

Bringing Back Manas

By Vivek Menon

It's just over a year ago. It is raining buckets through dawn, and I toss and turn wondering if the six a.m. park ride was as sane an idea as it had seemed the night before. The whole team is downstairs I remind myself, and struggle out of bed just as, miraculously, the rain stops. We clamber into three jeeps and set forth. The first hour into the park is bereft of large mammals. There are birds everywhere. A gaggle of Rufous-throated Laughing-thrushes push their way through the grass. A Changeable Hawk-eagle takes off from a branch just as we pass under. A Black-headed Oriole and two different species of Green Pigeon squabble over the fruits of a fig tree. Chestnut-headed Bee-eaters head off a swarm of termites that seem to have just hatched. "It should be called a bird park, not a tiger reserve," grumbles one of our new recruits, still unused to the jungle. "Be patient," I advise, leaning halfway out of my front seat to scan the road ahead. "Manas

is just recovering from over 10 years of a very hard time, and if it weren't, we wouldn't be here!" The Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) supported by its international partner the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) was in the park implementing a decade-long 'Bring Back Manas' project that had returned rhinos, elephants, bears and clouded leopards to the park. Working with the Bodoland Territorial Council and the Assam Forest Department, the first achievement was tripling the size of the Protected Area through an innovative community-led declaration for 'Greater Manas' and the subsequent training and equipping of the entire staff to curb poaching.

But was 10 years really enough?

BELOW One of two hand-raised clouded leopard cubs during its *in situ* acclimatisation in the wild. Such efforts to revive the faunal population have helped reinstate Manas as a World Heritage Site.

FACING PAGE With a grass and jungle habitat that straddles both India and Bhutan, Manas is truly one of the most beautiful landscapes on Earth.

A decade-long 'Bring Back Manas' project has returned rhinos, elephants, bears and clouded leopards to the park. Working with the Bodoland Territorial Council and the Assam Forest Department, the first achievement was tripling the size of the Protected Area through an innovative community-led declaration for 'Greater Manas' and the subsequent training and equipping of the entire staff to curb poaching.



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DR. RAJIB BARMAN/WWTI

A forest unlike any other

Manas needed only a couple of seconds to answer my reverie. Just under 200 m. to our left, a tiger stepped out of the green verge, stared momentarily at us and then turned back into the jungle. "Leopard, leopard" shrieked my companion to the right. "No, no, it was a sambar," says the new recruit trying out her species knowledge. "Sambar for breakfast with your idlis, my dear," I murmur, "that's a tiger!"

A tiger before breakfast! Passé in Ranthambhore. Possible in Kanha. But this was Manas. UNESCO's World Heritage Site in danger. The jewel in the Assam government's crown that had lain unpolished and tarnished for nearly two decades. The tiger banished all those thoughts in an instant to the backroom of memories, together with memories of a late '90s journey I had made into Manas, still a shell of a park with burnt bridges, uncut grass and absent guards. The frustrations of a decade of trying to bring Manas back into the mainstream of conservation were forgotten. This was not a failed icon but a resurgent phoenix.

The image of the tiger played itself back to me, sitting in a cold, UNESCO meeting room in Paris in July 2011. I was part of the Indian delegation that was trying to salvage some national and regional pride by getting Manas removed from the list of 'parks under danger' where it had languished for 19 years. Jagdish Kishwan, the Additional Director General of Forests, Ashish Srivastava, the Inspector General of Forests (both from the Union Ministry), Suresh Chand, the Chief Wildlife Warden of Assam and Vinod

TOP LEFT Three orphaned Asiatic black bear cubs explore their natural habitat in Manas. Rescued rhinos, elephants and bears have been released after a prolonged habituation process under close supervision. Once the animals are returned to the wild, they will be monitored using radio collars, but a question mark will always hang over their survival given the press of human numbers living cheek by jowl with the forest.

MIDDLE LEFT A greater one-horned rhinoceros roams peacefully in Manas after its release in the park.

