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5. THE GAUR *BOS FRONTALIS* LAMBERT IN MANIPUR¹ANWARUDDIN CHOUDHURY²¹Accepted May 16, 2006²The Rhino Foundation for Nature in North-east India, Bamunimaidam, Guwahati 781 021, Assam, India.
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The Gaur *Bos frontalis* Lambert is distributed in north-eastern India in discrete populations (Choudhury 2002). The Gaur population in Manipur is poorly known and is believed to be very small (Choudhury 1992). Field trips were made in April 1988, January 1996, January and October 2001, and February 2002 to assess the current status of the Gaur in Manipur. The state of Manipur (23° 49'-25° 42' N, 93° 00'-94° 45' E; 22,327 sq. km in area), (Fig. 1) has two physiographic units – Manipur or Imphal Valley and Manipur Hills. The highest ranges are towards north with Mt. Tenipu or Iso (2,900 m above msl) as the highest peak. The lowest elevation is in the riverbeds near the Assam-Manipur border (less than 50 m above msl).

Till about 1950s, the Gaur was widespread all over the hills in the state, especially in the districts of Ukhrul, Senapati, Tamenglong, Churachandpur, Chandel and Jiribarn subdivision of Imphal district. Stray animals were reported from the hilly areas of Thoubal and Bishnupur (Bishenpur) districts. By then, however, the Gaur has vanished from the Valley. In fact, even at the turn of the 20th century, the species was scarce near the Valley. The Gaur was never common in recent memory as its meat was considered a major delicacy by all the tribes (Zeliangrong, Mao and Tangkhul Nagas, Kukis, Hmars, Biates, Paites and Mizos), and hunting was a regular feature. In the 1960s, when the insurgency started, modern firearms became handy resulting in phenomenal increase in poaching. With the gradual increase in human population, the destruction of forest through felling and *jhum* cultivation has also increased. By 1970s, the main Gaur strongholds remained only in the western and eastern hills with small populations elsewhere. By 1980s, they vanished from the northern hills except for stray individuals from the Dzuko valley and adjacent hilltops. In the 1990s, the Gaur survived only in a few areas, namely (1) Anko / Ango Ching

range and Shiroy; (2) Bunning area; (3) Jiri-Makru forests; (4) Chandel district; (5) Tolbung forests and stray individuals elsewhere. In the meantime, the human population of Manipur grew from 1.07 million in 1971 to 2.29 millions in 2001 (GoI 2001), i.e. more than double in two decades indicating phenomenal increase in *jhum* cultivation.

The main Gaur populations are now confined to the five areas where they were in the 1990s, but in a reduced

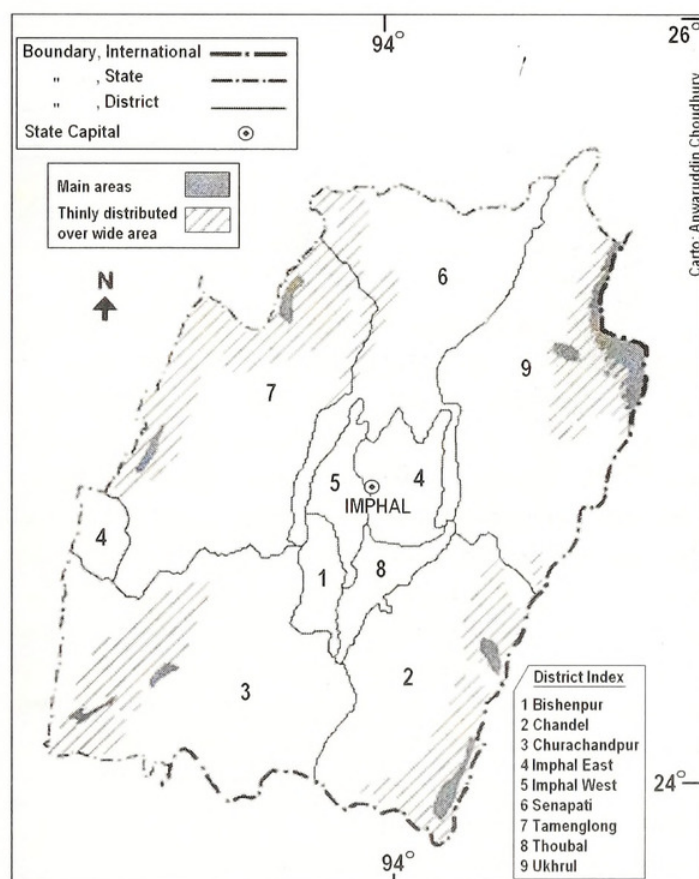


Fig. 1: Distribution of Gaur in Manipur

number. The approximate area and numbers are as follows: Anko / Ango Ching range and Shiroy (300 sq. km) of Ukhrul district in the north-east. This population has contiguity with forests in Myanmar and about 40-80 Gaurs could still be found. Bunning Wildlife Sanctuary (115 sq. km) and Jiri-Makru forests (198 sq. km) of Tamenglong district in the north-west have a small population of less than 30 animals. In Chandel district, a few are seen in the Yangoupokpi-Lokchao Wildlife Sanctuary (184.80 sq. km), but less than 30 animals are found in the forests (>50 sq. km) towards south, which also move to the Myanmar forests. In Tolbung Reserved Forest (>100 sq. km) and Kailam Wildlife Sanctuary (187 sq. km) of Churachandpur district, only stray animals or groups survive.

From the above account, it seems that the total number of Gaur in Manipur is only 120-160. The long-term survival of Gaurs in Manipur is bleak as the existing numbers are not only very small, but are also severely fragmented with no possibility of contiguity. The protected areas, where a few gaurs still survive, are inadequately protected

Habitat destruction and poaching continue to be major threats. The main cause of decline is unreported poaching. Protection measures in the sanctuaries should be strengthened. Anko/ Ango Ching range and Shiroy should be declared wildlife sanctuaries. Conservation education among villagers living along the fringe areas of PAs with the help of NGOs is also strongly recommended.

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