

# COMMUNITY CONSERVATION UPDATE

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In order to promote global biodiversity and sustainable land use, Community Conservation catalyzes, facilitates and empowers local people to manage and conserve natural resources within the social, cultural and economic context of their communities.

[www.communityconservation.org](http://www.communityconservation.org)

## Self Help Groups as a Community Conservation Tool

In Assam, poor villagers who have had to cut trees of the vanishing forest for a living are beginning to make a better living by working together to grow cash crops, make silk or raise animals. They are able to finance these small ventures through a unique microfinance system called Self Help Groups (SHGs), which empowers the poorest of the poor.



Member of Weaver Group

Self Help Groups are a system of microfinance that was begun by an NGO, MYRADA, in south India in the 1980s. Many local Indian NGOs now help to organize rural villagers into small groups of 10-20 people of the same sex. Each of the SHG members then deposits a monthly fee, usually \$.50-1.00 per month, into a joint community account. The NGO trains them how to maintain records, to run meetings of the SHG and to calculate interest. Trust is developed within the group through regular meetings.

Once the groups are keeping good records and running smoothly, they can be linked to local rural banks to maintain their joint account. These funds can then be used as loans to individuals or groups within the SHG on a short term low interest basis. The lowest interest goes to small business loans to encourage the rural villagers to better their economic situation.

It takes about six months for the NGO coordinator to work with the groups before they begin to take over the process themselves. Once they know what they are doing, they can then take over the full process and negotiate directly with the banks that will trust their dealings based on the records they have been keeping for their own SHGs.

Natures Foster and Green Heart Nature Club, member NGOs of the Manas Biosphere Conservation Forum, are developing and training SHGs. Coordinators Arnab Bose and Bablu Dey have focused on using this empowerment tool to reduce economic dependence on logging and firewood cutting. Over 30 such SHGs have been formed as part of our conservation program. They have begun group and individual micro-industries in weaving and thread dying, as well as fish, goat, chicken, banana, ginger, turmeric, arum and seasonal vegetable production.

The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) has developed this process (similar to that of the Grameen Bank) into the largest microfinance initiative in Asia. The key to this new style of microfinance system is decentralization. Rather than complex rules, centralization and credit, SHGs operate on simplicity, thrift and trust. It utilizes existing banks to support SHGs. It replaces moneylenders who charge high interest rates or complex bank loans with low interest, easily accessible loans with simple procedures, working on mutual trust therefore no security is needed.



Villagers and Bose (right) at SHG fishery pond

Many of the members in SHGs are women. SHG participation tends to increase the self confidence of women. For poor rural women just coming out of their houses to attend meetings of their SHG can be a step toward empowerment. They participate more in village meetings and give their opinion more. This also tends to change decision-making about spending and investing in the family. Earlier, husbands made all decisions. Now more husbands and wives share this decision-making.



Self Help Group in Charakhola

SHGs build community and demonstrate the power of working together. They allow a village to determine its direction of economic development and can provide an alternative to natural resource depletion. SHGs are an important empowerment tool for community conservation.

## **Communities Protecting the Forests A Conservation Strategy for the Golden Langur**

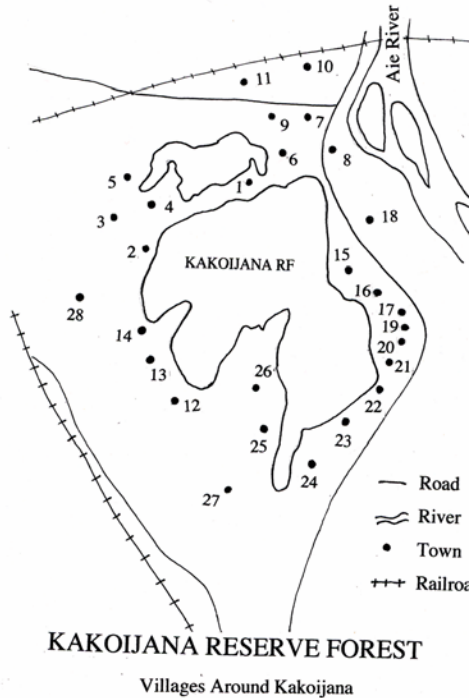
CC Director Horwich's recent trip to Assam indicated how successful the Manas Conservation Forum has become in accomplishing a strategy for protection of the Golden Langur (*Trachypithecus geei*) and its forest habitats in Western Assam. This is notably important since the local politics in the past have caused deforestation as well as deterred the Golden Langur Conservation Project duties.

