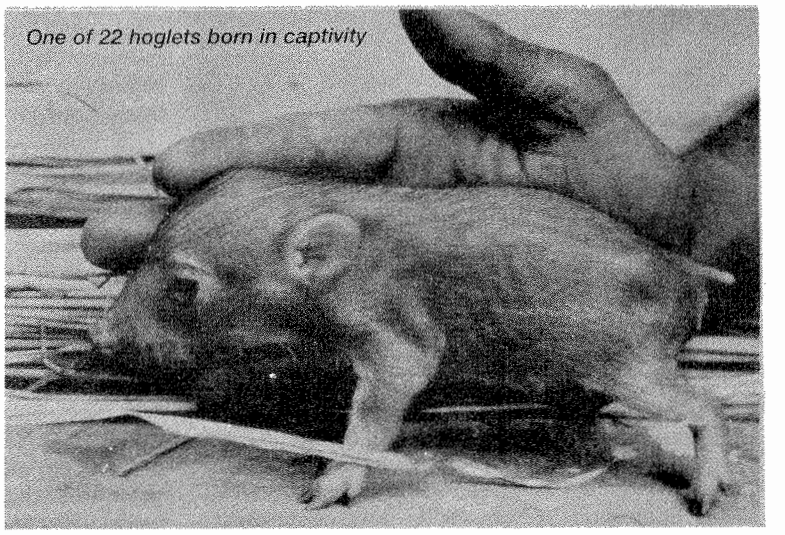
HOGS, HOGLETS AND MORE HOGLETS
CAPTIVE PIGMY HOG POPULATION INCREASES BY 666% *

William Oliver **

Just 18 months after Project Director William Oliver and Project Manager Goutam Narayan led an expedition to capture a "founder" breeding group of pigmy hogs, the captive population of the world's rarest pig has increased by an astonishing 666%.



One of 22 hoglets born in captivity

Forty animals reside at the Pigmy Hog Project's Research and Breeding Centre in Guwahati, Assam. The hog 'baby boom' began with two males and four females caught in Manas National Park. Three of the females, believed to be pregnant at the time, subsequently reared 12 young born 8 to 9 weeks after arrival at the Breeding Centre.

This year 6 litters of hoglets conceived in captivity were born between April and September, with 22 surviving young doing well. Ten females will reach breeding age by the end of 1997. With an average litter size of 5 and a rearing rate of 81% to date, Project staff alerted JWPT to the prospect of a hog housing crisis.

The design of the Guwahati hog house was based on everything known about the social behaviour, reproduction and habitat requirement of the pigmy hog, coupled with normal management principles. Nine interconnecting stalls surround a central service areas. Each stall leads (via pigmy hog-sized hatchways and drop slides) into two or more large outside paddpocks, all planted out with tall grasses from the hogs' habitat in Manas.

The area also had to be predator-proofed. According to earlier captive records from Assam, the pigmy hog is deliciously edible to everything -- snakes, crows, owls. Perimeter walls were constructed deep into the ground, weldmesh fencing was extended 1.5m above the walls and roof wires were stretched overhead to prevent avian attacks. The project office overlooks the enclosures to provide additional security.

Extension Enclosures Funded

The hog house was built to accommodate an expanding population; but no one could have anticipated the rapid increase in animals this year. We are happy to report that the Assam Valley Wildlife Society, which was involved in earlier efforts to breed the pigmy hog in captivity, has generously offered to fund the construction of extension enclosures.

The new enclosures will give Goutam, Project Officer, Dr. Parag Deka and other staff maximum flexibility in managing the captive hog population. The stalls and paddocks will be less elaborate than the original hog house, less expensive to build and slightly less secure from potential predators. Therefore, they will be used primarily for well-grown litters, adult boars and bachelor groups so that the existing (intensely secure) hog house can be used for breeding females and their dependent litters.

