Rhino Population in Kaziranga National Park

What is the issue?

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- The latest rhinoceros census in Kaziranga reported a gain of just 12 rhinos since 2015, a jump by barely half a percent.
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- Though marginal, this increase is seen as a healthy trend.
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What was the concern?

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- Kaziranga lost over 500 rhinos in the last 2 decades of the twentieth century.
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- The situation improved from the 2000s when an average annual loss to poaching came down to single digit.
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- Kaziranga reported a population of 1,855 rhinos in 2006.
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- But after 2006 it suffered a setback with poaching taking huge tolls.
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What is the recent healthy trend?

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- Even as poaching made a comeback after 2006, Kaziranga reported the biggest jump in rhino numbers.
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- Rhino population had a gain of 193 rhinos in just 3 years from 2006 to 2009.
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- It increased by 353 between 2009 and 2015 period, despite worrying numbers on poaching.
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- But since 2017, Kaziranga brought down the numbers on poaching and thus claims a healthy population gain.
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- Kaziranga National Park (KNP) has counted 2,413 one-horned rhinos in the latest triennial population estimation.
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- It comes closer to the goal of hitting the 3,000-mark in the Asian one-horned rhino population in Assam by 2020.
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- Moreover among the female population now counted, a majority are breeding.
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What are the reasons for improvement?

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- Poaching has been brought down considerably by concerted efforts.
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- A group of **informers** earlier used by the civil administration, to get updates on poaching operations, started turning hostile.
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- In tie up with their controllers, they were apparently protecting the poachers in return for big protection money.
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- This group of hostile informers have now been identified and controlled.
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- It has been a practice to offer **political patronage** to monetise Kaziranga's rhinos in exchange for varied electoral services.
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- The ups and downs in poaching numbers, with peaks during the election times, clearly reflect this practice.
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- This decade-long tradition which affected rhino population has now been done away with by the government.
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What drives poaching?

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- Kaziranga and its rhinos still remain very much in the grip of both commercial and political interests.
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- Rhino is far easier to poach than, say, a tiger or an elephant, and far more valuable in that sense.
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- A carton of horns fetches as much as a carload of tiger derivatives or tusks would.
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- These factors perpetuate the interest in rhino poaching, posing a challenge for controlling them.
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- This interest had in the past made it easy for local insurgent groups to strike cashless arms deals with operators in Myanmar.
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What are the administrative and legal shortfalls?

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- **Local Population** - The forest administration least consider as allies the local population, mostly tribals and Muslims.
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- Violent eviction drives against encroachers are common and, at least once, led to deaths caused by police firing.
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- **Killing Poachers** - Hundreds of alleged poachers have been gunned down and the number of poachers killed is on the rise.
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- On the other hand, expressively, only two forest staffs have ever been killed by poachers since the late 1960s.
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- In 2010, Assam extended legal protection against prosecution to staff who kill poachers.
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- Resultantly, from a decadal count of just 17 between 2001 and 2010, the number of poachers killed raised to over 50 in the next 5 years.
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- These figures clearly seem to give credibility to recurrent allegations of staged murders.
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- **Neighbourhood** - The anti-migrant rhetoric against alleged Bangladeshis have alienated the minority population in villages around the park.
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- Resultantly, rhino protection does not enjoy much goodwill in its neighbourhood.
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- Winning their support over time can be the best insurance against poaching.
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Source: Indian Express

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