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## How India's First Conservation Success Came to Be

By: Biswajit Sarmah

*India's first conservation success - the rhino in Kaziranga - came from sustained measures by Assam's political class and by accommodating rural rights. In the 1970s, such models gave way to more centralised and restrictive patterns of conservation.*

In January 2023, the Kaziranga National Park (KNP) turned 115 years old. Home to 2,600 of nearly 4,000 surviving greater one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*), the park is among the most attractive nature tourism sites. In 2021-22, reportedly 2.75 lakh tourists visited the park, breaking all previous records.

Kaziranga and the rhino were early successes in wildlife conservation in India, ahead of the tiger and the lion. The rhino disproved a series of prophecies about how the peasants and graziers, Indian self-rule, and post-Independence regional politics were hostile to wildlife protection. Colonial officials feared that with Independence, Indian politicians – purportedly incapable of appreciating the aesthetic of nature – would undo the reserves to meet the demand for cultivable land. It is also received wisdom that India's ecological restoration began only in the 1970s when environmentalism got a boost under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's leadership. Implicit in this argument is that states rapaciously exploited natural resources, and a wise central leader was needed to pull rank and undo the damage.

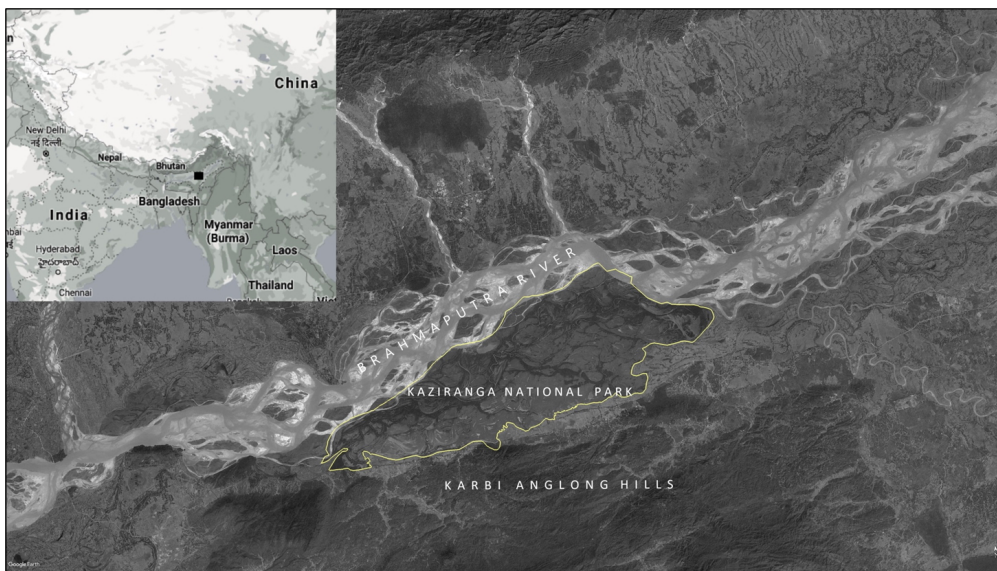
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All of these claims overlook regional efforts. Even before the union government's intervention in the 1970s, the rhino had grown in numbers and became a cultural icon in Assam, offering promise for Assam's economic development. This conservation success – the first in India – was led by regional political leaders stereotyped by many as bereft of appreciation for natural history. Importantly, this success came through careful accommodation of rural rights rather than strict protection.

### Preserving empire's heritage

The colonial government established the Kaziranga Game Reserve in 1908 across 230 square kilometres, one of three reserves to preserve the rhino. (The other two were in Laokhowa and North Kamrup (now Manas National Park.))

At that time, the area was sparsely populated. European military officials, planters, and Indian peasants hunted here. These low-lying floodplains were some of the finest pastures in the province. Once the reserve was established, European hunters relentlessly lobbied the government to expand it into adjacent lands used by shifting cultivators and graziers. They argued that the rhinos could not be protected in the presence of the graziers and peasants around the reserve. The hunters wanted to win shooting rights in the reserve by excluding Indian peasants. This advocacy led to the eviction of 300 families – mostly Nepali graziers and Mishing cultivators and graziers – and two successive expansions that nearly doubled the reserve's area. But unsure about the rhino stock in the reserve's 'impenetrable swamp', the government progressively banned rhino hunting.



