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Conservation Crisis of the Greater One Horned Rhino

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Despite the efforts being made to improve the conservation of the greater one horned rhino, government agencies have failed to realize it and poaching of the threatened species has been continuing in the 430 sq. km large (Talukdar, 2000). Kaziranga National Park (KNP) in Assam, India. Recent data on the status of poaching in KNP reveals several alarming trends. As per the latest figures this year a total of 41 adult rhinos were killed by poachers. A thorough research should be carried out in the state in areas where the poachers have some influence in order to find out the extent of poverty and unemployment of the people living in those areas. The impact of the government's poverty alleviation and employment generation schemes should and the extent of skill mapping also be examined. Park officials had disclosed in the media that a manhunt for the poachers was still on in KNP. Officials said that poachers might have holed up in villages adjoining the park and intelligence gathering has been stepped up. Recently the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has been investigating the killings of rhinos in the National Park. This is a welcome step taken by the Centre given the alarming rise in the number of killings of rhinos by poachers. Kaziranga is an ideal rhino habitat as two-thirds of the area of the Park is nutrient-rich grassland and it therefore holds more rhinos than any other park or sanctuary in Asia (Vigne and Martin, 1994). Given the population count of rhinos here, it also attracts poachers who cater to the huge market for rhino horns. In this year itself, till date, around 41 rhinos have been killed, some even having their horns sawed off while still alive. Dozens of others have died in floods. These killings have sparked off widespread protests by conservation groups as well as the general masses.

In spite of the nefarious activities of the poachers, the rhino population in Assam has continued to rise. The rhino population in Kaziranga national park increased from 1164 in 1993 to 1552 in 1999 and subsequently, it has increased 2329 in 2012. Though this is good news, the increasing demand for rhino horns and the consequent poaching attempts are challenges that still have no solutions. In general, poachers have used various techniques to kill rhinos. Recently it came to light that sophisticated AK 47 guns were used reportedly by some illegal Karbi group of extremists. They are suspected of trading rhino horns in order to buy guns from Bangladesh, Burma and China. Some sources also pointed out that the effort by the some neighbouring country to create disturbance in India would give a lifeline to the rhino poachers in the days to come. It is a fact that over the years, the active militant groups of northeast India have been using sophisticated weapons manufactured by different companies in China, but it is difficult to prove whether any Chinese official was directly or indirectly involved in providing weapons to the militants. However, the Government of India should take up this issue strongly with the Chinese authorities to stop the flow of weapons manufactured in their country to the hands of the militant groups challenging India's security and using its wildlife as a tool. The biggest challenge before the government, hence, is the threat coming from the local poachers, the home-grown militants, with an objective to kill the world famous one horned rhino in order to purchase the weapons from the foreign country.

Despite all government assurances and efforts, India's best known national park still remains vulnerable to poaching. The reason is the organised poaching groups, the demand in the international market. Currently a horn fetches Rs. 1 crore in the international market. To ensure the future of the rhino in Assam, forest anti-poaching staff needs further government support. Habitat conservation and protection need to be given priority. According to the census conducted in 2012 in the KNP, there are 2329 rhinos included 645 adult males and 684 adult females besides Juvenile and calves (<http://www.ians.in/>). An increase in political instability in the state recently, however, poses a growing threat to the survival of the rhinos. The challenging task of conserving rhinos in Assam is still achievable and hence the following aspects should be carefully considered for effective implementation of rhino conservation policy and programmes. The policy must outline a set of proactive interventions and create the environment and receptivity required for it to be successful:

- An adequate number of well-trained security personnel with requisite technology should be deployed in the National Park
- The incharge of the park and the concerned ministry should be held accountable for any rhino death in the forest occurring due to poaching
- There has been a steady rise in poaching and will remain a major threat to the rhino population. Therefore, anti-poaching efforts have to be improved and maintained. Only coordinated efforts can ensure rhino conservation among the neighbouring villages
- Illegal trade of rhino horns flourishes primarily because of superstitious beliefs that it has tremendous positive influences on the wellbeing of people. Hence it is extremely necessary to create awareness regarding such superstitions among the people
- Collecting information regarding the illegal trade of rhino horns with India's neighbouring country is crucial. If it is able to acquire clinching evidence in this regard then the Government of India should request the country to take legitimate steps to control the abominable activities

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