

# Saving *Karbi Anglong*

The guide was waiting for me at Nihang Langso from where I was to trek to the Mikir Hills Reserve Forest, a large unexplored wilderness in Assam's Karbi Anglong district. We crossed the Chamdhara *nadi*, the upper reaches of Kaliyoni river near Chaprasi Rongphar village. After an hour's hiking through bamboo-covered slopes, we reached the crest of a ridge and followed it along an old elephant trail. I came across fresh signs of dhole, tiger and gaur. Hoolock

gibbons made brief appearances while capped langur troupes crashed through bamboo brakes. Inaccessibility has preserved the forests of the Mikir Hills, a veritable wonderland in which sambar, muntjac, serow and wild boar are plentiful. This is one of the few places on earth where as many as seven species of primates can be seen, including the slow loris, and four macaques – the Assamese, rhesus, pig-tailed and stump-tailed.

This area is umbilically linked with Kaziranga through a belt of unclassified forests. The northern slopes of Karbi Anglong are vital to Kaziranga because one-horned rhinos, elephants, wild water buffalo and a host of other animals are able to find refuge here when floods come calling each year to Kaziranga's low lying Brahmaputra flood plains.

My purpose of visiting the area this time was to gather field data on the basis of which I could recommend that the forest be declared

a sanctuary or national park. For this, I would need to lobby with the local Autonomous Council as Karbi Anglong has special status under the 6<sup>th</sup> Schedule of the Constitution and without their support and consent no area can be declared a sanctuary. It had taken almost half a decade, but things were on the right track, thanks to Jotson Bey who became the Chief of the Council in the late 1990s.

Following my trip to the Mikir Hills, a meeting with him in December 1998 paved

the way for not one but *four* wildlife sanctuaries in this district. The Mikir Hills Reserve Forest was notified as East Karbi Anglong Wildlife Sanctuary, while the unclassified forests that connect it with Kaziranga became the North Karbi Anglong Wildlife Sanctuary. Two more followed – Nambor and Marat Longri Sanctuaries.

## DHANSIRI – THE TIGERLAND

Near Langcholiet in the Dhansiri Reserve Forest on a routine morning site visit, I heard the alarm calls of a muntjac barely 50 m. away. At 770 sq. km., this is Assam's second largest reserve and I was well into this wild habitat, accompanied by an assistant. I was excited, but a touch apprehensive on hearing the call, as anyone who may encounter a tiger on the prowl would be. In this sample area of about 10 sq. km. (Langcholiet-Nailalung), we had evidence of a full-grown tiger and a tigress and her near-adult cub. Two more areas of Dhansiri, Monglumukh and Khelma had also been surveyed for tigers by me when I found signs of perhaps around seven in an area of roughly 50 sq. km. Elsewhere in the reserve too I conducted transects and here too I saw evidence of the big cats virtually all over, including the adjacent reserve forests of Daldali, Tamulbari and Barlangpher.

In the early 1990s, my estimate for the entire 1,000 sq. km. area was about 70 to 80 big cats. I recommended the area as a tiger reserve and later on revised the proposal to include four more reserve forests in the north, Disama, Kaki, Inghongkiri and Miyungdisa, making the total area for the proposed tiger reserve 1,454 sq. km. Sadly, this proposal has still not seen the light of day, though the last four reserve forests were actually declared as the Marat Longri ('abode of wildlife' in the *Karbi* language) Wildlife Sanctuary.

My surveys in the early 1990s also suggested the presence of at least 1,500 hoolock gibbons in Dhansiri and its adjacent areas – the largest for any single reserve forest in Assam. Encroachment has, however, taken a toll on this population over the years. Thankfully, the *Karbi* tribe does not harm gibbons as they believe themselves to be related to the apes through common ancestries. And, despite being located on the Assam-Nagaland border, which often allows miscreants from both sides to escape punishment, these forests have good tree cover and are still clearly wildlife rich. One reason is that the Intanki National Park in Nagaland has served as a sort of buffer to reduce poaching pressures from across the state border.

An account on Dhansiri would be incomplete without referring to Sarsing Rongphar, a hunter-turned-guide. Walking with him in these glades, I was able to confirm the existence of the rare and elusive marbled cat (two specimens examined), clouded leopard, a small herd of wild water buffalo, stump-tailed macaque and keeled box turtle. I also identified some wild varieties of citrus plants that could have great genetic value at some point. Sarsing had earlier reported sighting *Khenglong-po*, the legendary ape-man of *Karbi* folklore, but this remained elusive, and probably always will!

