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A one-horned rhinoceros at the Kaziranga national park in Assam on Octpber 10. | Photo Credit: AP

**The story so far:** Greens worldwide called the Kaziranga National Park the greatest conservation success story in 2005 when it completed a century. Much of it is attributed to a rhino protection force that shoots alleged poachers at sight; more than 55 armed men have been killed within the boundary of the 1,300 sq. km tiger reserve for unauthorised entry since 2012-13.

The population of the one-horned rhino was about a dozen when Kaziranga became a protected area in 1905. According to the State of Rhino Report 2022, the poor-sighted herbivore's number in Kaziranga is an estimated 2,613, more than 65% of its total population of 4,014 across 11 habitats in India and Nepal. A decade ago, the rhino's population in these domains was 2,454. A section of conservationists say the focus is too much on the rhino but agree this has made other animals in its domains a beneficiary. The number of tigers, for instance, has increased in Assam at a rate higher than elsewhere in India. A 2010 count said Kaziranga has the highest density of tigers — 32.64 per 100 sq. km — in the world.

According to Assam-based rhino expert Bibhab Kumar Talukdar, the strengthening of the anti-poaching mechanism in India and Nepal with more manpower, capacity-building of frontline staff and equipping forest guards with better fighting gears have helped protect the rhino. The sentiments of local people attached to the rhino have also been a factor in the sharp drop in the number of rhinos killed, from 54 in 2013 and 2014 to one each in 2021 and 2022. The threat from poachers cannot be wished away because of the illegal wildlife trade in next-door Myanmar and beyond in Southeast Asia, he said. "While poaching remains a major threat to rhinos, alien invasive plant species grabbing key grassland habitats in rhino-bearing areas in the past decade has emerged as a bigger threat to the animal in India and Nepal," Mr. Talukdar, also a senior member of the Asian Rhino Specialist Group, said.

India is home to nearly 60% Asian elephants and the last count of the species in 2017 had put the number at 29,964. While the number of elephants in India has increased in the past few years, the species is listed as 'Endangered' on the IUCN Red List of threatened species and Schedule I of The Wildlife Protection Act.

The largest land-dwelling mammal is under continuous threat of poaching and conflict with humans. While incidents of poaching for ivory have come down, the human-elephant conflict has been increasing. On average, about 500 humans and 100 elephants are killed every year across the country in such confrontations. The elephant population is not evenly distributed in the country. The south Indian States of Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu is home to nearly 44% of India's elephant population. The fragmentation of elephant habitats and the construction of linear (railways and roads) and power infrastructure have led to many elephant deaths. The change in land use, particularly bringing erstwhile forested areas under agriculture, has aggravated the conflict. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change launched Project Elephant in 1992 to ensure the long-term survival of elephants in their natural habitats. The number of elephant reserves in India is 32 with the latest addition being the Agasthyamalai Elephant Reserve in 2022. Elephant corridors and linear narrow habitat linkages which allow elephants to move between secure habitats are crucial for conservation. So far, about 101 elephant corridors have been identified in the country which need to be secured for conservation of elephants.

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