



Empowering People for Rhino Conservation (EPRC)

A brief report on

Focus Group Discussion

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Empowering People for Rhino Conservation (EPRC) project starts from August 1, 2007 being implemented by Media Consultancy Nepal and supported by Asian Rhino Project, Australia.

As per the program purpose, a focus group discussion was held at Meghauli VDC-1, Laukhuri, Chitwan where the magnitude of park and people conflict is comparatively high. Discussion was targeted to Kumal indigenous group which have blame of high involvement on poaching. Conservation education and awareness program is not adequately implemented on those communities. That is why EPRC have chosen the place and group for the program. The purpose of the program was to reduce the park and people conflict and to gradually increase motivation towards conservation.



1. Background :

Meghauli is an adjoining bufferzone VDC of Chitwan National Park which is prone area of rhino induced ravages. Indigenous people of this VDC are highly vulnerable on poaching and its related activities. Meghauli is 25 KM far from the district headquarter Bharatpur. It has around 17000 populations where 60% are indigenous tribes prominently dominated by Kumal, Bote Majhi and Tharu.

Meghauli is also one of the most wildlife suffering bufferzone area of Chitwan National Park. Among nine wards (in Nepal every VDC is further divided into

nine wards), ward no. 1, 2 and 3 are affected immensely and ward no. 5 and 7 partially by the rhinos of nearby national park in terms of crop, livestock depredation and physical attack. Since long, villagers have induced queue system for night watch from the Machan (tower) so that they can inform others about the rhinos arrival and can hound out through human noise and torches.

CNP has convicted 25 individuals of Meghauli VDC on being indulged or assisting poaching. Among them more than 75% belongs to the indigenous groups which are mostly illiterate and impoverished.

2. Objectives :

The objectives of focus group discussions were to :

- a) Provide opportunity to narrate their experiences about park-people-wildlife circumstances.
- b) Know their attitude and feeling towards rhino and its conservation.
- c) Motive them on rhino conservation, to aware on benefit of conservation, repercussions of poaching and to apprise them on prevailing laws.

3. Methodology :

The program was conducted with the local co-ordination and support of Prabhat Kiran Sewa Samaj (PKSS), a CBO based on that locality. It has formally committed to support the project. The EPRC project team member and the activists of PKSS approached to the target group member three days ahead of the program and informed about the program. The venue was selected on local primary school which was at the central accessible venue for all the participants. Though the participants were from different wards, majorities were from 1, 2 and 3 no. and were mostly illiterate.

The president of PKSS, Mr. Chabilal Neupane started the program with the relevancy and contents of the program. The project co-ordinator of EPRC Mr. Deepak Acharya explored on the objectives of the EPRC and the focus group discussion.

The family members of imprisoned or fled alleged rhino poachers belonging to Kumal indigenous group were specially requested for the program. In the program, family members of seven imprisoned poachers participated.



Interestingly, two family members had handed over their son and husband respectively to the park.

The program was scheduled on three phases. At first phase, participants were offered one by one to narrate their experience and practice on park-wildlife induced circumstances. Similarly, the family members of imprisoned alleged poachers put forth the realities, sufferings, stigmatization and desires.

At the second phase, the participants shared on their perception and attitudes towards the conservation and rhino issues. Lastly, the participants were made aware on the benefit of conservation, needs of rhino protection and prevailing laws on poaching.



The participants have shown eagerness to express their views on several aspects of conservation and rhino issues. According to them, they are never been invited to share on these issues though it highly relates to them. They said their problems and grievances have

never been heard by the concerned authorities. Participants requested organizers (EPRC) to relate their voices where it will be deemed. Most of the participants stressed on conservation education and awareness program to Kumal community and reiterated their role on conservation shouldn't be disparaged.

Local community leader and ex-ward chairperson (people representative) Mr. Karna Dhowj Adhikari was specially invited on the discussion and he further stressed on needs of conservation and urged participants to keep refrain from any sorts of anti conservation activities and poaching assistance.

The participants of Kumal indigenous group have intense grievances towards the park official and even a public for being bad-tagged them as 'poachers.' Surprisingly, some participants said they did not have knowledge that involvement in poaching directly or indirectly is a serious crime.

The imprisoned family members blamed park authority for lengthy juridical process. They asserted that investigative process should be swift and time span needed for final verdict should be defined so that they should not have to live with dilemma and mental torture.

Indigenous people have entrenched conviction that regulation, act and activities of the park are not pro-public and park wants to impose it at through any means.

During the program, the project team convinced the participants to seek amicable solution of the problem. They were apprised that the endorsed regulations and laws (on which they are unsatisfied) are prepared by the team including people representatives and if felt necessary it can be amended through dialogue with the concerned parties.

