

THE MANAS—ASSAM'S UNKNOWN WILD LIFE SANCTUARY

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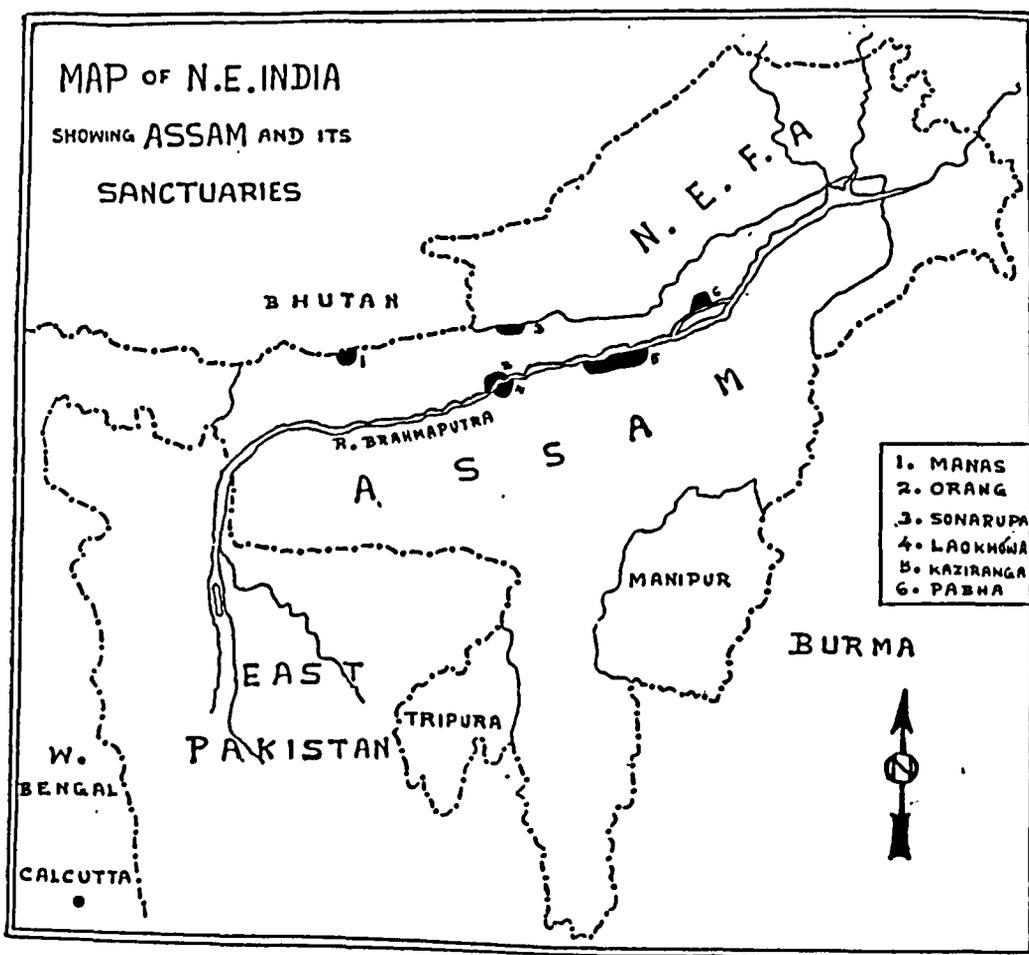
The many people who left India at the advent of Independence, especially those who knew her rivers and forests, must surely ponder over what "things" are like now. They may have read of the deforestation, the effects of the jeep and the shot-gun (although neither of these are really new), or they may just have heard, vaguely, that "things are not what they were".

That everyday life in India has altered considerably is undeniable, but as this article is concerned with Assam and in particular with an area of some 100 square miles and its animal population the altered scene is of small importance save possibly in the changing attitude of the public, which will be referred to later. It is an area still unspoilt and untouched by India's persistent need to feed her millions.

The North Kamrup Wild Life Sanctuary (previously known as the Manas) must nearly be unique—Mr. E. P. Gee has, in fact, written that it could be one of the finest in the country. Few places in India, or indeed in Asia, can offer the fishing to be had in the 300-yard wide Manas river, the scenic beauty and the varied forms of animal and bird life found within the sanctuary and its precincts. That it should be remote and difficult of access, even in these days of improved communications, has undoubtedly saved it from the modern, high-powered poacher and the eyes of Government.

Since 1955, I have visited the Manas every year and on each occasion it has noticeably improved; the first visit, marred by a 24-hour drive and lack of adequate facilities for visitors, was singularly revealing. On the evening of my arrival at the Beat Office I saw a dead sambar hind being carried from the sanctuary, half a mile's distance away. Last November, however, we were able to motor straight to the new camp at Mothanguri which lies 50 yards from the Bhutan border.

The new-comer to Mothanguri may well be taken aback at the scene that greets him: after a long dusty drive through the limitless paddy fields and the subsequent 10 miles of rough going in the forest, he is suddenly confronted with a huge, clear river set against a background of the virgin forest of the Bhutan hills. If he is lucky, the panorama will be aglow with the orange light of the setting sun.



