

India uses drones to fight rhino poaching

April 8 2013, by Zarir Hussain



Indian forestry officials hold up unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) during a demonstration to the media at the Kaziranga National Park, some 250 kilometers east of Guwahati, on April 8, 2013. India said Monday it is deploying drones over a reserve in the northeast to safeguard the rare one-horned rhino from poachers in the first-ever such aerial conservation move in the country.

India said Monday it is deploying drones over a reserve to safeguard the rare one-horned rhino from poachers, the first time the country has employed aerial technology to protect wildlife.

The [unmanned aerial vehicle](#) (UAV) gives patrols a new strategic

advantage with an eye in the sky, allowing access into previously unreachable areas and a safe view of illegal activities on the ground.

"This is the first time in India that the UAV technology is being used for protecting the wildlife," Assam forest minister Rockybul Hussain told reporters in the state's main city of Guwahati.

"The presence of the UAVs will also serve as a deterrent to [poachers](#) since they now know the parks are being monitored both on the ground and from above."

The drones are being flown over the Kaziranga National Park, some 200 kilometres (120 miles) from Guwahati, in the northeast of the country, park officials said.

The UAVs are light enough to be launched by hand, taking images of the ground below with a still or video camera.

"They can fly a pre-programmed route at a maximum elevation of 200 meters (yards) for up to 90 minutes. The battery can be recharged as and when required," K. Ramesh, co-ordinator of the Wildlife Institute of India, told AFP.

Kaziranga has been fighting a long battle against rhino poachers who kill the animals for their horns, which fetch huge prices in some Asian countries.

The main market for the horn is China where it is used for making medicine and jewellery while in Vietnam many believe it has cancer-curing and aphrodisiac qualities.

At least 21 [rhinos](#) were killed last year by poachers in Kaziranga while another 15 have been reported dead this year.

A 2012 census in the park put the number of the rhinos at 2,290 out of a global one-horned rhinoceros population of 3,300.

The species fell to near extinction in the early 1990s and is currently listed as "vulnerable" by the International Union for [Conservation of Nature](#), one notch up from "endangered".

Alarmed by the spurt in rhino poaching incidents, the Assam government has handed over investigations to India's federal Central Bureau of Investigation.

Park warden N. K. Vasu hailed the maiden flight of the drones as an important milestone in the fight against rhino poaching.

"The test launch was successful. The UAV was in the sky for about 15 minutes and landed safely. We hope this new technology will go a long way in effective surveillance of the park," he said.

The move comes as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has been turning to UAVs in a bid to tackle an upsurge in illegal poaching of rhinos, elephants, and tigers carried out by increasingly sophisticated and well-equipped cartels.

The WWF provided two hand-launchable UAVs to the government of Nepal last year. In December, Google awarded the organization \$5 million to develop more advanced UAV systems.

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