4. Significant voices :

We have included here the selected voices of participants including imprisoned family members, their perception about human-wildlife relation, rhino conservation and related matters in their own words.

“I forced my husband to surrender”

a) Durga Maya Kumal (*Meghauli-2, Sisawas*) : I have never participated in this type of program. I am pleased to share my experiences. I take this as an opportunity. I am Durga Maya Kumal, 45. My husband Buddhi Bahadur Kumal is at Bharatpur jail since six month on the allegation of rhino poaching. I had never known my husband was involved in poaching till park official sent warrant letter to my house. Subsequently, my husband fled to India and remained there approximately for a year.

During that period, park staffs and army forces used to come at our house and threatened us to show the hideout of my husband. They even thrashed and misbehaved with my 20 years old daughter and put pistol on her forehead. How could I bear that? Park staffs didnot try to convince me rather threatened. Is that behave suit for government staffs? But once when I made contact with my husband, I forced him to surrender.



As my husband was a boatman, I did not believe he did a poaching, but he could have unknowingly assist poachers. My husband confessed he guide a group and informed them about Rhinos prime habitat of the locality. He got Rs. 30,000/- (US \$ 461) from that group.

On this ground of mistake, I had hope he would not be languished longtime in a jail and would be released soon. We, husband and wife, together went to national park office and he surrendered. But its more than half a year and his case is still pending, park officials say it is in process. Up to when we have to wait in this quandary. If my husband did against laws, he should be punished, but up to when we have to wait and only wait for final verdict. I

said publicly, I would make my husband to refrain from poaching if he get release.

We are poor and our agricultural land did not make us survive for a year. Had my husband been with us, we should not have struggle hard to get two time meal.

“I experience first sharing program”

c) Shova Shrestha (Meghauli-3, Jitpur) – I thank the organizer on being arrived here to exchange feelings with us. My son Raju Shrestha, 32, is imprisoned since five months in rhino case. I am women representative of ‘Bardah bufferzone community forest’ too.



Park officials and army surrounded our house two times in search of my son. He fled to India for 10 months after the park officials called him for investigation.

I forced him to return and handover infront of the park officials and bufferzone council members. This was the first case in CNP in which a mother herself handover her warranted son.

My son confessed with me, once he went with a poacher groups but was not involved in poaching. I know his deed worth to be punished but when his investigation will be completed? Our sons, brothers, husbands are not animals to be tied without proper justification.

Park administration always turned deaf ear to our voices. They even did not respond us. I have not expected this sort of behaviour while surrendering my son. My belief towards the park and bufferzone council are faded away now. For the sustainable conservation, the relation between park and people is indispensable. Conducive environment should be made to enhance co-action.

We did not have any means to share sufferings and no one to share with us. This is the first program held in this area where we have shared our attitude towards conservation and feelings.

I support these types of programs. Being a member of buffer zone community forests, I urge other organizations to implement awareness programs. These types of programs can hit the vulnerable people and can help to mitigate conflict between wildlife-people, park-people conflict.

“I am ready to own up responsibility of my husband”

d) Sita Kumal (Meghauli-2, Parsa bajar) : Two years ago, my husband Surya Bahadur Kumal, was arrested by the army from the house in midnight. Since then he is at jail, but his crime was not decided yet.

We did not have land. We have six children and my husband used to do labour works. After his imprisonment, our woes are further compounded. Me and my children too are compelled to work on other lands to get at least minimum survival.

I fear if my husband will languish in jail for ever. No one hears to us, neither define the crime. I am ready to own up responsibility of my husband that he would not be involved in any poaching activities in future. I did not believe he was involved in poaching previously because he did not have more than his usual wages. If he did something wrong or against laws, I am confident it is unknowingly. We are illiterate and could be deceived easily. Is being poor and living near the park is a curse to us?



If my husband wants to change himself, why he should not be given chance?

“We are not against conservation”

e) Pamfa Maya Kumal (Meghauli-1, Laukhuri) : I did not know my husband, Sukram Kumal, was indulged in poaching. Park authorities did not issue warrant letter or made inquiry on it. Our son work in India, hence my husband went India to meet with son. While returning, my husband was arrested in Chaubiskothi, Bharatpur 14 months ago. I did not know whereabouts of my husband then. I approached with Jyotishi (astrologer) to know where he was. Jyotishi suggested he might have arrested. On further inquiry, I came to know, husband was imprisoned on the rhino poaching case. But I did not believe he was really involved in poaching. He might have compelled to accept the crime by the torture of park and security forces.



