

Can we all become “conservationists”?

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An ecological review of Balpakram-Baghmara Landscape

I joined a wildlife conservation organization that has been focusing on wildlife habitat conservation in the periphery of the Balpakram National Park in the later part of 2005. Though I was in social sector since 2002, my interest towards conservation issues or rather wildlife was far more behind due to my poor acquaintance with the subject before. As a layman, I had very limited attachment to the conservation issues as I do today, sparing my 3 years in the Balpakram - Baghmara landscape with the organization. This landscape falls in the Indo Burma bio-diversity hotspot and is rich in wildlife.

Persistence of large stretches of old growth and secondary forests which are community owned has helped retain the richness of flora and fauna. It is one of the most important areas for the survival of the endangered wildlife species like Gaur, Serow, Goral, Tiger, Hoolock Gibbon and lesser cats such as the Clouded leopard. The landscape houses the world famous Balpakram National Park (complex with Siju Wildlife Sanctuary), Baghmara and Rewak Reserve Forest and 36 Akings (community owned land literally translated as a clan kingdom) spreading across an area of approximately 600 sq km harbouring quite significant biodiversity.

The community owned land is not only rich in plant biodiversity including orchids and numerous medicinal plants but also harbours significant wildlife species as the protected area does. Therefore the ‘landscape level conservation approach’ is very crucial for the larger benefit of wildlife and people living in the landscape. In an informal interaction with DFO of Baghmara we came to know that the area has a huge potential for developing eco-tourism programme which would benefit both wildlife species and improving livelihoods for the people living in the landscape rather than developing permanent land use practices which would not benefit people in the long run. The trouble now we have is that nobody is coming forward to take up such tourism initiatives. Once we realized the threats of the landscape, we conducted many such discussions. There are immense threats encountered during the past 3 year time span in the landscape.

Among the major threats, as we also reported in recent past, the hunting is the primary one from wildlife conservation point of view followed by habitat loss and clearing of primary forest. These threats are caused by various actions of the local people and actions by ‘so called’ developmental agencies. However, the forest is the immense contributor to the livelihoods of the people. Extraction of timber and bamboo for construction of

house, collection of non- timber forest products, fishing are the major livelihood options being reported during a recent survey in the landscape. However, those traditional livelihood sources are being replaced by haphazard cash crop plantation. This plantation business is driven by various motivating factors including establishing ownership rights on the land, coupled with so called development projects implemented by various agencies in the landscape. The implementation of NREGA is a good example which had spent a major chunk of fund (58%) in 2006 towards clearing primary forest for cash crop plantation. The *jhum* plots are being converted into orchards to establish land ownership, however, a report emphasises that the productivity of such orchards is almost zero.

If we overlook those issues and not put efforts to involve all the stakeholders on this account, the survival of the human and non-human lives of the landscape becomes questionable in near future. A sustainable land use planning process also can minimize such haphazard development. Today, the proposed coal mining in the landscape overtakes all the issues that we have had discussed so far. If this unscientific or unplanned mining starts, no option would be left for the people except to become a “daily wage labourer” in their own land. A report published by the Centre for Science and Environment says that the existing coal mining in Meghalaya is changing the physical structure of the land, spoiling soil quality, threatening the biota and human life. Water flowing through the mining site turns highly acidic and toxic poisoning drinking water sources and enters agriculture fields, playing havoc with crop yield. Assuming such kind of development in the landscape as well, we can predict a black future for both human and non-human lives. As a layman, I would not value all those issues so much or rather trouble myself a lot had I not developed conservation consciousness being involved with the organization.

This is a journey that I had gone through where conservation education had played a key role in my life. I have decided out of my experiences in past, same effort can be made for all the stakeholders of the landscape including developmental agencies that they consider ecological aspect in their day-to-day actions. It is crucial to make people conscious towards the issue rather than trying to make them passive participant in the developmental action. I firmly believe that we shall all make an effort of mainstreaming conservation education into our action for long-term benefit of people and wildlife of the landscape. If we succeeded in this effort, we dare say that we have become conservationists.

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