## NAMBOR – THE ABODE OF ELEPHANTS

Huge tuskers stopping traffic on National Highway No. 39 passing through Garampani Wildlife Sanctuary and demanding a 'toll' (food) was a common occurrence until the mid-90s. This behaviour had been reported since the 1970s and was probably related to the transportation of sugarcane through the forest to a sugar mill. In the early '90s, it became a regular phenomenon and continued until



A forest stream inside the Mikir Hills Reserve Forest, now the East Karbi Anglong Wildlife Sanctuary. The Chief of Autonomous Council, Jotson Bey, met the author in the late '90s and helped this vital site be notified a sanctuary.

an upsurge in poaching and the closure of the sugarcane mill in the mid-1990s.

Nambor was a large rainforest wilderness stretching up to the Naga foothills. Declared a reserve forest in 1865, it was subsequently split up, with part of the North Block and the whole of the West Block included in Karbi Anglong while the rest remained in Golaghat district. In 1952, a small area of six square kilometres was declared as a wildlife sanctuary mostly to protect the mammals and birds visiting the hot springs, locally called 'garampanis'. The famous naturalist E.P. Gee had spent many days in small hides near these *garampanis*. Because of the rich primate diversity and its elephants, gaurs and other wildlife, there were demands made for an extension to cover the entire Nambor North Block Reserve Forest and adjacent Doigrung forests of both the districts, totalling 198 sq. km. Though the entire area was not protected, we should be grateful that 140 sq. km. (97 sq. km. in Golaghat and 43 sq. km. in Karbi Anglong) actually did end up with sanctuary status.

An intriguing phenomenon in Nambor used to be the 'friendship' between elephants and the rare pig-tailed macaques during the sugarcane-harvesting season. These arboreal primates would come down to the ground to feed on cane leftovers after the elephants had had their share. Perhaps because both species are in such sharp decline no such behaviour is reported any longer.

### THE BIRD CATCHERS OF HABANG

The Hamren subdivision of Karbi Anglong is unlike other parts of the district. It does not have many reserve forests and degraded community forests dominate the



Poachers from Nagaland are a great threat to Karbi Anglong. Attempts to motivate the police using posters and holding discussions have been useful, but we need strong anti-poaching measures in and out of legally Protected Areas.

landscape. However, there are pockets of ecological value, such as Killing Sarpo, a sacred grove, in which tigers, large monitor lizards and other wildlife can be seen. Also, the Kolonga Reserve Forest with its hog deer populations, the Amreng Reserve Forest with its elephants and the Kopili river's impressive Panimur falls. D.K. Lahiri Chowdhury once reported a fight between a tiger and a mugger near Panimur. While tigers are still around, muggers have vanished from Northeast India, though an occasional report of a gharial sighting does come in from the Kopili river.

Hamren's uniqueness, however, lies in the Habang 'bird phenomenon'. Habang or Umwang is a relatively remote area comprising a few villages inhabited by *Khasis*,

Nepalese and a few *Karbhis*. The Umkhen or Borpani river passes along its southern side, and this area has been identified as an Important Bird Area. Beyond lies Meghalaya. Every autumn, migrating Amur Falcons congregate at Habang. They are said to travel from northeastern China and southeastern Siberia to southern Africa, using Northeast India as a staging point. At night, large numbers congregate to roost at Habang. While their total abundance is not known, at least 3,000 falcons were counted on a single night in late October 2000 by me. This number could be higher. The birds move through the area for about a month, suggesting that a staggering 90,000 birds might be stopping over, *en route* to their wintering grounds.

A wild tusker steals rice from a truck in the Nambor Wildlife Sanctuary. The penchant of elephants to attack vehicles for food became a major attraction in the early 1990s and often caused major traffic jams on the highway. Poaching incidents and the closure of a sugarcane mill put an end to the phenomenon.

### KARBI ANGLONG – MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

*Mammals:* The Chinese pangolin, northern treeshrew, yellow-throated marten, hog-badger, Chinese or small-toothed ferret-badger, Burmese or large-toothed ferret-badger, otters (three species), binturong, Gangetic dolphin (occasionally in Dhansiri river during monsoon), Chinese or crestless Himalayan porcupine, Asiatic brush-tailed porcupine, hoary bamboo rat, lesser bamboo rat, Malayan giant squirrel and rufous-tailed hare.

*Herps:* The brown hill tortoise, Asian leaf turtle, rock python, king cobra and banded krait.



Every October and November, the villagers, both *Khasis* as well as Nepalese get ready to capture the roosting birds. Most are eaten in the villages, some are sold in urban areas such as Shillong. This 'feasting season' is much awaited by the villagers. Together with Amol Sharma, the then Divisional Forest Officer, I have participated in awareness drives in the area, jointly undertaken by the local Forest Department and The Rhino Foundation for Nature. In recent years, the annual capture has reduced drastically. Interestingly, none of the villagers could identify the species nor were they aware that it is a long-distance migrant. When explained to them, the migration saga generated a lot of sympathy, particularly among the elders.