He often used to enter the park areas and community forests to get forestry needs and park resources. I did not know more than that.

Before the arrest, I did not know the laws and punishment made for poaching, but now I know little, the laws are harsh. We want to know more about conservation, but who will render us? We did not even have chances to share our sufferings, problems and feelings. We are not against conservation and are ready to contribute but we should not be tortured. We hope you have come here to help us.

“Our community needs awareness”

f) Batuli Kumal (Meghauli-1, Laukhuri) : Five months ago, security forces raided our house at midnight. They took away our guest in the confusion he was my husband. But when they know, they released a guest and arrested my husband. They assured me they will not torture or misbehave with my husband and will be released the next day after short inquiry. We did not dare to go CNP office the next day. After some days, I came to know he was transferred to Bharatpur jail from the park custody.

I am illiterate, impoverished, did not know much and hence cannot face with park authorities to know the realities of my husband. Villagers said my husband was arrested for rhino poaching and I feel harassed. Our village and community avidly needs awareness and conservation education program to avoid this type of circumstances. I hope you will act as bridge to solve our problems.



“Who will hear to us?”



g) Sita Kumal (Meghauli-2, Parsa bajar) : My husband, Bir Bahadur Kumal, was arrested two years ago, while he was in work. Some local enemy might have blamed him as a poacher and he was arrested. He was simple house labour. We have five small children. I have immense trouble to eke out living.

My husband case was still pending and I did not know legal procedures. Who will hear to us? We did not have any guide who will apprise us about legal process and educate us on conservation.

“Fed up with the legal process”

H) Sani Maya (Meghauli-2, Parsa bajar)

My husband Toplal had worked at Tented Camp for 20 years. He was guard and was arrested at night during the duty hours. Previously, he was labour of the tented camp, later he was appointed to care baby rhino reared by the camp itself.

My husband said he had taken NRs. 20,000 (US \$ 308) in two installments as a loan to support in a house maintenance from the Raju shrestha (the person who blamed). We never had enough money to survive. If he had been a poacher, we should have enough for survival.

After arrest, we went to park office and did inquiry. They assured he will be released within a week but he was sent to jail. Often we used to talk about rhino. I told my husband not to indulge in any kind of poaching activities because we know the laws are harsh. He used to respond positively too.



I am second wife of my husband and have seven children. How could I rear them? Park officials did not torture us but we are becoming more poorer by the judiciary process. We did not know about it .

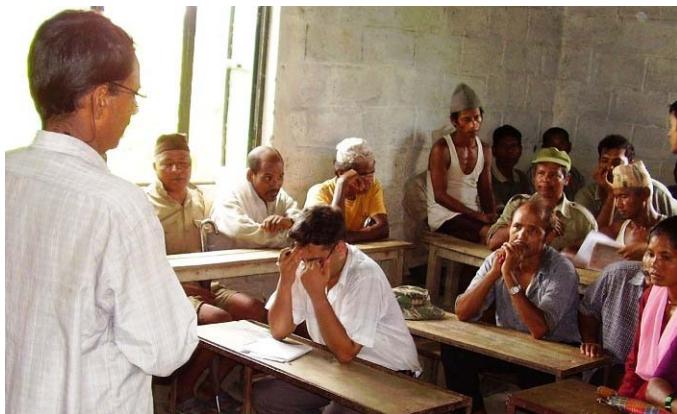
Once we provided NRs. 5000 (US \$ 77) to the lawyer who was introduced by the local leader of our community Jaya Mangal Kumal. Lawyer again asked for NRs. 10000 (US \$ 154) to defend the case, but we could not afford furthermore and aftermath did not know about the case.

“Interaction between park-people extremely lacks”

h) Karna Dhowj Adhikari (Community leader, ex-ward chairperson) :

The rules and regulations of parks and bufferzone didnot encompass feelings and aspirations of bufferzone people. National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act 1973, its amendments and bufferzone regulation 1996 should be largely rectified .The bufferzone people are not against conservation but where are the initiatives to make them conservation oriented. Their crops are decimated by rhinos, park staffs show aggression to the villagers, they are victimized more on their small fault. Allocated budget for compensation didnot carry even 10 percent of damage. There is not direct interaction, discussion between park and people. The distance and antagonism between them is growing day by day.

Kumal community is being regularly bad-tagged as 'rhino poachers' and they used to suffer more than other community. If Kumal community is vulnerable for rhino poaching, why government and non-government sectors keep silence to hear and motivate them on conservation. It should be a grave concern of related organizations to aware, advocate and motivate the critical population towards the conservation. Wide scale of conservation education and conflict mitigation program will definitely turnaround the prevailing situation.



