

**COMMUNITY BASED CONSERVATION OF IMPORTANT ELEPHANT HABITATS IN THE
NORTH-EAST INDIAN STATE OF MEGHALAYA, INDIA:**

**Involving the Local Community in Elephant Conservation
Through Livelihood Security**



Male elephant - Taidang stream

Photo: MD Madhusudan

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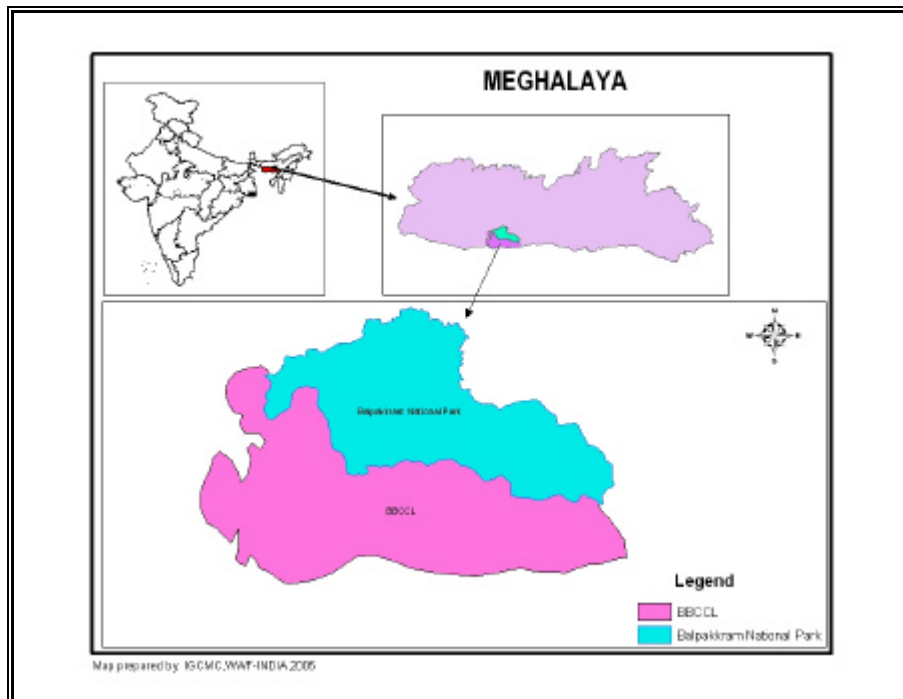
SAMRAKSHAN TRUST – MEGHALAYA

CONTENTS

Section	Title	Page No.
Part 1	Background	2
Part 2	People and Elephants : Enhancing Livelihood Security	4
	2.1 Building People's Institutions	
	2.2 The Group Building Process	
	2.3 Rules followed by SHGs	
	2.4 Functions Performed by SHGs	
	2.5 Status of SHGs on the basis of various Performance Parameters	
	2.6 Capacity building of SHGs	
	2.7 Book Keeping	
	2.8 Agricultural Improvement	
	2.9 Monitoring and Evaluation	
Part 3	Mapping the Landscape	10
	Land Use Pattern using Satellite Imagery	
Part 4	Engendering Conservation Consciousness	11
	4.1 Screening of Wildlife Films in Community Lands	
	4.2 Sketching Competition for Children	
Part 5	Community Based Monitoring of Elephants	14
	5.1. The Problem	
	5.2. Methodology	
	5.3 Results	
Part 6	Capacity Building	16
Part 7	Partnerships and Collaboration	17
Part 8	The Team	19

PART 1 BACKGROUND

The state of Meghalaya lies between 25° North and 26° 10' North latitude and 89°45' East and 92°45' East longitude, and covers an area of 22,429 km². Meghalaya is home to a unique array of vegetation, ranging from tropical and sub-tropical to temperate or near temperate. The forests are particularly well endowed with orchids and numerous species of medicinal plants. Meghalaya has one of the largest and most dense Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) populations in India - a population, however, that is poorly protected and is causing increasing damage to life and property. Other large animals of significance include wild buffalo (*Bubalis bubalis*), gaur (*Bos gaurus*), serow (*Nemorhaedus sumatraensis*), Goral (*Nemorhaedus goral*), Sloth Bear (*Melursus ursinus*), Tiger (*Panthera tigris*), Hoolock gibbon (*Hylobates hoolock*) and a number of small cats. Within Meghalaya, the Garo Hills (situated in the western part of the state, neighbouring Bangladesh) are particularly rich in natural values, and therefore merit greater conservation attention than they have received so far. Of particular significance for wildlife is a 300 sq. km. tract called the Balpakram Baghmara Community Conservation Landscape (BBCCL). On the northern periphery of the BBCCL is located the Balpakram National Park (220 sq.km.), the largest protected area in Meghalaya. In conjunction with this park and its surrounding areas, the BBCCL forms a large tract of contiguous habitat (nearly 600 sq.km) that is relatively intact and supports approximately 500-600 elephants. The BBCCL also has populations of gaur, tiger, clouded leopard and hoolock gibbon. This is possibly the largest tract of habitat in Meghalaya that has the best long-term possibility of conservation of wildlife in general and mega fauna such as elephants in particular. Land use changes have been relatively benign and no major infrastructure projects that could fracture the habitat are envisaged in the near future.



Location of Balpakram National Park and BBCCL Within Meghalaya and India

The principal threat to elephants (and other wildlife) in the BBCCL arises from large scale conversion of land use to activities that are not compatible with the survival of elephants. This includes monoculture cash crops such as cashew, areca nut, rubber, coffee and tea; horticulture crops such as pineapple, citrus and temperate fruit; and spices such as ginger and cardamom. Such conversion permanently banishes forests and drastically reduces habitat available to elephants to meet their ecological requirements.

