),1977-78 (42),1978-79 (63),1978-79 (63),1979-80 (61)  
= Total: 312

At a press conference held at the Guwahati Press Club on the 4th February, 2008, Nature's Beckon made their stand clear on the poaching of wildlife and their trade in Assam. In this conference Nature's Beckon demanded a CBI inquiry on the stock of wildlife parts in the custody of Assam forest department as well as about the poaching of rhinos, elephants, tigers and leopards in Assam. On 18th February, 2008, Nature's Beckon has also submitted an appeal to the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Assam for a CBI inquiry on the stock of wildlife parts in the custody of Assam forest department as well as about the poaching of

rhinos, elephants, tigers and leopards in Assam.

We would request the National and International Civil Societies, NGOs, environmental journalists and individual nature lovers to appeal Shrimati Sonia Gandhi, Chairperson, UPA and Shri Tarun Gogoi, Chief Minister of Assam, India, to make a CBI inquiry about poaching of one horned rhinos of Assam and about the illegal trade in wildlife parts in Assam.

***By Soumyadeep Datta***

*Note: The letter has already been sent to Shrimati Sonia Gandhi, UPA chairperson and Shri Tarun Gogoi, chief minister of Assam.*

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editor

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