Around 15 persons of three wards (1, 2 and 3) of Meghauli VDC are convicted by the park for being involved in poaching. Seven of them are imprisoned while others were at large. The cases are protracted for long period. Neither they are released nor the case ends.

I will not say local people are being jailed without any cause but the level of their crime should be identified and should be punished accordingly. Most of them have to suffer more than their deeds. This tendency generates nothing except vengeance against park and conservation. If the situation perpetuates, after five years male members will be difficult to find out here.

"Aware the People"

i) Chabilal Neupane (President, Sukranagar) : Bufferzone people should be awared on their rights and responsibilities on conservation. Natural resources should be allowed to consume but with conservation-friendly modality. There are two major stumbling blocks of conservation. Firstly, conflict between park and people and secondly inadequate conservation education for grassroot people. If initiations are taken to tackle with these things, conservation problems will be alleviated gradually.



5) Output: The discussion tests the interpretation and understanding of the participants on the conservation and rhino issues and to some extent redress their conviction. Out of 41 participants (except project team and

local supporting CBO activists), 37 were from poaching vulnerable Kumal community including 18 female.

According to participants, *this is the first sharing and sensitization program on conservation* that reached at their level. Hence, it is expected that the essence of rhino conservation will be disseminated to many through the participants. The participants stressed on following points :

- a) We realize conservation is necessary for all. Rhino conservation will benefit us.
- b) We need conservation education and awareness programs.
- c) We will try to refrain our community and prison-released individuals from poaching.
- d) We commit to actively participate and support in rhino conservation programs.
- e) We are ready to resolve problems and conflict.

6. Conclusion :

From the views of the participants, it can be concluded that indigenous people are not against conservation but proper and adequate initiatives are not taken to motivate them. They stressed on dire need of information, knowledge about conservation aspects, park rules and system. They want to share their problems, sufferings and seek mutual solution of the problems but did not have enough means and opportunity to express.

7. Recommendation :

- a) Conservation education and awareness programs should be in direct access of vulnerable community.
- b) Urgent initiations should be taken to mitigate conflict between park and people. Interactions and dialogue should be enhanced among the grass root people, park, bufferzone council and related stakeholders,
- c) Park staffs should inform imprisoned family members about judiciary process and final verdict should be given sooner as possible.
- d) Compensation process should be transparent and amount should be justifiable.

List of Participants

S.N.	Name	Address
1	Shankar Kumal	Meghauli 1
2	Bishnu Bahadur Kumal	Meghauli 1
3	Bal Krishna Kumal	Meghauli 1
4	Sukram Kumal	Meghauli 1
5	Baburam Kumal	Meghauli 1
6	Lal Bahadur Kumal	Meghauli 1
7	Purna Bahadur Kumal	Meghauli 1
8	Karna Bahadur Kumal	Meghauli 1
9	Aaitram Kumal	Meghauli 1
10	Durga Maya Kumal	Meghauli 2
11	Indra Maya Kumal	Meghauli 2
12	Rudra Kumar Shrestha	Meghauli 3
13	Shova Shrestha	Meghauli 3
14	Srijana Kumal	Meghauli 2
15	Ram Bahadur Kumal	Meghauli 1
16	Shanti Kumal	Meghauli 1
17	Mangali Kumal	Meghauli 1
18	Batuli Kumal	Meghauli 1
19	Suk Bahadur Kumal	Meghauli 1
20	Pampha Maya Kumal	Meghauli 1
21	Dolakhi Kumal	Meghauli 1
22	Deu Maya Kumal	Meghauli 1
23	Sita Kumal	Meghauli 2
24	Shanti Kumal	Meghauli 1
25	Karna Dhowj Adhikari	Meghauli 1
26	Som Bahadur Kumal	Meghauli 1
27	Jit Bahadur Kumal	Meghauli 1
28	Ram Bahadur Kumal	Meghauli 1
29	Bir Bahadur Kumal	Meghauli 1
30	Basanta Bahadur Kumal	Meghauli 1
31	Purna Bahadur Kumal	Meghauli 1
32	Som Bahadur Kumal	Meghauli 1
33	Maite Kumal	Meghauli 1
34	Bir Bahadur Kumal	Meghauli 1
35	Tul Bahadur Kumal	Meghauli 1
36	Mangali Kumal	Meghauli 1
37	Biba Kumal	Meghauli 1
38	Suk Bahadur Kumal	Meghauli 1
39	Amar Kumal	Meghauli 1
40	Sita Kumal	Meghauli 1
41	Sani Maya	Meghauli 1

Thank You