

VIETNAMESE VISIT INDIA

A.J.T. Johnsingh and S.P. Goyal

We were standing in Dogudda *rau* (*rau*=dry river bed) in Rajaji National Park with 12 wildlife officers from Viet Nam looking at the fresh pug marks of a tiger that had walked along the *rau* the previous night. Suddenly, one of the Vietnamese officers shouted, *Voi*, which means elephant in Vietnamese. We all looked in the direction where the officer was pointing and saw a magnificent makhna (tuskless bull elephant) coming out of the forest about 200m from us. The makhna nonchalantly walked across the *rau* diagonally, allowed some of us to approach very close for photographs and then disappeared into the forest as silently as it had appeared. For the Vietnamese, this encounter, on the first day of their 3-week wildlife study tour in India, was an exciting starting point.

Unabated war with the French from 1945 to 1963, and then with the Americans from 1965 to 1975, and the consequent drain on the natural resources to reconstruct the war ravaged country resulted in an almost ceaseless ecocide in Viet Nam. This has resulted in severe loss of forest cover which had been reduced from 45% to 15-20%, and extermination of many wildlife species such as the Sumatran rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatraensis*) sika deer (*Cervus nippon pseudaxis*) and wild buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*). Though two large mammalian species, a bovid (*Pseudoryx nghetinhensis*) and a giant muntjac (*Megamuntiacus vuquangensis*) have been discovered during the last two years, the status of other large mammalian species such as the thamin (*Cervus eldi eldi*), kouprey (*Bos sauveli*) and tapir (*Tapirus indicus*) is debatable.

Without urgent conservation action the next two species of large mammals most likely to become extinct in Viet Nam are the banteng (*Bos javanicus*), which possibly numbers less than 50, and the Javan rhino (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*) which

numbers about 12 individuals. In time extinction of these species will be followed by the tiger (*Panthera tigris*) and the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*). Birds, particularly those that are large and much sought after for meat such as the Giant ibis (*Pseudibis gigantea*) and Green peafowl (*Pavo muticus*) have also suffered immensely due to habitat loss and hunting.

Realizing the grave need for effective field conservation, Vietnam has embarked on a mission to train 800 of its wildlife guards, 200 of its wildlife managers and 80 wildlife biologists to protect and manage its 87 protected areas. Funding has been ensured by Global Environment Facility (GEF) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and technical assistance, by WWF-Indochina. Presently these 87 areas cover some 11,000 km² which is about 3% of the total land area and 5.75% of the forest area. Plans, however, are afoot to enlarge the main reserves to a new total area of over 20,000 km². Several Transfrontier Reserves in collaboration with China, Laos and Cambodia are also being planned. The study tour to India was a part of the ongoing programme under GEF and UNDP to develop the managerial capability in Vietnam.

Shafts of golden light filtered through the forest as we drove in the evening from Dhanagari gate to Dhikala in Corbett Tiger Reserve. The Reserve had received rains during the previous two days which had cleared the dust in the air and the sky was sparkingly clean. All along the 31- km drive, there were numerous chital, sambar, wild pig and langur to see. Two of the participants sitting in the last row of the bus could even fleetingly see a tiger sitting near the road. Before the bus could be brought to a screeching halt and reversed to enable others to have a glimpse agile cat had silently vanished into the dense understorey.

Corbett Reserve, one of the premier tiger and elephant habitats in Asia, had many things to offer to the study team. Its scenery of the Himalayan foothills was soul-soothing and there were ideas to discuss with Mr. Rajiv Bhartari, Deputy Director of the Reserve, on tourism, grassland management, weed suppression and control of poaching.

Signs of spring were everywhere as we set out on four elephants looking for wildlife on one morning. Most of the trees had shed their leaves, tender shoots were sprouting and most of the shrubs and trees had adorned themselves with fresh flowers. Humming of bees and songs of birds filled the air. We were about a kilometre south-west of Dhikala and as we were riding through the forests looking for tiger, alarm calls of a sambar sharply rang out in the adjacent grassland. It was obvious that there was a predator around and we hurried hoping to see a tiger. The sambar, a young male, however, walked through the grassland as if nothing had bothered it and as we watched it puzzled, a prime bull tusker, an embodiment of grace and strength, approached our elephants which were all cows. The tusker was in *musth*, and had a short cut tail (most adult elephants, particularly bulls, get their tails bitten off while fighting with one another).