Sweet Tooth

The hogs are given a varied diet twice a day. Prepared foods are presented on trays in the stalls, while certain preferred or less perishable foods are chopped and scattered around the paddocks to encourage foraging, though the hogs already forage a great deal of their time anyway.

Sixty different food items, all purchased in local markets, have been offered to the hogs. Carefully documented food preferences show that pigmy hogs have a sweet tooth. Apples, bananas, papayas, melons, dates and coconuts are seldom left uneaten. Sometimes the hogs are encouraged to consume less favoured or previously untried foods, such as yams, turnips or cauliflowers, by sweetening the food with condensed milk.

In the paddocks, the hogs browse on grass shoots, teak pods and the roots of grasses and herbs collected in Manas and transplanted in Guwahati. When funds are available to establish an organic farm, native grasses and food plants of wild pigmy hogs will be cultivated on site.

Nest-building

Pigmy hogs also require tall grasses for nest-building. This is a largely social activity, shared by several group members working together. However, unlike most other wild pig species, solitary hogs, even adult males, build and use nests at all times of the year.

In the paddocks, nests are kept in good repair by the addition of dead and living grasses at regular intervals and hoglets

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Gautam Narain and William Oliver with the world's rarest pig. Photo by Roland Seitre.

as young as four months have been seen collecting nesting material. The hogs often remain inside their nests unless occupied in other activities and retire to their nests if they are disturbed or during hot or wet weather.

The hogs seldom construct nests in the stalls, where they are shut in at night. The thatch provided by the staff is used as simple bedding, except when a maternity nest is built by a sow prior to farrowing. Maternity nests are larger, well constructed mounds with a central chamber. They are built overnight, giving Project staff a clear signal that a litter is on the way.

Field Studies

While diet, behaviour and rearing studies of the captive hogs continue, William and Goutam are planning further field research on the wild pigmy hog population. A preliminary field survey in Manas conducted on four wild hogs yielded a surprising statistic. The 'home range' of a wild hog appears to be very small, 30 to 50 hectares, indicating the species is quite sedentary. In nine months of radio tracking the hogs, only one individual moved away from its orginal home range and then only in response to the deliberate buring of the tall grassland.

Fire remains the single greatest threat to the survival of the species, so long-term ecological studies of the grasslands have been started. Five sites in Manas have been chosen, each with diverse characteristics including tree density, grass helight, domestic animal grazing, flood and fire conditions and human disturbance levels. The results of these studies, as well as controlled burning experiments, may provide grassland management guidelines to assist the survival of the few remaining wild hogs and many other species dependent on these habitats.

Moral Support

Regular visits to forestry officers, park staff, government officials and local non-governmental organisations are an enormously important part of the Pigmy Hog Project. Political turmoil and civil unrest in Assam has spilled into Manas National Park. A few years ago, several park staff were killed and wildlife patrols were suspended in many areas. As a result, globally important populations of Indian rhino, swamp deer and other species were decimated by invading poachers. Fortunately increased human encroachment in the reserve has not happened, but continued delays in the release of government funding earmarked for conservation have contributed further to corresponding delays in making improvements in the situation.

By attending meetings, focusing issues, and addressing the interests of local communities, Project personnel hope to influence the stepping-up park protection. Pigmy hogs once lived in the foothills stretching the entire length of the Himalayas from northern Uttar Pradesh, through southern Nepal and northern West Bengal to Northwest Assam. Today only two or three wild populations are known to survive in the latter region. Helping to raise morale among local forest officers is almost as vital to the success of the Pigmy Hog Recovery Programme as raising captive-bred hoglets in Guwahati.

The Pigmy Hog Recovery Programme is conducted under the aegis of a formal, collaborative agreement between JWPT, the Pigs and Peccaries Specialist Group of IUCN (World Conservation Union, Species Survival Commission), the Assam State Forest Department and the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India. Major financial support has been provided by the European Commission.

The Pigmy hogs of Assam Pigmy hog breeding project at ten months old. Photo by W.L.R. Oliver.