Other species recorded in Habang include the Mountain Bamboo Partridge and there is a very interesting report, which needs confirmation, of the existence of a remnant peafowl population, possibly the globally threatened Green Peafowl *Pavo muticus*.

#### ASSAM'S WILDLIFE CAPITAL

Karbi Anglong, the largest district in Assam, is truly the wildlife capital of the state. According to the *State of Forest Report 2001*, the district still harbours around 8,000 sq. km. of forest, of which about 5,000 sq. km. is dense forest – one-third of all the dense forest left in Assam. With the exception of a few districts in Arunachal Pradesh, no other district in the Northeast can boast of such a large forested area. Not surprisingly, the best populations of elephant, gaur, hoolock gibbon and capped langur in Assam are to be seen in and around Karbi Anglong. It also supports the most extensive habitat for slow loris, pig-tailed macaque, dhole, Himalayan black bear, tiger, leopard, clouded leopard, sambar, muntjac, serow and birds such as the Great Pied Hornbill.

More than 400 bird species have been listed from Karbi Anglong, including the globally-endangered White-winged Wood Duck and Greater Adjutant Stork, the vulnerable Lesser Adjutant Stork and Swamp Francolin, Kaleej Pheasant, Red Junglefowl and Oriental Pied Hornbill. The Grey Peacock Pheasant, White-cheeked Hill Partridge and Mountain Bamboo Partridge are also common. The Dhansiri forests are also a stronghold for the 'near-threatened' Brown Hornbill. The threatened Rufous-necked Hornbill was reported from the Singhason area while the Wreathed Hornbill is common. Swarms of wintering Spot-winged Starlings and a few Blyth's or Jerdon's Baza can be seen near Langcholiet and Black Bazas are also common. The only record of Large Indian or Oriental



A rare keeled box turtle in the Dhansiri Reserve Forest, a large unprotected wilderness that harbours several rare and endangered species.

Pratincole *Glareola maldivarum* (syn. *pratincola*) in Assam was from the Parokhowa area of Karbi Anglong.

Karbi Anglong is among the most significant biodiversity hotspots in the Northeast. But it will not remain so for much longer unless national and international agencies come forward to support the Autonomous Council (elected by local people) to ensure its protection. As of now, the area is directly threatened by *jhum* cultivation and poaching, and in the north by expanding tea plantations. The sacred groves of Hamren including Killing Sarpo cry out to be preserved for posterity. The large wilderness of Dhansiri, now threatened with fresh encroachment and insurgency, also requires to be declared a Protected Area. All these forests are prime water sources, particularly Singhason, which is the origin of many of the rivers and streams of the eastern Karbi Plateau. In my view, the entire area should be declared a Biosphere Reserve, with *de jure* protection afforded to the most biologically vital cores. Apart from educating villagers, we desperately need effective anti-poaching measures through armed guards both inside as well as outside officially declared Protected Areas. If this is not done, a vital heritage

of the people of Assam, indeed India, will be lost by default.

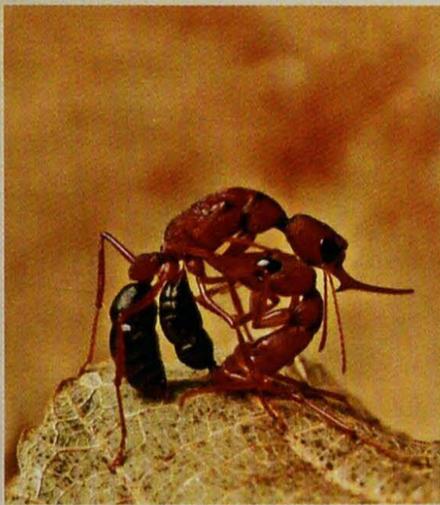
When I look back on decades of fieldwork undertaken in the Northeast, my mind keeps coming back to Karbi Anglong. This wonderful area inspires me; it boasts of many potential sites for long-term biodiversity conservation that could survive well into the future with minimal effort. It stands to reason that whatever success has been achieved thus far was possible only with the support of local officials, politicians and some villagers. Perhaps some strictly regulated wildlife tourism initiatives, in keeping with the National Wildlife Action Plan, could benefit local communities, but this will require priority, time, energy and financial investment. This would be worth it and more. The northern border of Karbi Anglong touches the world famous Kaziranga and with proper planning, the North Karbi Anglong Wildlife Sanctuary could easily attract a large chunk of the 50,000 plus tourists that visit Kaziranga annually. This would not only ease pressure on this, the last stronghold of the Indian rhino, but also shine a spotlight on one of the world's most piercingly beautiful, indispensable, yet fast-disappearing biodiversity havens. 🐅

#### CONSERVATION – AN ONGOING PROCESS

In 2003-04, the Chief Wildlife Warden of Assam formally sent a proposal to declare Dhansiri Tiger Reserve to the Project Tiger Steering Committee. The size of this tiger habitat (1,454 sq. km.) justifies its inclusion. Though a sizeable population still survives, tigers are declining due to sporadic incidents of poaching.