BOTTOM LEFT With peace has come much support from the Bodo people who are working closely with the Forest Department to protect this special forest and its wildlife such as these elephants.

Mathur from the autonomous Wildlife Institute of India were the other members at the meeting. It was interesting that union, state and civil society worked shoulder to shoulder for the same end. Kampa Borgoyari of the BTC was on the phone with me a couple of times. UNESCO had been petitioned few times before but missions and voluminous reports later they still claimed that Manas was in danger. And so it was, and is, but then why were we campaigning to take it off the list?

Ready to move on?

The answer is very simple. In today's day and age almost every wildlife preserve in India is in danger. In danger from poachers waiting for the authorities to take their eye off the ball to enable a strike. In danger from fringe villagers whose idea of usufruct rights run counter to conservation imperatives. In danger from knowing and unknowing development lobbies. In danger from the ignorance of the Indian populace and its polity that overlooks the fact that our

RIGHT A pair of released elephants explore their new habitat in Manas.

BELOW Though Manas is well on its way to recovery, problems do remain. The southern boundary is still vulnerable. In the Greater Manas landscape, tree felling is still rampant and poaching of small animals continues apace.

Protected Area system is actually a vital national heritage.

However, Manas is not an exception. In truth, things have greatly improved over 19 years, when forest staff had to be withdrawn after a spate of attacks. At that time there was no governance, no management and no budget. Not even one NGO entered the park. Most of the large mammals of Manas were hunted out. A full blown civil conflict prevailed in the region.

Mercifully all of this is in the past. Manas is well on its way to recovery, though problems do remain. The southern boundary is still vulnerable. In the Greater Manas landscape, tree felling is still rampant and poaching of small animals continues apace. But reality demands that the core of Manas, inscribed as a World Heritage Site should now be removed from the Global Red List. Far from being an emotional plea, this demand is backed by detailed documentation that has been handed over to UNESCO experts.

And by consensus they agreed! This was followed by an ovation in the hall, congratulations in the foyer and celebrations back at the hotel. But all through this, the image of that tiger that stepped out of the green edge into my sight stayed with me. It is strange how mesmerising this animal can be, even for a self-professed elephant lover!

But perhaps it was not just the animal; it was the realisation that if a top predator was making a comeback, there must be many other things going right in the ecosystem as well.

I am aware as is, I am sure, the government, that there is no room for complacency. There is much to be done in Manas to truly say the park is out of the woods, but this global pat-on-the-back is an important celebratory moment. There are too few such moments in conservation. When one does present itself, it is up to the movement to unite in savouring it and then picking itself up from its salutary tones, go back to the ground and do some more work to ensure its sustenance.

ANIRUDDHA MOOKERJEE/WTI



SHARADA ANNAMARAJU/WTI

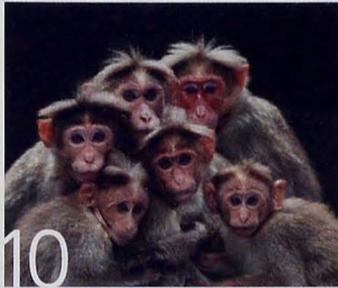


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Cuckoo wasps, much admired for their metallic colours, belong to the family Chrysididae. An astounding 3,000 species have been documented globally. Their name is derived from the habit of parasitising other insects.

Photographer: Vedwati Padwal



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Contributors



38 Madhu and Savita

During a multi-year sabbatical across India, they travelled to different parts of the country to explore its rich history, archaeology and wildlife.



42 Nimesh Ved

Based in the Northeast now, he is working on community-based conservation projects but has fond memories of his walking trips in and around Kuno.



56 Seshadri K.S

A post-graduate in Ecology and Environmental Sciences, he is keen on understanding the impacts of habitat modification on ecosystems.



66 Sumit Sen

Financial expert and co-author of the *Sundarbans Inheritance*, he has travelled extensively and is passionate about birding and wildlife photography.