

Rhinos Increase in Nepal

By R. S. M. Willan

The Chitawan Wildlife Sanctuary in the Rapti River valley in Nepal together with the Mahendra National Park are the home of the great Indian rhinoceros, one of the world's endangered species. In 1959 and 1963 Mr. E. P. Gee, noted Indian conservationist, made surveys of the area, the second one at the request of the FPS; his reports published in ORYX (1959, V, 57, and 1963, VII, 67) drew attention to the decrease in the number of rhinos, due to poaching, from about 300 animals in 1959 to 160 in 1961, and the large amount of illegal settlement in the National Park. Mr. Willan, who is Chief Conservator of Forests in Nepal, continues the story since then with the encouraging news of the clearing of all illegal settlement from the park and also from the extension, the latter on the orders of HM King Mahendra, and the proper demarcation and accurate mapping of the sanctuary, which it is hoped will be created a National Park. Rhinos are now quite frequently seen, and between January and September this year 35 rhino calves were reported.

IN 1962 the Forest Department made strong representations to the Nepal Government about the considerable illegal settlement and encroachment in the forests and the wildlife sanctuary in the Chitawan District. As a result of this, and the discussions with senior officials at the time of Mr Gee's visit in March, 1963, the Government ordered an inquiry, and in April appointed a committee to examine the whole position on the spot. This committee's report revealed a very disturbing state of affairs on illegal settlement and forest destruction. Accordingly in October 1963 the Government appointed a Settlement Commission under an Assistant Minister, with a Conservator of Forests, Govind Narsingh Raimajhi, as a member, to determine which settlement was legal, and provided it with powers to remove the illegal squatters and resettle them elsewhere.

This commission started work immediately and in 1964 and the first half of 1965 resettled no fewer than 4,400 families. With an average of five to a family, this meant the removal of about 22,000 people, and cleared the settlers from a large area of forest together with the whole of the King Mahendra National Park, and also from the proposed extension south of the Rapti river which is the main rhinoceros habitat. From this last area, estimated at 300 square miles, some 4,000 people have been moved this year on the personal instructions of HM King Mahendra, who visited the Chitawan area in 1963 and 1964. The Forest Department has now demarcated the forest boundaries and those of the proposed sanctuary. At the same time the area was photographed from the air, together with the whole of the Nepal Terai, and maps are now being prepared by the Survey

Division. This will be the first accurate map of the sanctuary, and it will be invaluable for control and development purposes.

In recent months rhinoceros have been seen on numerous occasions in the area south of the Rapti river and also in the area of the King Mahendra National Park where they had not been seen in recent years. It is felt that this may be partly due to the lack of disturbance resulting from the removal of settlement, and to the effective protection secured by the Wild Life Officer, Major Nara Raj Thapa, and his guards. Most encouraging of all, 35 calves have been seen this year.

Quite apart from the rhinoceros, Chitawan is very rich in other wildlife, notably tiger, leopard, bear, gaur, wild elephant, sambar, spotted deer, hog deer and wild boar. Both species of crocodile, the mugger and the gharial, occur in the Rapti and Narayani rivers, while bird life is abundant and in great variety. Peafowl are very common, the giant hornbill occurs in the forests on the northern side of the Rapti valley, and several kinds of ducks and other water birds are to be found on the Rapti river. In future it may be possible to re-introduce swamp deer, which occurred in this area formerly, and to introduce wild buffalo, which are now very rare in Nepal and confined to one area on the Kosi river in east Nepal.

A recent development of great significance for the future protection and maintenance of the Chitawan sanctuary has been the establishment of a tourist hotel, "Tiger Tops", by an American Mr. John Coapman, on a piece of land leased to him by the Government on the south bank of the Rapti river and within the area of the sanctuary. John Coapman, big-game hunter and lover of wildlife and the jungle, has built the hotel himself entirely of local materials, in the style of "Treetops" in Kenya. His aim is to give his guests an opportunity to live right in the jungle, and to see and hear its wild inhabitants at night as well as in the day time, particularly tigers. From the hotel one looks northwards, across the river, to the tall grass swamps on Bimli island, where there are always several rhinoceros. Behind the hotel are the wooded Churia Hills which are the haunt of sambar. Further away to the north are the jungle-clad hills of the Rapti valley, and beyond them, on clear days in winter one can see some of the giant Himalayan peaks, Himalchuli, 25,800 ft., Manaslu, 25,658 ft., and the eastern part of the Annapurna range which is over 25,000 ft.

Tiger Tops was due to open on November 1st and one hopes that by then conditions in the Indian sub-continent will allow the resumption of tourism in Nepal.

The Bawean Deer

The Bawean deer, at one time thought to be in danger of extinction, is now reliably reported to number several thousands. Confined to the island of Bawean in the Java Sea, it is regularly hunted by local people, despite being fully protected, but is preserved by its inaccessible habitat. Continuous deforestation, however, might threaten it again.