In 1993 the Bodoland autonomous movement started. The Bodo tribe was dissatisfied as they watched the numbers of non-Bodos increase in the state of Assam. Other northeast states based on tribal groups had been created previously from Assam while only the Bodo tribe had no such autonomous region. In 1996, the Bodo Autonomous Council was formed but it had no real power. After that a vigorous autonomy movement was spearheaded by two extremist groups based in the Assam forests. This led to major deforestation. Initially some extremists financed their movement through timber extraction. Later, encouraged by the lack of forest protection by the Assam Forest Department, log smuggling activity increased with local people doing the cutting for the smugglers and gaining a pittance from the logs cut. This lack of forest protection continued as extremist groups targeted Forestry Department staff and other government workers for killing and kidnapping. Thus forestry staff could not enter the forest because of Bodo extremist groups inhabiting the forest. Eventually one of the extremist groups began protecting the forest by killing encroaching woodcutters.

Further deforestation occurred due to ethnic clashes between the Bodo tribes and Adivasi in 1996 and 1998. This ethnic violence forced both legally residing villagers and encroaching illegal villagers to move out of the forest into relief camps situated on the southern borders of the Reserve Forests. This situation produced a mixed situation relative to forest protection. Although the encroaching villages could not be reestablished in the Reserve Forests, these displaced forest refugees began to harvest timber for firewood sales and for the timber smugglers. The problem was immense since in Kokrajhar District alone there were 200-300,000 refugees in relief camps that still exist in 2004 on a reduced basis.

Given this history, effective methods are necessary to deal with this "tragedy of the commons" which had reduced the golden langur habitat by over a third in ten years. Our basic strategy is to encourage villagers to become conservationists both to protect the forest for their own benefit as well as for the benefit of the golden langur and other wildlife. Currently Manas Conservation Forum member NGOs are pursuing this strategy in conservation, education and research programs covering all of the known golden langur population sites except for two forest fragments below Chakrashila Wildlife Sanctuary.

These programs are incorporating the help of over 100 local villages to both reforest and protect the forests adjacent to their villages. By surrounding the golden langur habitat with participating conservation-minded villages, we hope to protect most of the populations of golden langurs as well as the forest and other wildlife. In the smaller "island" populations south of the main Manas Biosphere Reserve some Forum



member NGOs are having great success encouraging and aiding the local villages surrounding the main wildlife sanctuaries and reserve forests. These include the Chakrashila Wildlife Sanctuary and the Nadangiri Reserve Forest which is northeast of Chakrashila. Green Heart Nature Club has been actively working with villages surrounding those areas to create village protected buffer areas around both of these forests with buffer corridors between them, thus connecting the two isolated populations of langurs. Additionally, Natures Foster is creating a similar community protected buffer zone surrounding Kakojana Reserve Forest. Finally a similar technique is being pursued by Green Forest Conservation in the Kachugaon and Ripu Reserve Forests and by New Horizons in Manas Reserve Forest. However, this large area cannot be as easily sealed and protected against encroachers until greater on site government

presence can be maintained.

Fortunately, the political turmoil is beginning to subside. In 2004 one of the main militant groups signed an accord with the Central Government of India. The accord led to the creation of a Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). The BTC, in its infancy, is beginning to take on the administration of much of western Assam and the full range of the golden langur. The BTC seems very interested in protecting the forests and has shown particular interest in the Golden Langur Conservation Project and in the golden langur as a focal animal because of its endemic occurrence in western Assam and in the Bodoland territory.