In rural society, there was a general restraint in killing rhinos. The rhino, mostly confined to its habitat, was seen as ‘peaceful’. Killing it solely for its horn was considered a lowly act. I am yet to come across an Assamese or tribal legend glorifying rhino hunting, unlike the heroics of hunting the crop-raiding elephant or cattle-lifting carnivore. Rhino killings usually escalated only in times of distress.

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These social norms were vital to the rhino’s survival until and after its preservation began. During the colonial period, patrolling strength in the reserve hardly exceeded seven men. Accommodating rural livelihoods proved immensely useful in enlisting local support in reviving the rhino population up to 100 by the late 1930s. In response to petitions, the forest department in 1925 issued grazing permits to villagers along the southern boundary to keep buffalos inside the reserve. Similar permits were issued to the Nepali graziers on the reserve’s northern side. Still, the forest department viewed the peasants and graziers as fleeting anomalies to be expelled to recover ‘pristine’ nature.

### The rhino: Assam’s global envoy

Until Independence, the rhino hardly featured in Assamese folklore or literature. This was to change: the rhino soon captured the Assamese imagination.

What led to this shift? From the early twentieth century, the Assamese intelligentsia was concerned about Assam’s place in India and the world. They wanted to showcase their rich cultural and political past. The rhino fell into this quest for recognition.

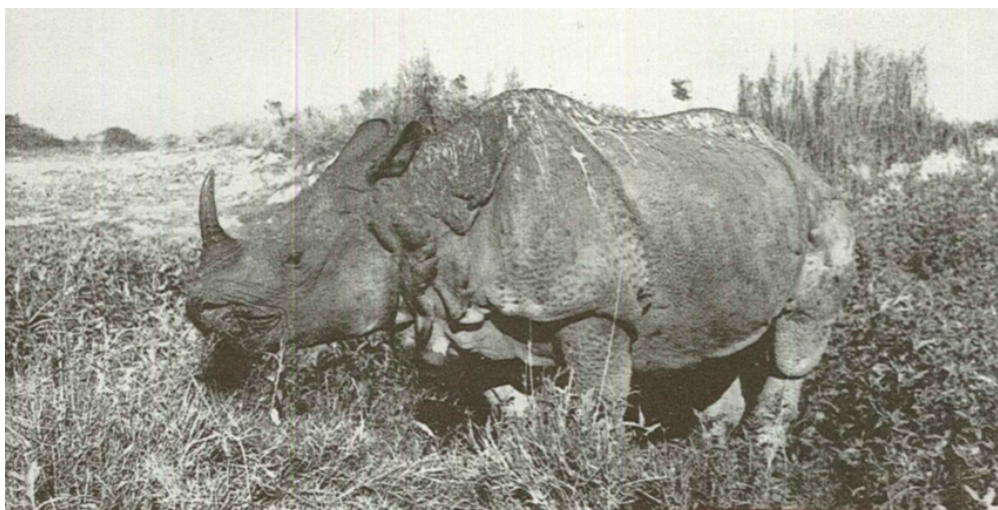
Around Independence, it became clear that rhinos were in demand abroad as magnificent species of natural history. Between 1939 and 1950, the Assam forest department supplied eight rhinos to zoos in the United States, Europe, and Africa. The rhino had become Assam’s global envoy. Many Assamese came to believe that the rhino was exclusively found in Assam, although there were smaller populations in North Bengal and Nepal.

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The post-Independence government of Assam emphasised protecting and popularising the rhino. The top political leadership micromanaged efforts like rephrasing advertisements to popularise the rhino globally. E.P. Gee, a British planter-turned-naturalist, wrote relentlessly on the rhino and Kaziranga to attract a global readership. In 1950, the Assam government renamed the game sanctuary the Kaziranga Wild Life Sanctuary. In 1954, it passed the Assam Rhinoceros Preservation Act, outlawing rhino hunting even outside the sanctuaries. Every death of a rhino, natural or otherwise, had to be investigated and reported to the government.

Until 1955, only a few foreigners were visitors to Kaziranga. To attract tourists, the government built two lodges near the sanctuary: one luxury and another for lower-income groups. Soon, Assamese-speaking government servants, journalists, teachers, and students, thronged the sanctuary. These early visitors to the sanctuary would become voices to demand better protection for the rhino.

