

'Habitat deterioration posing threats'

Face to Face

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Dr Bibhab Kumar Talukdar of Aaranyak says that Assam's approach to rhino protection is perhaps the best in Asia.

Dr Bibhab Kumar Talukdar founded Aaranyak in 1989. He is a wildlife biologist and currently working on rhino conservation and prevention of illegal wildlife trade in Asia.

Congratulations on Aaranyak completing 35 years. How has Aaranyak contributed to the overall conservation efforts in Assam?

Aaranyak has been able to contribute through a few Public Interest Litigations in early 1990s to stop leasing out of fishery mahals in Dibru-Saikhowa and also halt the decision of Assam Government in 1993 to de-reserve three reserved forests. It also played a key role in augmenting conservation awareness among students and local communities. Aaranyak is also involved in applied research that assists in conservation and management of species and habitats.

What is your current workforce size?

Aaranyak currently has a workforce of about 194 paid employees and over 350 members. Our employees are mainly from Assam and other Northeastern states. Our members are from across the country, although majority of them are from the Northeast. We have about 25-30 women in our workforce working in various projects. Our thrust is to build capacity of budding conservation workers from various disciplines to cater to the needs of diverse ecological and environmental challenges the region has been facing.

How do you view the conservation scenario in Assam?

We have the dubious distinction of having maximum forest cover loss due to encroachment, not to mention other issues like man-elephant conflict and poaching.

Conservation challenges are dynamic. Assam has done well with rhino recovery with proactive protection. Compared to 41 rhinos killed in Assam in 2013, it has been reduced to single digit in the past few years. However, based on satellite images, it is evident that dense forest cover in Assam

has declined due to encroachment and exploitation. Forest destruction has led to increased human wildlife conflict. Further, if we just see the recent flash flood in Guwahati, it is related to forest destruction in and around the city and most importantly altering wetlands for development activities.

You have worked for a long time in the Manas National Park and Tiger Reserve. What changes have you seen in the park over the years?

Manas had gone through a phase of destruction from late 1990s to early 2000. However, post-2004, Manas gradually improved due to realisation among communities and also efforts of the Assam and BTC governments. We lost all the rhinos in Manas during the prolonged socio-political unrest from late 1990s to early 2000. But under Indian Rhino Vision 2020 of Assam Government, 22 wild rhinos were translocated to Manas and almost 20 rescued rhinos were also released in Manas, leading to the current population size of about 50. Aaranyak provided vehicles, skill-building training to the Manas National Park team and also worked with local communities to build their skills to shoulder diversified livelihood options. Self-help groups were formed, which are now engaged in weaving, pickle and juice-making, and money-yielding cultivation.

What has been your greatest moment as a conservationist?

I was thrilled when White Winged Wood Duck ('Deoanh' in Assamese) was declared as the State Bird of Assam in 2003. I carried out my research work on this species from 1994-1999 and worked closely with the then forest officers in Nameri WLS and Dibru-Saikhowa WLS to upgrade both these wildlife sanctuaries to national parks on the basis of presence of the 'Deoanh'. Further my greatest contribution in conservation is to help build a platform through Aaranyak that has given opportunities to local conservationists to contribute to the field of conservation and flourish profes-



sionally to achieve national and international recognitions.

How do you view the recent actions of the State Government in setting up luxury hotels on elephant habitat near Kaziranga, electrification of train tracks inside Hollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary, denotification of Garbhanga Reserve, etc.?

These issues could have been addressed if these areas were declared Eco-Sensitive Zones. Certain development projects could have been diverted from the key wildlife areas including shifting of existing rail track passing through the gibbon habitats in Hollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary. Any denotification of protected area must be avoided as it sends a wrong signal about the government's efforts for the conservation of wildlife and forests.

Do you think habitat loss poses the biggest threat to conservation in Assam?

Yes, habitat loss in parts of Assam is leading to increased human-wildlife conflicts. Elephant population is having a hard time of late due to loss of habitats connecting forest areas, which is restricting their natural movement, resulting in increased interactions sometimes leading to loss of both human and elephant lives. Besides habitat loss, habitat deterioration is also posing diverse threats to a number of threatened species. UN has declared this decade as the Decade of Restoration. As such my appeal to the competent authority is to initiate well-

planned restoration of key forest, grassland and wetland ecosystems in Assam.

From your interaction with foreign NGOs engaged in conservation efforts, what difference do you see in the approach of foreign governments in these areas?

It depends from country to country. But in case of rhino, I must say that Assam's protection approach is perhaps the best in Asia. The number of frontline forest guards deployed in rhino-bearing areas and the forest camps inside these areas helped Assam to keep strict vigil to deter poaching attempts. I have worked in other Southeast Asian countries, but nowhere they have come close to Assam's protection measures to secure rhinos. In Assam, we have Special Rhino Protection Force, besides three Assam Forest Protection Battalions. Assam is successful in increasing rhino population from about 100 to about 2850 in a span of 100 years.

Which are the major areas that Aaranyak is working in recent times?

Aaranyak has been working to secure the future of threatened species in Northeastern India that include tiger, elephant, rhino, hoolock gibbon, golden langur, Gangetic dolphin, herpetofauna and avifauna. Besides species research and conservation, Aaranyak is also involved in upscaling the skills of law enforcement agencies and judicial officers so as to create a synergy among multiple stakeholders to check illegal wildlife trade. We are working with local communities to reduce their dependence on forest, and helping them build skills to opt for diverse livelihood opportunities. We are also creating conservation awareness. We have set up one Wildlife Genetics Laboratory and a Geospatial Technology and Application Laboratory at Aaranyak, which have been contributing in their respective fields. The Wildlife Genetics Laboratory has forensic facility and in the past few years we have given species identification forensic report to the Assam Forest department and also to Assam Police.