

Although northeast India is considered an international biodiversity hotspot, political and civil unrest have had an adverse impact on its rich flora and fauna. Many species that are in danger of being lost have barely even been listed, leave alone studied. For all these years, inaccessibility kept development-induced destruction at bay from the Northeast, while the rest of the country jumped on to the industrial bandwagon. While one set of people in the Northeast have started clamouring for factories, mines, dams, roads and chemical complexes, another point out that the region's Nature Capital (see box) is going to be the true measure of the wealth of the people. Of course, at present the wrong side is winning, with natural resources being eyed by both the government and industrial giants. Predictably, the forest cover is disappearing. Cut off from the ravages of pollution for all these years,

Whither the Northeast?

innocent tribal communities that largely make up the population of most Northeast states, have no way of knowing that the promises being made to them are only lures to steal their survival assets for a pittance. History might just prove that the benign neglect of the Northeast was preferable to the unbridled assault that is already unfolding. *Sanctuary* is working with young people in Assam and with new-age economists to highlight the value and worth of what Ranjit Barthakur, Principal Advisor to *Sanctuary*, calls: Naturenomics (see box).

FOR THE FIRST TIME...

Perhaps a good indication of the unexplored biodiversity that is still waiting to be found in this region, are the species discoveries and new sightings that keep cropping up ever so often.

One of the most intriguing discoveries was that of the 'man face stink bug', familiar to the rest of the world but first discovered in Assam's Barak valley as recently as mid-2005. The markings on the dorsal exoskeleton of this bug *Catacanthus incarnates*, bears a close resemblance to a Japanese Samurai. The insect species was recorded by Dr. Parthankar Choudhury.



by Bidisha Basu & Shivani Shah

A large number of discoveries come from Arunachal Pradesh, which has perhaps the most difficult mountainous terrain, daunting even to the most intrepid field researcher.

Little research is directed towards the plants of this region and plant diversity is poorly documented. Nevertheless, a WWF-led study in 2004 revealed a staggering 107 plant species in a mere 200 sq. km. stretch of the North Bank landscape, encompassing the biodiversity-rich areas of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.

More than a century after the last new macaque species was recorded, scientists – Dr. Anindya Sinha, Dr. M.D. Madhusudan, Dr. Aparajita Datta and Dr. Charudutt Mishra (the latter two are Sanctuary-ABN AMRO Wildlife Service Award 2004 winners) – published a paper on the discovery of the Arunachal macaque *Macaca munzala* during expeditions conducted in 2003 and 2004. The Arunachal macaque is a near relative of the Tibetan and Assamese macaques and is characterised by a dark face with distinct

markings. Found at altitudes about 3,300 m. above sea level, the monkeys are amongst the highest-dwelling macaques in the world.

Earlier in 2002, researchers from the Nature Conservation Society and the Wildlife Conservation Society's India Programme had also sighted two ungulate species for the first time in India in the forests of Arunachal Pradesh. The leaf deer *Muntiacus putaoensis* was considered to be restricted to a strip of forest in Myanmar and its discovery in India's Northeastern forests is of major global importance. Standing at about 50.8 cm., this muntjac species is considered to be one of the smallest species of deer in the world. The scientists also discovered another species of barking deer that was similar to the Indian muntjac *M. muntjac* in size but found at higher elevations than which the Indian muntjac or the leaf deer have been recorded. The colour of this species suggests that it is the black barking deer *M. crinifrons*. The sighting would extend

the earlier accepted habitat of the animal, which was restricted to southeast China and northern Myanmar.

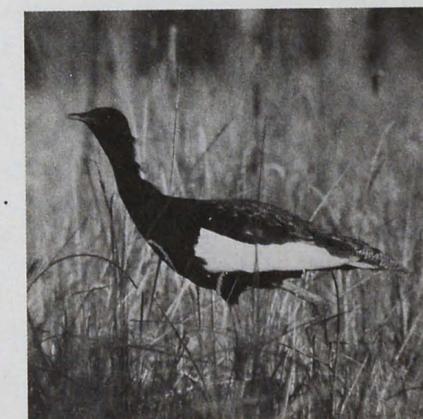
Other than mammals, researchers have also spotted new amphibians, birds and reptiles. In 2001, a new species of wolfsnake *Lycodon serpentes* (Family *Colubridae*) was discovered in the Northeast raising the count of *Lycodon* species in the region to five. If nothing else, these discoveries and sightings provide an idea of how much more study and research is needed to measure the full natural wealth of the seven sisters. Meghalaya, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura.

...AND THE LAST?

But while we speak of biodiversity documentation in Arunachal and Assam, what really lies in store for these and other states? Dams. Big, bigger and among the biggest dams in the world. Between hydel projects, mines, new roads through pristine jungles and chemical industries, we are almost certain that the prime economic base of the people of the Northeast will be wiped

out in' much the same way as colonisers of yesteryears, the British, did to the rest of India when they forcibly took over.

The nefarious ambitions of state officials and development agencies have sourced an almost unlimited treasury – project finance based on



A combination of hydel projects, mines, new roads through forests and chemical industries threaten the very survival of endangered species such as the Bengal Florican and Indian one-horned rhinoceros.

I believe the advancement of the people of Northeast India will be best served by institutionalising a philosophy of economics in tune with a visionary 'nature capital and conservation policy'. Current tourism strategies will then be replaced by a concept of 'wildlife socialisation' for humans, which is sustainable, equitable and more lucrative than has thus far been envisioned. The keepers of the inheritance that is 'Natural Assam' will need to strictly enforce this policy in their self-interest. Over commercialisation, would dilute this 'nature' brand equity. By contrast, if we go 'back-to-the-future' and rediscover the wisdom of our ancestors, we might just find the perfect balance between development and conservation that has thus far eluded the industrial north. The pressures and contradictions of an ever-increasing population that is becoming more consumerist by the minute, is fast resulting in the felling of forests for agriculture, minerals, timber and power. This, in my view, is the greatest threat to all of India's wildernesses, including Kaziranga. Ranjit Barthakur in *The Kaziranga Inheritance*.

borrowed money, which will destroy the Northeast forever. The first sightings of rare species could thus be the last. Some will go extinct unmourned, even before they are discovered.

In Manipur, the Tipaimukh Dam, is at the confluence of the Tuivai and the Barak (locally called Tuiruong) rivers. The 390 m. long, 162.8 m. high dam will throttle the Barak, the second largest river in the Northeast while promising to generate 412 MW of electricity. In Meghalaya, we have the Myntdu-Leshka Hydroelectric Project in the famed Jaintia hills. The Umiam-Khwan dam in the East Khasi hills and the Ri Bhoi districts of Meghalaya has its own set of shallow promises of development. Ongoing hydel projects in Mizoram, such as the Maicham Phase II small hydel project, Lamsial small hydel project, and the Serlui 'B' small hydel project, will take their own toll. River waters are being taken over at blinding speed to be converted into electricity and sold for a few rupees, to the accompaniment of mumbles, "we will protect the wildlife, we will plant more trees, we will share the wealth with people." Developers seem to be saying: "We know how to cut the golden goose without killing it."

No one, of course, believes they can, but by the time the marauders are brought to book, they and Mother Nature's now-dead goose will have vanished into oblivion. 🦢