Some readers may feel that the inclusion of fishing in a sanctuary is hardly appropriate, but were this prohibited, both the visitors' book and the fishermen would be much the poorer. The latter's presence on the river assists in the prevention of poaching and in the illicit extraction of driftwood, a valuable quantity of which is brought down annually during the monsoon.

The Manas river proper, partially glacier-fed from the melting snows, emerges into the plains from a wide, deep gorge; it then divides into two smaller yet formidable rivers, the Beki, which is the larger, and the Mona Manas. It is in these twin torrents—and to a certain extent in the gorge—that incomparable sport is to be had with the mahseer and boka.

The predominant inhabitant of the sanctuary is the wild buffalo which flourish, the record Indian "head" being taken from a female found dead on the Mona Manas some years ago. Wild pig, hog deer, barking deer and gaur, or Indian bison, as well as sambar and chital, all frequent the northern part of the sanctuary in varying numbers. While "sitting up" in a

hide on our last visit, we were lucky enough to photograph a family of chital from a distance of 10 yards. Entirely unaware of our presence and in excellent condition, the stag presented a magnificent sight with his horns just coming into velvet. Only once previously had I caught a glimpse of these beautiful animals in the sanctuary, but now a herd of twenty has been reported—indeed welcome news. There has also been an increase in the tiger population.

There have always been tigers in fairly substantial numbers in this area of Assam, but to-day, with the rapidly vanishing fauna of the Naga Hills and extensive deforestation in other parts of the state, virtually only the North Kamrup and Goalpara Districts can offer the tiger his unrestricted natural diet. This year we saw two tigresses on consecutive days—and missed an unrepeatable photographic opportunity. In the same area, some 5 square miles, a game watcher had seen a family of four a week previously. Though one could not say without further investigation that the balance between predator and prey has been disturbed, the existing evidence, including a decrease in the smaller ungulates, tends to show that this may be so, or at least that its time is not far off.

This state of affairs presents an intriguing problem, for if permission were granted to shoot, say, two or three tigers per annum, local poachers, who still account for a number of deer, would undoubtedly be encouraged. It would, also, reduce the tiger population in an area which may prove to be one of the animal's last strongholds, apart from the fact that the tiger is one of the world's most magnificent beasts and is a great asset to any sanctuary. There are various other remedies which may be practical, but I consider that a thorough ecological survey of the sanctuary, with the backing of Government, would go a long way to solving this and other problems, among them that of the Indian great one-horned rhinoceros.

During the past ten years the numbers of the Indian rhino residing within the Manas Sanctuary have been varyingly estimated from forty-five in 1949, to the present-day figure of twenty, quoted to me by the District Forest Officer and the Range Officer. Recently, the carcasses of three dead rhino have been found (all without the horn) but I understand that the same number of cases are pending against the culprits, one party of whom were caught red-handed. This might lead one to imagine that there is large-scale poaching of rhino in the sanctuary, but I doubt whether this can be actually established: first, because of the increased efficiency and enthusiasm

of the sanctuary staff and, secondly, because of the Indian rhino's partiality for the rice which is grown along the southern boundary.

During July (the planting season) and November (the harvest time), rhino frequently issue forth and partake of the annual crop—to the anger and consternation of the law-abiding villagers, and to the delight of the poachers who have accounted for at least one animal outside the sanctuary during this very season. Twenty rhino in an area of 100 square miles may be an underestimate, in itself an unusual occurrence for India, but an accurate "census-taking" method has still to be evolved. Tigers again take their toll of calves and there are stories, some of the most sanguinary nature, of desperate battles between a rhino mother and, on one occasion, two tigers. The rhino and its wallow are inseparable and the sanctuary possesses few water holes during the "cold weather"; this is another reason for the comparatively small rhino population. It is proposed to create some artificial water holes which will not only alleviate the rhino's need, but that of other animals also, especially the elephant.

Apart from buffalo, pig and barking deer, the majority of the sanctuary's wild life appears to shun the sparkling water of the Manas river in favour of the few muddy wallows and streams of the forest. A natural shyness of the bare expanse of rivers' banks, and the mineral content of the streams two of which emanate from salt-licks, are presumably the reasons for this allergy. The two salt-licks make an interesting study: Originating from landslides, both of which are inside Bhutan, they are visited regularly by all the wild life without exception. Elephant, in particular, apparently derive much pleasure in tobogganing down the slopes.

One of the most significant changes in the realm of wild life conservation since Independence is the new attitude of the general public. Before 1947, the forests and their inhabitants were considered to be mainly the prerogative of the European sportsmen and the princes. But since the formation of the Indian Board for Wild Life, public opinion has been slowly awakened and imbued with the urgent need for preserving India's fauna, before it is too late. A great increase in the number of tourists from overseas who visit the sanctuaries and national parks has also helped to stimulate public opinion. Yet much remains to be accomplished.