

Making conservation work

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Once while eating at a restaurant along the NH37 in the foothills of the Garo hills my attention was drawn to two gentlemen who dismounted from their vehicle and negotiated a deal with a roadside vendor who had something to sell in a few cages. Closer inspection revealed that the transaction involved the sale of Meghalaya's state bird the Hill Myna. Sadly, it turns out that the illegal trade in Hill Mynas is a regular practice in most roadside markets along the NH37.

"*Aebor aami paharar para ano*" which in Assamese language means 'we got these from the Hills', the lady trader responded to her customers' query. The lady's Hill Mynas were for sale at a rate of Rs 700 each and while the two gentlemen were busy bargaining for the best deal I spotted another cage with common mynas and parakeets on the other side of the road. This pointed to a thriving business involving the sale of wild birds. While the traders are to blame, the two gentlemen who were busy bargaining with the lady trader and numerous other people like them are equally guilty. Sadly many people love to have birds in their homes as such pets are a source of pride and their calls and antics are a source of entertainment. However, such people never think of the negative impact their actions have on the creatures they have forced to live in their homes or on the populations of their conspecifics.

A few months earlier, I had another experience involving the issue of keeping wildlife as pets. I had gone to the nearest government hospital to get a fitness test done in order to renew my driving licence. Once the Doctor came to know about my involvement with Samrakshan Trust (the wildlife conservation organization that I work with) she expressed her bitterness towards our wildlife rescue work. The Doctor's callous attitude towards the issue of illegally keeping wildlife as pets points towards a disturbing lack of understanding even among educated sections of our society, with regards to the rights of wildlife to live in their natural habitats alarming pet keeping of wildlife. I felt it necessary to clarify the wrong perception she had about wildlife rescue work. There is an urgent need to raise awareness among all sections of society with regards to the need to protect the wildlife of this region and ensure they continue to live safely in their natural habitats. I often use the phrase "conservation is a losing battle" in good humour while



Bamboo trap for Hill Myna



Brown Fish Owl

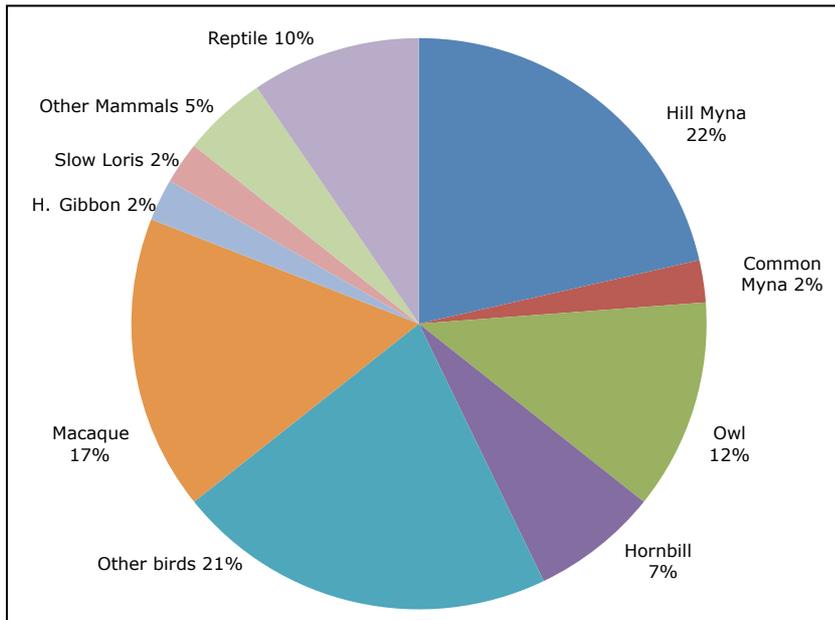
joking with my colleagues around our dining table. However, what used to be a frivolous comment has now started playing in my mind and the above-mentioned bitter experiences are forcing me to give serious thought to the question of how difficult promoting and fighting for the conservation cause really is.

