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Gays Mills man part of group working to protect rare monkeys in India

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GAYS MILLS, Wis. — Gays Mills is a world away from Assam, India. But for Robert Horwich, director of the nonprofit Community Conservation, they have much in common.

In Gays Mills, where he is based, he helped create the Kickapoo Reserve, protecting the land and wildlife that make their home there.

In western Assam he helped create a project to stop the deforestation of the Manas Biosphere Reserve, home to the golden langur. The monkey species' population had dwindled to about 100 when Horwich and his team arrived in India 10 years ago.

Through years of research and work, Horwich said, they've been able to curb the logging that depleted the forest and have been able to restore not just the trees, but the monkeys. About 250 golden langurs now live there, Horwich said.

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For the group's work, Horwich just received the first Lawrence Jacobsen Conservation Research Award. The \$5,000 grant will be used to document and evaluate a program that pays villagers to act as protectors of the forest, to make sure loggers don't come back and take the remaining trees, Horwich said.

In other words, they'll be guarding the trees.

Because they are dealing with politics, education, economics and the environment, finding a solution to the deforestation problem has been complex, Horwich said. In the past 10 years, one-third to one-half of 350,000 acres have been deforested. Political agitation in western Assam has contributed greatly to the deforestation, Horwich said, with rival militant groups basing their armed struggle within the forests of western Assam and Bhutan.

Targeted for killing or kidnapping, Assam Forest Department staff were unable to enter the forests, allowing log smugglers to cut illegally.

Community Conservation now works to form informal forest protection groups in that region. Each village has been replanting, maintaining and guarding forest adjacent to their village, both for the wildlife and for their own future use and benefit. Tree seedlings are grown in village nurseries and then replanted. Villagers are keeping encroaching woodcutters out.

Horwich first visited India 30 years ago as part of a Smithsonian Museum project to establish connections between Indian and U.S. scientists.

This time, the project was more about making connections with the villagers, who must be the first line of defense against log smugglers, he said.

“The farmers in the village are very poor. They live on \$1 to \$2 a day. We want to help them, but by the same token, we asked for their help,” Horwich said. “The villagers lived in the forests, so they could go in, communicate. We began to mobilize the village people and help them, and eventually the militant groups settled and signed an agreement.”

This project can only be successful if the villagers buy into it, Horwich said.

“We’re trying to help the communities be full partners in this protection. If the communities are not behind what’s going on, they can sabotage it, or the project won’t work.”

For more information on Community Conservation or the golden langur project, go to www.communityconservation.org.

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