

# Human Boom Gives Animals No Room to Roam

By John Stackhouse

Indraneil Das doesn't have to look very far to see India's wildlife crisis.

From his small office near the Bay of Bengal in southern India, he can watch no fewer than 8,000 crocodiles slither, swim and generally lounge about the pits of his reptile farm.

So fiercely were the crocodiles once hunted that the Indian government hired the Center for Herpetology in Mamallapuram in the 1970s to breed the reptile in captivity.

But now that the animal is thriving, perhaps too much so, no one wants the beast back in the wild.

"The local people no longer want crocodiles," Mr. Das said. "It's understandable. Who wants a crocodile in the local fish pond?"

So Mr. Das and his colleagues watch the reptiles multiply and die. Such struggles for space between humans and wildlife are being played out across India with increasing cause for alarm.

In the land that inspired *The Jungle Book*, the subcontinent's vast, rich and diverse wildlife is under siege as never before by 900 million human beings building highways, hydroelectric dams, plantations, factories — and fish ponds.

Extinction threatens not only the glamorous tiger and elephant, but scores of other species, from the Travancore Evening butterfly to the Andaman wild pig to the Olive Ridley turtle.

Squeezed by human growth and ineffective government conservation measures, more than one-fifth of India's 372 mammal species have entered the official endangered list, with many more insects, reptiles and amphibians to follow.

As India's human population heads toward 1.6 billion in the next century in an area one-third the size of China, the prospects for wildlife seem even more dire. A study published this year by the Zoological Survey of India found that as many as 59 species of freshwater fish — more than 10 percent of the total — face a serious threat of extinction because of irrigation schemes, dams and deforestation.

While human expansion threatens much of India's wildlife, inept wildlife management appears equally to blame. In India's lush northeast, a recent investigation by the Worldwide Fund for Nature discovered that the Lakhowa wildlife sanctuary had "vanished" because local forestry officials had sold the land to Bangladeshi immigrants. The sanctuary's 70 rhinos appear to have been poached.

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In the Manas sanctuary, also in northeastern India, WWF-India reported massive clear-cutting of forests by a criminal organization and an "alarming rate" of rhinoceros poaching.

Another wildlife sanctuary in northeastern Assam has become home to a military firing range. A study by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature estimated that 8,750 acres of elephant habitat in northeastern India have been lost to military bases.

And the well-protected elephant is running out of space. With about 20,000 pachyderms remaining in the subcontinent, the land squeeze has reached such critical levels that when 50 left a forest in northeastern India last year in search of food, the herd came within a day's march of Calcutta. In their march, the elephants trampled to death six persons and destroyed a wide swath of farmland. ■