Keeping wildlife as pets is a common phenomenon in Baghmara, where I am working and in *Akings* (equivalent to a village) throughout the Garo Hills. Nobody seems to see anything wrong in such activities and an oft-cited example is that of the tigers that are shown on TV roaming around drawing

rooms in New York City. However, just because some people freely keep wildlife as pets does not mean that it is a justifiable pursuit without any negative ramifications. In my experience wildlife kept as pets are subject to numerous hardships and forced changes in their natural behaviour and living patterns. For instance I have often witnessed pet owls who are nocturnal being fed in broad daylight; pet Slow Lorises being taken for a walk along with stray dogs which is sure to impact their health

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**Fig 1: Survey of Wildlife kept as Pets: 2009
(Samrakshan Trust)**



and behaviour; and white rice being given to macaques which can have numerous negative impacts. On the whole the common citizen has little understanding of the various needs of wildlife that results in their mistreatment in captivity. Scientific research sometimes reveals that numerous wildlife species don't breed in captivity.

Garro Hills is predominately inhabited by the indigenous Garro tribal community who call themselves A`chick in North East India and "Mande" in Bangladesh. Historically, Garos use to keep wildlife as pets and hunt for consumption. Commercial hunting and trade of animal products is a relatively recent phenomenon. These activities are mostly being promoted by and learnt from outsiders. Easy access to black markets for animals and animal produce in Bangladesh, with which Garro Hills shares its boundary, has given a substantial boost to these pursuits. The locals of the region often point out that when the Nagaland and Assam militant movements were at their peak around the 90's, most of the militants from these states sought refuge in several of Garro Hills pristine forests. While the militants hunted wildlife for their own consumption they are also often credited with being responsible for triggering off large scale commercial trade in animal products, killing of elephants for ivory and meat, commercial supply of meat to other north-eastern markets and opening up the area to numerous traders in wildlife and wildlife related produce from the rest of Northeast India and Bangladesh.

One of Samrakshan Trust's main activities is carrying out conservation education and rescue operations to reduce wildlife pet keeping in the South Garro Hills district, one of three districts of Garro Hills. Wildlife pet keeping is rampant in the region and primates and birds are the main targets. While the state of Meghalaya has proudly declared the Hill Myna as its state bird, a sad reality is that there are numerous instances of this beautiful bird either being kept in captivity locally or being supplied to other areas. In several *Akings* across the landscape, one will often come across long bamboo baskets hanging over trees meant to trap Hill Myna chicks. Removal of wildlife for pet keeping, trade in animal produce is a burning conservation issue in the region. Conservation education programmes are being used as a tool to alter people's attitude in favour of wildlife and forests. So far

Samrakshan has rescued a couple of Leopard cats, 12 primates and 54 birds. More than 90% birds were released back to the wild while the primates were sent either to Tura zoo or the Centre for Wildlife Conservation and Rehabilitation for further treatment and rehabilitation. In a recent rapid survey in sixteen *Akings*, it was revealed that birds are the most common pets followed by primates (fig: 1). Birds are mostly removed during the juvenile phase and a high mortality rate among captive chicks was reported.

In addition, the region is also facing several other serious environmental threats namely – forest degradation due to illegal logging and overexploitation; deforestation and forest fragmentation due to population expansion and a shift to forest destructive land use patterns; and illegal coal mining which is rampant in the Garro Hills. Private coal mining is carried out illegally in several *Akings* across the Garro Hills and the land in question more often than not tends to be forested and home to a variety of wildlife. On the whole this unregulated and unscientific mining is resulting in large scale environmental degradation.

In conclusion, despite the cards being stacked against the conservation cause I still feel there is light at the end of the tunnel however dim it may appear at present. Samrakshan's humble efforts to combat the threats to wildlife and forests in the Garro Hills are slowly reaping dividends in the form of youth and student movements campaigning for a variety of Environmental causes across the region. It such baby steps which will eventually help us create a more environmentally sensitive society.

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Leopard cat