Animals ‘reclaim’ abandoned quarries

Denizens of Kaziranga are returning to habitats in Karbi-Anglong hills after the closure of stone mines

RAHUL KARMAKAR
GUWAHATI

Animals fleeing the floods in the Kaziranga National Park (KNP) are ‘reclaiming’ migratory paths in the Karbi Anglong hills south of the park that had been blocked for years by illegal stone quarries.

The Assam Forest Department banned stone mining in the hills of the Karbi Anglong district south of KNP on April 30 after the Supreme Court on April 12 ordered the closure of quarries. The ban followed a petition by environmental activist Rohit Choudhury against the quarries that caused noise pollution and contaminated streams flowing into the park.

Natural refuge
The hills of Karbi Anglong south of the highway that marks the southern boundary of the park, have been the natural refuge of animals whenever much of KNP goes underwater during the monsoons. However, animals fleeing the floods were confined to a small patch at the foothills after the stone-crushing machines came up at the quarry about four years ago.

“The hills are part of the Kaziranga-Karbi Anglong landscape. The noisy quarries had hindered the movement of animals to higher altitudes, offering 750 sq. km. of refuge and fodder. Animals moving toward the areas during this flood after a long gap underlines the efficacy of the SC-mandated ban,” KNP Director P. Sivakumar said.

This year, the floods have claimed 205 animals, including 18 of the endangered one-horned rhinos so far. Most have drowned while 16 hog deer and one sambhar were run over by vehicles while trying to cross the highway for the relative safety of the hills.

“We found elephants, deer and other animals in and around the Dhing quarry, less than two kilometres from our range office. Our staff spent three nights looking for a rhino that went up the hill near the deserted quarry before returning after the animal made its way back to the national park,” said Pankaj Bora who heads the Bagori Range of KNP.

Officials of the park’s Burapahar Range spotted tiger pug marks close to a quarry near the Silimkhowa village. The quarry is along the Maloni animal corridor.

KNP officials said the water level in the park had fallen by 162 cm in the last 24 hours. But heavy rain forecast of eastern Assam and Arunachal Pradesh could result in more floods.