

Authority involved in illegal wildlife trade: Nature's Beckon

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Guwahati: Assam and other states of North East India are among the richest wildlife areas of the world trade in wildlife and its derivatives worth more than US \$ 20 billion annually, is a global phenomenon with serious ramifications for the conservation of biodiversity in all its beauty and variety. Assam being a source of area of wildlife and its parts having easy entrance and exit passages with other countries of North and East Asia has always been an important centre on the trade map.

Four major species of wild animals, namely Asian one-horned rhino, tiger, leopard and Asian elephant are available in Assam. All these four species are globally endangered and protected under Indian Wildlife Protection Act 1972. These species have been listed in schedule I in Wildlife Protection Act and Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). These four species are the major target-species of wildlife trade. Wildlife poachers have killed these four animals indiscriminately and ruthlessly.

Tigers and leopards are killed for their skins and bones. Tiger skin and heads are used as trophies. Their bones and skulls are used in traditional oriental medicines, their meats and fats are used in balms, poisons and as an aphrodisiac.

Rhinos are poached for their horns and the elephants for their ivory.

Although trades on wildlife parts have been banned in India, their demands in the International markets have increased with the passage of time.

In 1972, Govt of India has prohibited hunting of wildlife and their trade by enacting laws. Poaching is a punishable offence in India with 7 years imprisonment. India is a party to Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species since 1976 and hence bound by all its efforts to eliminate International trade in wildlife and wildlife parts.

The price of a rhino horn in India varies from four lacs to 7 lacs and its international market value is between 12 lacs to 20 lacs per piece. The price of Ivory in India is between 8 to 12 thousand rupees per kilogram. In the international market per kilogram of ivory is sold at a price varying from 30 to 40 thousands.

The price of tiger skin is 30 lacs in Hongkong and five lacs in Nepal. Leopard skin is approximately 20 lacs in Hongkong and the same is sold in Nepal between 4 to 5 lacs.

Since 1972 or even earlier than that year, a huge quantity of rhino horns, elephant tusks, tiger and leopard skins and bones have been in the custody of Forest Department of Assam.

We suspect that a large share of the wildlife parts, which are being sold in the international, markets every year, come from the forest department stock due to the manipulations and corrupt practices of some of the dishonest forest department officials.

It is quite reasonable to think that in spite of strong enforcement of laws, poaching is taking place in the sanctuaries and National Parks of Assam due to involvement of forest department people.

On 5th November 2007, we applied for some information to the CCF (wildlife) of Assam under the Right to Information Act 2005. Forest department received our application and issued money receipt of Rs.10/- to us as per RTI Act 2005. But even after the lapse of 30 days forest department failed to give us any information as per our demand.

On the 14th December 2007, we made the second appeal to M.C.Malakar, CCF (wildlife), Assam under section 19 of RTI Act 2005.

After our second appeal, the information we received from the CCF (Wildlife) of Assam establishes the fact that wildlife parts somehow of other reach the international trades on wildlife parts. This clandestine sale of wildlife parts including rhinos horns increases the need of the consumers which in turn further increase poaching and encourage poachers to kill wildlife including rhinos, elephants, tigers and leopards.

This may be the reason that last year as many twenty rhinos have been poached in Kaziranga National Park from 1984 to 1995. 42 rhinos were killed in the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary and in Orang Wildlife Sanctuary 48 rhinos were killed. Between 1980 to 1995, 64 rhinos were killed in Manas National Park during the same period 452 rhinos were killed in Kaziranga National Park and 68 rhinos were killed in Lowkhowa Wildlife Sanctuary wiping out all the rhinos of Lowkhowa Wildlife Sanctuary. From 1980 to 1995 during the period of 15 years 1509 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 1498 horns are there in the custody of Assam forest department. We have authentic information that till 1972 forest department of Assam sold rhino horns. We suspect that the forest department of Assam sold rhino horns even after 1972. This indirect encouragement in rhino horns trade by the forest department has encouraged further poaching rhinos.

Unless this hidden wildlife parts trade is stopped the poaching of rhinos will continue in Assam. In case of elephant tusks a few thousands pieces should have been there in the custody of the Assam forest department, but only 1334 pieces including the tusks of domestic elephants of the forest department of Assam are there with the forest department of Assam.

Large quantity of bones of tigers and leopards are smuggled out from Assam. A few years back the prevention department of customs at Shillong seized a truckload of elephant tusks, skins of leopard and other scales of Pangolins and bones of tigers. The registration No. of the truck was AS-01-4401. The value of these wildlife parts was estimated to be Rupees two crores.

Lallung Nema, the then Commissioner of Customs admitted that trade on the wildlife parts was going on in a huge scale. He also said that this could be only the tip of the iceberg. We have been suspecting large-scale smuggling of products of endangered species of wildlife for a long time.

It is shocking to know from the information of the CCF(Wildlife), Assam that only 6 numbers of tiger skin and 3 numbers of leopard skin are there in the custody of Assam forest department.

We fervently appeal to Shri Tarun Gogoi, the Chief Minister of Assam, to make 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.

1996 report of trade record analysis of flora and fauna in commerce (TRAFFIC) has also mentioned that the forest department personnel are involved in rhino poaching. It is quite relevant to mention here that a sophisticated foreign gun was used in 2007 for rhino poaching in Kaziranga which belongs to high-level forest officials. On 20th January 2008, a rhino and its cub were killed with 315 rifle, which was known from the empty and live cartridges found at the site of killing. This rifle is available with the forest department only.

We would fervently request all the Journalist, NGOs, Intellectuals and the Nature-loving people of Assam to prevent further occurrence of wildlife poaching in Assam.

editor

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