While in Assam in November, Horwich addressed a seminar on biodiversity with a focus on the golden langur. This seminar organized by Green Heart Nature Club and hosted by Kokrajhar College included addresses by many prestigious people from the area including Sri Kampa Borgoyari a member of the BTC, Sri Sansuma Khunnggar Bwismuthiary, a Member of Parliament for the District, Sri A. Rabha, Director of the Manas Tiger Reserve and Dr. Jihosuo Biswas, a golden langur expert. Hopefully, this conference will contribute to a renaissance of forest protection with the additional allies of the BTC.



Horwich and Other Seminar Panelists

## Ecotourism in Wisconsin

Two Wisconsin projects stimulated by Community Conservation are having significant conservation awareness and economic impact in their communities through eco-tourism.

Ferry Bluff Eagle Council (FBEC) is a community non-profit organization which preserves habitat for wintering eagles, works with landowners to manage eagle habitat, conducts educational programs and maintains an overlook to see eagles feeding on the Wisconsin River. In 1990 Community Conservation helped FBEC initiate Bald Eagle Watching Days, an educational tourism festival in January. This event began small but now in its 16<sup>th</sup> year draws over 10,000 people and over \$750,000 to the Sauk Prairie area. The event is co-hosted by the FBEC, the Wisconsin DNR and the Sauk Prairie Area Chamber of Commerce with 26 area business sponsors. Activities this year included education about eagle watching, eagle watching tours, nature trails, presentations on wildlife photography and birds of prey, drawing birds, feeding birds in winter, tracking eagles by radio and a release of rehabilitated eagles.

[www.ferrybluffeaglecouncil.org](http://www.ferrybluffeaglecouncil.org)

Community Conservation also initiated a project which has become the Kickapoo Valley Reserve, a protected area of almost 8,600 acres co-managed between the state and the Ho-Chunk Nation with a locally dominated Managing Board. The fifth annual Winter Festival encouraged people to enjoy outdoor winter activities with a weekend of horse-drawn sleigh rides, cross country skiing, mutt sledding, horse apple golf, ice skating, sledding, chili tasting and bread baking contests and a presentation on birds of prey. This year the event was blessed with snow for the second time in its five year history.

[www.kvr.state.wi.us](http://www.kvr.state.wi.us)



Horse-drawn Sleigh at KVR Winter Festival

These events both occur in the sometimes inhospitable Wisconsin winter when tourism revenues are down in these areas. Their success has stimulated other communities to begin ecotourism. Cassville, a Wisconsin community on the Mississippi River, has its own Bald Eagle Days this year with eagle watching, educational programs and story-telling. Ecotourism events can be an effective way to educate the public about their environment and financially support environmental organizations and their communities.

## Study of a “New” Macaque Species

Although known by local residents of the northeastern India state of Arunachal Pradesh (AP), what is thought to be potentially a new species of macaque was first seen in West Kameng, AP by Dr. A. Choudhary, of the Rhino Foundation and Bablu Dey, of Green Heart Nature Club in 2000. In 2002, while conducting a general survey of primates, Drs. J. Biswas and D. Chetry encountered a group of the unidentified macaques in Namdapha Tiger Reserve, AP. Last year Benu Abedin of Banashree photographed hunters with a dead macaque (see photo). Recently, a group of biologists, Drs. A. Sinha, A. Datta, D. Madhusudan and C. Mishra of the Nature Conservation Foundation, Wildlife Conservation Society and the Snow Leopard Society issued a press release noting it as a new species in West Kamang, AP.

The macaques are more robust than other species in the region and have prominent buffy whiskers extending to the cheek. Their body color is darker than Assamese macaques (*Macaca assamensis*) and the upper eyelids have prominent white areas. The adult tail is longer than that of the stump tail macaque but much shorter than that of



Assamese macaques. These observations suggest that the macaque is morphologically distinct from other macaque species found in Northeast India and may be a new species or sub-species.

A comprehensive study of the two populations in AP to document the identification, biogeography, biology and conservation perspectives of this unknown primate taxon will be undertaken by Drs. J. Biswas and J. Das of the Primate Research Centre accompanied by B. Dey. They will also carry out an education awareness campaign in the areas of the primate's occurrence. The study is sponsored by Community Conservation with support from the Margot Marsh Biodiversity Foundation.

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