Though their eyesight is poor elephants can communicate with one another, even upto five kilometres, through infrasonic vocalisations. Even when the bull was 60-80 m away and walking towards us along the road, that runs between the dense sal forest and the grassland, our riding elephants could sense its coming and became nervous. The bull, framed by the forest, grassland and a carpet of fallen dead sal leaves, came straight towards our elephants. When it was about 30m away and when the restlessness of our riding elephants became uncontrollable we hurriedly took some photographs and retreated to the camp as fast as we could. Fortunately, the bull did not trail us!

Smoke from controlled and uncontrolled forest fires, and early morning fog of an early summer gave a mysterious air to the stately sal forests of Dudhwa Tiger Reserve. We drove silently in two vehicles to the rhino enclosure. Mr. Suman, Director of the

Reserve, was with us to explain the problems of and management practices in Dudhwa Tiger Reserve.

The Reserve has an area of 816 km² and lies solely in the *terrai* abutting Nepal. Dudhwa has several endangered species such as the tiger, swamp deer, Bengal florican and hispid hare. Dudhwa is an excellent field lab where several conservation lessons could be learnt. Great Indian one horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) had become extinct from north-western India 100-150 years ago. In 1984, in Dudhwa, rhino reintroduction programme was initiated in an area of 20 km² which has been fenced with electric fence. In 1984, three adult females and two adult males were translocated from Assam, and in 1985, four adult females from Nepal in exchange for 16 elephants. Of this original stock five adult females and one adult male survive and they have, in total, given birth to six calves and now the rhinos, swamp deer, hog deer, chital and barking deer share a common habitat in Dudhwa after a span of a century. There are man-eating problems caused by tigers living outside the forests in sugarcane fields.

Dudhwa is a passage for smugglers to run illegal wildlife products to Nepal. Dacoits occasionally use Dudhwa as a hideout. The habitat of the 30 or so Bengal floricans demands specific management to ensure their long-term survival. Having totally lost their habitat in Nepal 40-60 elephants have sought asylum in Dudhwa and their increasing population is bound to cause serious management problems. We had a discussion about all these aspects both in the field and back in the rest house and Mr. Suman was there to lead us all through the deliberations.

Darkness rapidly engulfed the forests as we entered Nagarhole National Park. The drive from the first entry gate, some kilometres beyond Hunsur, to Nagarhole is about 30 km and this drive itself gave an excellent introduction to Nagarhole wildlife. As our 35 seater bus lumbered along the road which had many potholes we encountered a huge sloth bear and a little distance thereafter two adult bull gaur. Disturbed, the gaur, like two big tar-coated rocks, plunged their way into the thick understorey.

It was early April and summer had set in Nagarahole. Emerald green foliage, that had adorned every bush and tree, indicated that a successful spring had preceded. The 640 km² Nagarahole National Park stands out as one of the few protected areas in the country where field conservation is practiced with great commitment year after year against great odds. Rangers and guards patrol the forest day and night, and firelines are meticulously maintained to ward off the devastating summer fires. Elephant-proof trenches prevent the elephants from raiding the adjacent crops, and keep the village cattle from making inroads into the forest. Credit for establishing these and other laudable management practices goes to the legendary retired Range Forest Officer K.M.Chinnappa who started his career in Nagarahole as a Forester 30 years ago.

When Chinnappa joined the forest department poaching of large mammals and wood cutting were rampant. The large mammal populations were at a low density and were extremely shy owing to the high levels of persecution. This angered Chinnappa who comes from a martial race with great liking for wildlife, and he as a one man army started a war against the poachers. With his splendid knowledge of the Nagarahole terrain he identified the routes used by the poachers. Armed with a .22 rifle and a revolver, and assisted by an able Kuruba tribal, he surprised poachers several times and caught them red-handed. Soon, word began to spread in the underworld about a stealthy Ranger who could appear from nowhere and thwart attempts to smuggle timber or poach wildlife. In times of serious problems with the criminals, Karnataka Forest Department gave steadfast support to Chinnappa. Gradually, poaching and wood cutting activities in and around Nagarahole steadily declined and wildlife began to reappear.

Chinnappa quit the active service two years ago, but supported by Dr.Ullas Karanth of the New York based Wildlife Conservation Society, he continues to evince great interest in the protection of Nagarahole by launching an education programme in the villages around the Park. Fortunately the tradition set by Chinnappa still continues. Whenever a gun shot is heard in the periphery of the forest,

Rangers and guards risking their lives sneak through the forest, even at night, looking for the culprits. Even as recently as January 1994 Ranger C.P.Durge Gowda ambushed a poacher and narrowly escaped death when he attempted to snatch the gun from the poacher. The shot fired by the poacher, from a distance of a meter, injured Gowda in his upper left arm. The able-bodied Gowda was forced to spend 10 days in the hospital. The Vietnamese learnt a lot about protection and habitat management and importance of research in conservation by interacting with Gowda and Dr.Ullas Karanth.

