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A Brief Status Report on the Dudhwa National Park and 16th Tiger Reserve

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The Dudhwa National Park was declared on 1st February 1977. The erstwhile North Kheri Forest Division was computed to have the finest quality of sal timber (*Shorea Robusta*) in India, and it was with extreme reluctance that the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, guided by the Forest Department, agreed to Mrs. Gandhi's request to declare it a National Park.

The declaration of the Park was chiefly because of the Swampdeer which had moved into the Sathiana-Saretta block of grassland from adjoining Ghola due to the extensive planting of sugarcane, poaching by resident farmers, and the reluctance of the Forest Department in 1964 to take over the Ghola grassland when it was offered to them as a result of the Land Ceiling Act having rendered the aforesaid land surplus. Resulting from the ambivalence of Government attitudes, Ghola was colonised by Naxalites, and indentured labour from Eastern U.P. who sold out their holdings to Sikh farmers from Pakistan.

Initially the herds of swampdeer multiplied in their new home and an estimation in 1972/73 by Dr. C.W. Holloway of the IUCN postulated a population of 1200-1600 in the Sathiana/Saretta grassland to the west. Relict populations also existed in the neighbourhood of the various lakes in the East and Central Zone viz. Maknaha, Ranwas, Churela, Nagra, Bhadi, Banka and Kakraha etc. with an estimation of circa 2-2500 animals. Gradually numbers have dwindled, with Sathiana being the worst affected. The annual flooding of the Neora Seheli River has been particularly severe on habitat conditions. An Escarpment runs along the River which is the southern boundary of the Park, and the direction of the flooding is to the south. The swampdeer are therefore driven out of the Park and into cultivated areas, where they are slaughtered by resident farmers. In addition the illegal construction of an irrigation Barrage on the boundary river by the Irrigation Department of the U.P. has intensified the flooding and water-logging from June onwards and has increased the mortality of the faunal population of the barasingha with whose peak period of reproduction it coincides. Also the resultant heavy siltation in the area under consideration has coarsened the fodder grasses, and rendered it unfit for an early burning to encourage the appearance of palatable new shoots, which had hitherto been a management ploy to attract a migrant population which had moved back into neighbouring Ghola during the rains.

The adverse result of the annual migration and a degradation of habitat militating against the return of the Barasingha has reduced a seasonal population to circa 100.

The Chital population has also severely decreased in the area because of habitat degradation triggered by the Barrage and poaching by neighbouring agriculturists, chiefly ex-soldiery from Nepal settled on deforested land adjoining the western boundary of the Park. The protective staff appear

unable, or unwilling, to control the assault, and the tiger who killed three Nepalese intruders sometime ago was declared a maneater?!

The reduction of the prey biomass has had a severe repercussion on the tiger population, and the only solution appears to be a control of poaching activities, and a reclamation of the degraded habitat conditions by Management Practises consisting of agricultural operations to encourage palatable fodder grasses, and a proliferation of Prey Species. It is also vitally essential that the Soheli Barrage should be transferred to the jurisdiction of the Dudhwa National Park to be utilized in effectively improving the Rhine and Swampdeer Habitat by imaginative Management procedures.

The Rhine Reintroduction Project.

The extensive lake system which held a medicum of barasingha appears to be now mainly devoid of this animal, and it is possible that they have migrated to Kakraha and Banke Lakes which have been effectively protected due to the Rhine Project which was promulgated in 1984, as the other lakes are pressurized by hunting with dogs by Tharus. The Project began with an introduction of two male and three female problem rhines from Pobitara, an outlying area of Kaziranga in Assam, with no effective protection. Of them one female died of an induced abortion due to a pregnancy during an airlift, another female of radial paralysis caused by an unnecessary immobilization to treat a minor wound, and a male died of injuries in an intra specific conflict with the other male. Later four selective females imported from Chitwan have thriven. In spite of a gloomy, and perhaps wishful predictions by Assam Forest authorities, the animals have successfully adapted and each female has bred. Moreover one female has appeared from Nepal and has joined the remaining population inside the 29 sq/Km fenced enclosure.

However the Reintroduction Project which is eagerly watched by the entire World Wildlife Spectrum, considering the sorry plight of the world rhino populations, will not need much momentum to be registered as a failure: An introduction of thirty rhines proposed in the original prospectus over a period of five years, has stopped at six at the end of nine, and could inbreed themselves out of existence. Four rhines which have moved into the Katarnian Ghat Sanctuary from Nepal could be acquired by inclusion of the Sanctuary in the National Park, but the Department falsely maintains that they are Nepali rhines (sic).

A domestic rhine from the Kanpur Zoo was introduced into the Enclosure in spite of contrary advice, and nearly killed by the resident male: Furthermore Fishing rights in the river Soheli adjoining the Rhine Enclosure have been surrendered to local Fishermen, and could sound the death knell of a successful Project considering the world price of 60,000 dollars for a kg of Asian rhine horn, and the current onslaught on the Rhine of Kaziranga.

THE ELEPHANT PROBLEM:

Wild Elephants never colonised the North Kheri Division in pre war years, and I can recall the period beginning with 1945 when an occasional solitary elephant used to appear in the winter to briefly browse on the sporadic clumps of bamboo obtainable in the North of the Dudhwa Range. Gradually over the years with the unrestrained destruction of habitat and migration route, especially in Nepal, the Dudhwa National Park has appeared as a last bastion for this widely ranging animal. However as with the extirpated tiger, when expelled from the submontane forests of the Churia Range, who came into conflict with the human of India and were largely destroyed as maneaters, the herd which comprises 30-40 animals have taken to crop raiding in the neighbouring fields which abut the forested area. Though comparatively docile at present, and amenable to the human presence, males in "Musth" might react aggressively in the future, and the possession of firearms by farmers on the periphery of the Park should be carefully monitored.

Patrolling of the Park is essential as not only does an open border with Nepal exist, but cultivation surrounds the forest and virtually no buffer exists. The local streams are poisoned and are devoid of fish, and the gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*) is extinct. The Marsh crocodile (*Crocodilus palustris*) is in very short supply and the otter has disappeared. The Wild Dog, the hyena, and the leopard have vanished as have the chousingha and the black buck.

Human pressures are unbearable, and a complete reorientation of the prevailing administration is essential. A Wild Life Service with an orientation biased towards Tourism is essential. The maintenance of Core areas is a travesty, and merely serves as a hunting ground for the timber Mafia.

With a modified, though successful Rhine Reintroduction. The fortuitous, and unplanned arrival of a herd of wild elephants. The possible revival of the tiger, concomitant with the build up of a prey base. The Dudhwa National Park and Sixteenth Tiger Reserve still has the potential of becoming a viable Wildlife Refuge, but only with a complete break with the past. It is anomalous that there was more wildlife in the North Kheri Forest Division, than there was after its Declaration as a National Park on the February 1 1977.