Some parts of the Dhansiri Reserve Forest were affected by the inter-tribal fighting in October 2005 that also led to the slaughter of many innocent people. Armed extremist elements of Karbi and Dimasa tribes are reported to be involved.

The proposed extension of the East-West Corridor (four-lane expressway) to eastern Assam along National Highway 37 will severely impact the movement of wildlife between Kaziranga National Park and Karbi Anglong. Alternative routes, via Doboka-Karbi Anglong (away from main wildlife areas) have been mooted, but the real solution will be to move the highway north of the Brahmaputra (see *Sanctuary* Vol. XXV No. 1, February 2005).



**On the cover**

Kalyan Varma is the Sanctuary-ABN AMRO Wildlife Photographer of the year 2005 – this is his image of a worker ant *Harpegnathos saltator* assassinating a de-alated queen.

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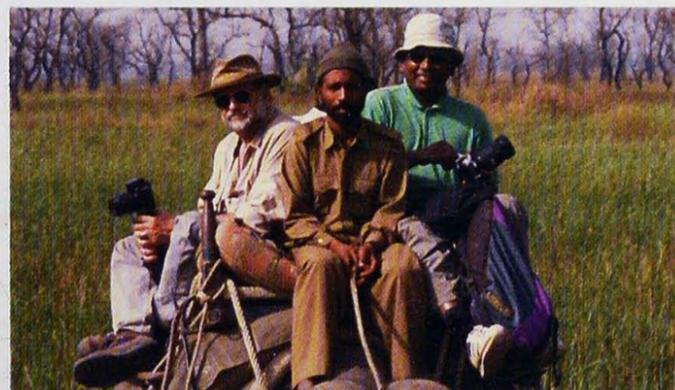
# Call of the wild Sanctuary

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A S I A

## 20 The Earth Heroes

History they say is written by the victors of war. Could this be why the Earth Heroes we honour here are not recognised or acknowledged as such by those who wage war on India's natural heritage? Read and be inspired by these simple men and women whose life's meaning is defined not by what they possess, but by what they have protected for generations unborn.



## 32 Saving Karbi Anglong

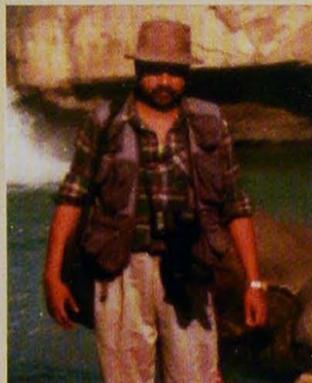
Assam's Karbi Anglong is the wildlife capital of the state, writes Dr. Anwaruddin Choudhury. This district has around 8,000 sq. km. of forest and some of the finest populations of elephant, gaur, hoolock gibbon and capped langur. But widespread poaching, encroachment and a lack of understanding of its worth, could destroy this biodiversity hotspot – unless focussed conservation efforts and plans lying unimplemented for years are ushered in.



## 44 Dam That River

Riparian forests are the first to die at the hands of dams, write A. Latha and S. Unnikrishnan as a seventh, hugely expensive and utterly pointless dam is poised to destroy the forests that clothe the Chalakudy river catchment. The Athirappilly project will ruin a vital elephant corridor and will displace tribals. Hornbills, giant squirrels and sloth bears will vanish. How can they be allowed to do this, ask the authors, who offer well-reasoned arguments against the dam.

## Contributors



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Author and field biologist, he is the Honorary Chief Executive of The Rhino Foundation and Deputy Commissioner of Baksa district. **32**



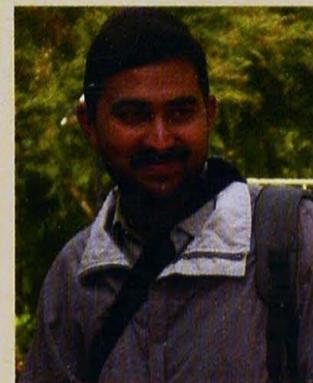
### Radha Veach

A conservationist and keen student of natural history, she is involved with landscape and reforestation projects. **38**



### A. Latha & S. Unnikrishnan

She is a doctorate in agriculture and he is an engineer and poet. Both are involved in river basin protection and conservation efforts. **44**



### K. R. Kishen Das

A software engineer and conservation-education volunteer, he has been studying butterfly migration for over five years. **50**