The early evening sun was more than warm when we drifted in boats from Kabini River Lodge westwards upstream of river Kabini which flows between Bandipur and Nagarahole. Kabini River Lodge is one of the successful undertakings of the Karnataka government where ecotourism is practiced for the benefit of local people, affluent wildlife tourists and wildlife. The tourism facility supports about 50 local people and a constant flow of keen wildlife tourists in the crucial Bandipur-Nagarhole junction enables the management to keep a watchful eye on the wildlife and its habitat. The result, the area vibrates with abundant wildlife. Early April is the ideal time to see plentiful elephant and gaur and other wildlife which assemble on the banks of Kabini to feed on the lush nutritious *Cynodon dactylon*, a short grass, and satiate their thirst. It is a joy to behold elephants bathing and frolicking in the river. That evening the boat ride in Kabini lived upto expectations and before the ride was over we could see more than 200 elephants bathing, swimming, feeding and play fighting. Numerous gaur, sambar, and chital were also seen. Giant crocodiles lazily basking on the banks unwillingly slunk into water as our boat approached. Nature, however, was unkind to us. A big blob of rain cloud blocked the sun which forced us to give up photography as early as 1700 hrs. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese were thrilled by this wildlife panorama, which is unparalleled elsewhere in Asia.

Our last destination was Ranganathittu Bird Sanctuary on the banks of serenely flowing Cauvery river. Though April is not an ideal season to visit Ranganathittu the grey rocks where crocodiles were

elephants could cross only through these narrow sand banks. The other areas of the corridor were too steep or had large limestone boulders or steep formations lining both the banks of the river. This corridor connects the elephant population of Balphakaram National Park (BNP) and Siju Wildlife Sanctuary with that of the elephant population of the Nokrek National Park, Imangiri (It is also spelt Emangiri) Reserved Forest and Angratolli Reserved Forest areas. There were many tracks coming and going into the water. The pad marks of a mother and her calf leading into the water were still very clear. Maybe, they came early that morning or perhaps late last night. I decided to come back the next morning to evaluate the corridor. After spending sometime, I got back into the canoe and we started off.

This corridor is now being threatened due to the proposed setting up of a Cement plant by Associated Cements Company (ACC). The project is being promoted jointly by Meghalaya Industrial Development Corporation Ltd., Shillong and ACC. An area of 2 Km² has been leased out for mining limestone by the Garo hills district council in the Siju Aking land adjacent to the Rewak RF. The proposed mining site, the factory and the settlement area fall within or on the border of the corridor. According to the Forest Department census in 1993 this corridor connects a population of about 600 elephants on the left Bank of river Simsang to a population of about 250 elephants. The commencement of the proposed cement project will put an end to the gene flow between the two populations mentioned above.

The wind had dropped down to a gentle breeze. Suddenly we heard the sound—the sound of bamboo being broken by a very heavy animal. This could mean only one thing—elephants. The three of us, the boatman, the Forester and myself, turned to trace the source. We heard it again from the right bank—Rewak RF. Sand banks on the right and left, similar

to the ones described above, were looming in front of us. The boatman beached the canoe on the left bank. We got down and waited in anticipation.

The sun had set and I knew that my efforts at getting a picture would prove futile. Still I set up the tripod and fixed the camera and waited breathless. After a few minutes, I saw her emerging about 50 metres from where our canoe was beached. She was a very old female. I could see that her ears were tattered and completely folded over. Her buccal cavity and forehead had a sunken appearance. After drinking for a few minutes, she slid gracefully into the water and started to wade towards the middle of the river. She half swam and waded through the middle of the river and came to stop about 10 metres from the opposite bank. I could see a small portion of her back was still dry and muddy coloured. She started to squirt water on her back and the water ran off her back. She then started moving towards the opposite bank and walked into the bushes behind Siju Artheke village.

It was almost dark, when we started again. I realised that this graceful lonely lady may not be around by the time the proposed limestone mining project and cement factory by ACC is completed in the middle of the corridor area. Maybe she would not have to face the indignity of not being able to use the traditional migratory paths that her ancestors have walked for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. I wanted to share a precious moment that will probably never be experienced in this part of our country again if the cement project is sanctioned. More than any economic argument that can be used for and against projects like the one mentioned here, it is rare moments like the one I had during my trip into the Meghalaya elephant country that would win an argument in favour of scrapping such projects. Maybe enough caring people would read this article and would allow their hearts to rule over economics. Perhaps the ACC project would be cancelled if enough people cared.
