A focal group discussion on the project “Status Survey and Conservation needs of the primates in the Inner Line Reserve Forest, Cachar, Assam, India” was organised on 12.07.2016 at Hotel Kanishka, Silchar. The project was funded by the International Primatological Society, USA and the discussion was conducted in association with the Centre For Integrated Earth Development, CIED, Silchar. It was attended by officials of the Department of Environment & Forests, Government of Assam and was participated by journalists of the leading dailies of this region.

The discussion started with the welcome address by Sagnik Choudhury, who briefly narrated the status of primates in the region and extreme necessity of scientific study of this group so that these species that are struggling their last battle of survival in the area can be saved with proper coordination between policy makers and scientists.

Parthankar Choudhury, the Principal Investigator of the project outlined the critical status of primates in the Southern Assam region due to increasing threats like poaching and unsustainable harvesting of forest resources. In his presentation, he explained the various components of the project like population estimation, present status, and study on resource partitioning and explained the various aspects of the studies that will be undertaken in due course of time. He also elaborated past and present status of wildlife and gave and account of the species which are now extinct from the area. He also opined that anthropogenic activities have largely altered the natural habitat of primate species resulting in a rapid decline of their population and stressed the need of generating awareness among development processes are major threats to primates of this region.

Vinay Gupta, Chief Conservator of Forest, Southern Assam circle said that the Northeast is having richest primate diversity in India and also agreed that the illegal encroachment, poaching, illegal felling of trees, and various activities have largely altered the natural habitat of primate species resulting in a rapid decline of their population and stressed the need of generating awareness among the mass to initiate various conservation aspects like habitat restoration, plantation of food plants, and increase the canopy coverage for canopy dweller species.

N. Anand, DFO, Cachar, raised the conservation needs and issue’s of Barail Wildlife Sanctuary. In spite of harbouring very rich biodiversity, the sanctuary is hitherto in a very uncared stage, as most of our conservation efforts

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are centered around big games; consequently, a situation has created where the plight of survival for majority of other species, including primates have been looked down upon with a variable outlook. He also stressed upon undertaking a study on the health aspects of primates as this might lead to some interesting findings in the case of disease transmission.

Akhil Dutta, ACF, Hailakandi, raised the issue of inter state border issue of forests in southern Assam as the forest area is having a common border with Mizoram. Poachers from neighbouring state often invade the forest area and engage in poaching and other destructive activities.

Shovan Dattagupta, in his presentation elaborated the comparative statement of wildlife status of this region during recent years through past few decades. He was of the view that habitat restoration must be the central dogma of all wildlife conservation programmes. Various causes of rapid environmental degradations were also discussed by him. He was of the opinion that two different wars in the past, first one in 1950s, followed by 1971 have significantly contributed to environmental degradation by generating huge numbers of refugees who were unscientifically allowed settle in places mostly alien to them. These settlers, unlike permanent forest village settlers (whose names are on record) have basic difference so far as nurturing of the ambience is concerned. The permanent settler always have a bent of mind towards giving something in return to the forest from which he is earning his livelihood, which is lacking to the new and illegal settlers. The later group were busy in ruthless exploitation of the forest and ambient environment for their survival.

Debasish Chakraborty, Range Officer, Jirighat Range in his speech emphasized that for successful implementation of conservation of any wild species, a detailed knowledge about the habitat requirement, food habit and related other information is a necessary prerequisite.

Samsuddin, Range Officer, Hawaithang Range, supported the view put forwarded by Dutta, ACF, Hailakandi, and add that encroachers from Mizoram is major problem. He informed that now and often, many areas of forest under his jurisdiction are illegally encroached by Mizo people and it is very difficult to drive them out with limited arms and other resources they have. Moreover, the Mizoram Government does not take any positive steps in spite of repeated requests.

D.J. Nath, Range officer, Silchar sadar informed the house about the tremendous pressure on forest due to firewood collection. He explained many awareness programme have been organised by his department to combat this issue in forest areas.

Siddatha Sen of Department of Ecology & Environmental Science of Assam University, who is also a resident of the fringe area of the Inner Line Reserve Forest appraised the house about various activities observed by him in and around the forest area since his childhood.

The discussion programme was then made open for in-depth discussion among the participants. Research Scholars of the Ecology & Environmental Science also participated in the discourse. Alternative livelihood programmes among forest dwellers were also given importance to ease the burden on forest resources. Many a times it has been observed that the unsustainable methods of harvesting are adopted by people. Possibilities of cultivation of many Non-timber forest products (NTFP) were also discussed since such programmes have become successful in many parts of the world.

The programme ended with a vote of thanks by Md. Anisur Rahaman, Research Scholar Department of Ecology & Environmental Science, Assam University.

**Recommendations**

The following are the recommendations of the discussion:

1. To restore habitats in and around the forest villages. It was
suggested that, to begin with, a 'Model village' would be selected. This was agreed upon by forest official and they assured that for the same, a proposal will be forwarded to State Forestry, Government of Assam, immediately.

2. To identify forest patches within ILRF where the three primate species [Phayre’s leaf monkey (*Trachypithecus phayrei*), Capped langur (*Trachypithecus pileatus*) Northern pig-tailed macaque (*Macaca leonina*)] occur.

3. To study their habitat characteristics, feeding ecology, activity profile and anthropogenic pressure and other conservation related issues to be ascertained.

4. Community conservation initiative has to be an essential part of the present work. To motivate local community to support primate conservation.

5. To educate the communities about the necessity and importance of primate conservation and they will be motivated so that this message gets widely circulated among the village mass.

6. To make frequent visits; organize meetings, conduct awareness camps to aware the local mass about the importance of primates. Hoardings and postures will be placed at suitable places and booklets/posters will be distributed. Local people will thus be made to develop a bent of mind for primate conservation.

7. To restore habitats through plantation programme in the study area to help bridging the habitat canopy gaps. Plantation of primate food plants and conservation of existing food plants will be done.

**Follow up**

Although the project is in its initial stage, yet meanwhile the activities like identification of forest patches within Inner Line Reserve Forest and also habitat study, activity budgeting etc. have been started.

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### Announcement

**Twenty-fifth Annual Conference**

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