Tourists were almost certain to spot Burha Gunda – “old bull” in Assamese – who grazed on a livestock pasture outside the sanctuary. When Burha Gunda died in 1953, Kan Kata replaced him for several years. The survival of these rhinos, sometimes in unpatrolled peripheries, meant a widening social base for rhino conservation, on which the government capitalised without relying on strict protection.



Enthusiastic officers like R.C. Das, a school-teacher-turned-ranger, creatively engaged with the community and youth to draw their support towards rhino conservation. As late as 2017, old-timers in villages bordering Kaziranga recalled him. “In the 1950s, we were in high school. Das used to take us to the sanctuary, probably to make us more conservation-minded,” an octogenarian remembered.

Officials relied on the loyalty of the graziers against illegal hunters. Even in 1960, only 55 men protected the 429 square kilometre sanctuary.

At Independence, the forest department was keen on removing the graziers from the southern edges, but elected representatives intervened to ensure continued access. P.D. Stracey, the top forest official, allowed Nepali graziers into the vast northern riparian areas, where the forest department had a weak presence. Officials relied on the loyalty of the graziers against illegal hunters. Even in 1960, only 55 men protected the 429 square kilometre sanctuary with high grasses, swamps, and streams.

While Assam’s political leadership emphasised protecting and popularising the rhino, it failed to address habitat issues like corridors and buffers. In 1949–50, the forest department proposed a corridor between Kaziranga and the Karbi Hills in the south to give animals unhindered passage to the hills during monsoon floods. The corridor finally came up 17 years later, in 1967, but only with one-tenth of the initially proposed area. The government was reluctant to add to Assam’s rising landlessness by giving away cultivable land to the sanctuary.

On the eastern side of the sanctuary, a 2,100-acre grazing reserve served as a buffer and village common. By the late 1950s, landless peasants devastated by flood and erosion turned it into homesteads and rice fields. The shrinking buffer meant increased conflict between the sanctuary and villagers over pasture, vegetables, and fish. There were isolated instances of rhinos being killed, but it did not make a buzz in the 1950s.

### **Triumph of the rhino**

From 1960 onwards, the regional press reported large-scale rhino killing for its horn in Kaziranga, which continued throughout the decade. As per government [estimates](#), 55 rhinos were killed between 1965 and 1970.

What explained this mayhem? Besides never-ending floods and erosion, a devastating cattle epidemic (1957–58) and drought (1959–60) distressed the sanctuary’s neighbourhood. Landlessness and skyrocketing prices of essentials and agricultural inputs forced a section of

peasants to look beyond cultivation to make a living. For many peasants, securing rice, the staple for life, was the leitmotif behind digging pits in the sanctuary to kill rhinos for their horns.

The reports of rhino killings angered the Assamese middle class, who viewed the animal as their pride [...] Political leaders across party lines were convinced that the rhino could not be safeguarded without armed protection.

Even as the rhino killing continued, it became clear that rhino numbers had revived. In 1966, J. Juan Spillett, an American biology student, conducted the first systematic census in the Kaziranga Wild Life Sanctuary and estimated the rhino population at between 366 and 400. Little importance is paid to the context of this path-breaking achievement in India's conservation history. It came at a time when the tiger, India's future national animal, was reported to be vanishing at an alarming rate. The then national animal, the lion, showed promising signs of a comeback in the Gir forests, but experts waited to declare it a success.

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The legislative assembly debates on the national park bill hardly referred to grazing and fishing rights inside the sanctuary. Instead, there was a consensus that human settlement in the buffer area and grazing in the northern riparian edges were a cover for illegal hunting.

Soon after Kaziranga became a national park, drought and hunger ravaged Assam. [...] villagers near the sanctuary were "left to choose between dying hungry or to the bullets".

Kaziranga was declared a national park in 1974. The years leading up to this declaration were most favourable for Assam's forest department to sanitise the sanctuary from graziers, fishers, and forest produce collectors. In 1972, the forest department removed the graziers from seven *tapus* (sandbars) in the northern riparian edges. Despite vehement protests, the park was expanded to include the Mora-Diphalu River, which was the southern boundary of the sanctuary and was a source of fish and water for villagers. Grazing, fishing, and foraging were banned. There was also political support for violence against suspected rhino killers. Guards frequently fired at suspected hunters.

Soon after Kaziranga became a national park, drought and hunger ravaged Assam. Facing a complete ban on foraging for vegetables, thatch, fish, and firewood, villagers near the sanctuary were "left to choose between dying hungry or to the bullets", the *Dainik Asam* newspaper reported on 6 November 1974. Such exclamations by the villagers reflected the prevailing fear that park guards might shoot them while collecting vegetables or fishing.

## Nationalising nature

Ever since Independence, Indian conservationists had demanded centralised control over India's wildlife. Under Indira Gandhi, the union government enacted the all-India Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 (WLPA). During the Emergency (1975-1977), the union government transferred forests and wildlife from the state list to the concurrent list of the Constitution. The union government could now intervene in managing wildlife and overrule the states. These developments shrunk the autonomy of Assam – and other states – to mediate between wildlife conservation and rural rights.

Visiting experts ignored that strict protection was recent in Kaziranga and that the success, long in the making, had been achieved with moderate protection [...] "total protection" became the guiding principle.

Kaziranga played a subtle role in the making of a new regime of environmental governance. In 1970, the government of India appointed an expert committee to enquire into the state of wildlife protection in India. While the committee was dismayed over the state of sanctuaries in India, it praised Kaziranga for its "extensive self-contained eco-units; rare and vanishing species like the Great

One-Horned Rhinoceros [...] good tourist lodge and transport.”

To the committee, Kaziranga exemplified “total protection.” The visiting experts ignored that strict protection was recent in Kaziranga and that the success, long in the making, had been achieved with moderate protection. The Expert Committee’s observation that wildlife could be protected only by “total protection” became the guiding principle in future national parks and tiger reserves in India.

Through the 1970s, the forest department kept rhino killing under check. But as Assam plunged into the anti-foreigners agitation from 1979 onwards, an [estimated](#) 100 rhinos were killed during 1979–1983 in Kaziranga. The unrest alone does not explain this surge. Assam periodically auctioned rhino horns collected from naturally dead animals. These sales stopped in 1978, following India’s ratification of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) in 1976, which banned trade in endangered species. The market demand for rhino horns was fulfilled through illegal rhino killings.

Amidst the reports of large-scale rhino killings, the union government sent a team to Kaziranga. The team’s most important recommendation was to create six corridors and buffers around the park. These proposals went into lengthy legal battles between the park and villagers. The acquisition remains incomplete in at least three of the six proposed areas, even as the Gauhati High Court in 2015 [ordered](#) the removal of the residents from all the proposed additions.

With constitutional changes in the 1970s, Assam’s electoral politics could no longer mediate the struggle between peasants and the sanctuary, and the conflict led to a drawn-out legal battle that persists till today.

The present-day challenges to acquisition emerged from the long history of an agrarian frontier in the region where the Kaziranga National Park evolved. The official view that residents in the proposed corridors are ‘encroachers’ is bereft of historical realities. Throughout the 20th century, landless peasants displaced by floods and erosion settled in areas including the park’s neighbourhood. The colonial government actively recorded the rights over such settlements and issued land titles. After Independence, land became scarce and landlessness colossal. The onus of acquiring land titles from the government gradually shifted to the peasants. The most common practice that emerged among landless peasants was to settle in any ‘unoccupied’ government land and wait for land titles by moving their elected representatives.

A large share of government land was excluded when a corridor was created for Kaziranga in 1967, where landless peasants settled from around 1970. In the 1980s, when a new process for acquiring these lands began following the union government’s recommendations, the residents were already ‘encroachers’. With constitutional changes in the 1970s, Assam’s electoral politics could no longer mediate the struggle between peasants and the sanctuary, and the conflict led to a drawn-out legal battle that persists till today.

## Conclusion

Kaziranga helps us shift the timeline of ‘ecological restoration’ in India from the national projects of the 1970s to focus on regional efforts in the 1950s. It also amends the view that environmentalism trickled down from the national elites to the regional states. In the case of the rhino, Assamese cultural politics was what held the government accountable for its protection.

In the backdrop of political anger against rhino killing, the state government departed from an accommodative strategy towards a more securitised approach. This change came ahead of the Wildlife (Protection) Act and Project Tiger (1973), which are considered key drivers of exclusionary conservation in India. Contrary to an understanding that the exclusionary model of Indian parks followed from a Western view of nature as separate from humans, regional cultural reasons drove this transformation in Assam.

The history of rhino conservation is also a pointer to the working of democracy in India. As the balance of power in environmental governance shifted towards the union government, the autonomy of the states in environmental governance eroded. This has shrunk the space for electoral politics to mediate the conflicts around wildlife conservation.

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