Since 2004, Samrakshan Trust has been working in *Aking*¹ within the BBCCL to reduce such habitat fragmentation.

¹ An *Aking*, roughly translated, is a tract of land that belongs to a particular clan. Each *Aking* is under the jurisdiction of a *Nokma* or headman who is the final arbiter about the nature of land use in the *Aking*. *Aking*s can vary in size from 3-4 sq.km to 20-30 sq.km and the land use in an *Aking* typically presents a mosaic of features like habitation (mostly wood and bamboo structures), jhum (shifting cultivation), wet terrace cultivation, orchards and homestead gardens, open forests and dense forests. The proportion of each category of

The focus of Samrakshan's initiative is on limiting such conversion to effect a "win-win" situation where farmers benefit from better agricultural yields without having to alter land use drastically. Learning from various experiences in north east India that have had similar objectives under comparable circumstances, we are attempting to assist farmers to intensively cultivate small plots of land with a judicious combination of food and commercial crops. The emphasis is on ensuring livelihood security and generating moderate surpluses for farmers. Such a model, as has been demonstrated at other sites in north east India, will ensure that at least a part of the community land is left in a state that can be used by elephants and other wildlife. Drawing from experiences of Integrated Conservation Development Projects across the world, Samrakshan's approach has been to foster strong local people's institutions that can serve as platforms for judicious land use activities that safeguard the interests of wildlife, while ensuring that subsistence needs of people are adequately met. In pursuance of this methodology, Samrakshan team members are involved with fostering people's groups (called Self Help Groups or SHGs) in the target villages, and building their capacity for effective collective action. Once these groups are sufficiently mature, they are assisted to undertake a variety of activities for consolidating and intensifying agriculture for improving the yield from land. SHGs fostered by Samrakshan have been able to access government funds for specific ecologically-friendly livelihood enhancing activities. Apart from such elephant-friendly livelihood enhancing activities, Samrakshan's strategy in the BBCCL also incorporates community based monitoring of elephants and enhancing conservation consciousness among people.

land use varies from one *Aking* to another. The habitations are often spread over the *Aking* in clusters that form distinct hamlets. Hence in an *Aking* it is not uncommon to find 2-3 hamlets, each comprising of a few homesteads

PART 2

PEOPLE AND ELEPHANTS: ENHANCING LIVELIHOOD SECURITY

2.1 BUILDING PEOPLE'S INSTITUTIONS

The experience of social development interventions from large parts of India shows that institution building efforts that follow the "SHG model" are far more effective compared to other types of institutions in engaging with various development activities. Progressively, this model is being adopted across countries to anchor social development projects. Samrakshan has over the last few years been working with this model in its Madhya Pradesh field office and has extended the experience to Meghalaya. Briefly, the SHG model involves mobilizing people into self help groups (SHGs), each consisting of 10-20 members bound together by affinity². Each SHG is put through a rigorous capacity building process spread over a 12 month period, during which each group is provided training inputs on issues like effective functioning of groups, maintaining accounts and other records, leadership, conflict resolution, conducting group meetings, business planning and fund management. In addition the groups are also trained on enhancing incomes through small business activities and improving the yields of their agricultural holdings as well as orchards.

The group members make small savings each week and thus build a corpus fund for their group. This corpus is also enhanced by various activities, such as small scale business and providing agricultural labour to large landowners. In addition, these groups also have the opportunity of accessing loans from various schemes of the local and state government. So far Samrakshan has desisted from investing monetarily in these groups, particularly since alternate sources of finance are available. This enables Samrakshan to invest in building a cadre of personnel who provide handholding support to these community institutions. Members avail of loans from the corpus of their group for financing income enhancing initiatives. Typically these consist of agricultural yield enhancement and small scale businesses.

The initial thrust of Samrakshan's efforts in the BBCCL has been in 5 *Aking*s that are located strategically in the interceding land area between the Balpakram National Park and the Baghmara Reserve Forest, two government owned forests in the BBCCL. In these *Aking*s, community mobilisation has been a graduated process, as is apparent from the table below:

S. No.	<i>Aking</i> Name	Date of initiating mobilisation efforts
1	Alokpang	July 2004
2	Ampangre	July 2004
3	Gongrot	November 2004
4	Halwa Atong	July 2005
5	Panda	July 2005

2.2 THE GROUP BUILDING PROCESS

The process of institution building is a gradual exercise in each *Aking*; meeting the headman, holding village level meetings, visiting each household, interacting with people at public places like tea-stalls, having meals and spending nights with the villagers have been some tools used for establishing initial rapport with the local community. As a consequence, our team members are now an integral part of the villages where we work, sharing day to day events as well as social occasions such as Sunday Church sessions and local festivals with the target community.

Our experience in the Garo Hills during the first year suggests that the group formation process takes close to twelve months. With due investment in time, today the community has come together in form of SHGs in all the above-mentioned *Aking*s. These groups follow basic rules of functioning of SHGs and undertake activities commensurate to their age and capacity. For example, a new SHG will concentrate on regular meetings, uniform savings and meticulous recording of proceedings, while the mature groups will indulge in activities like internal lending of money to its members and income generating activities, in addition to following basic rules.

Samrakshan's community mobilisers live in the *Aking*s for a greater part of the week, fostering new groups, attending meetings of existing SHGs, helping them with writing of books, providing capacity building inputs as and when needed, discussing problems and issues in the *Aking*s, and taking these up if required to the relevant government authorities.

² Affinity groups pertain to people with similar characteristics - caste, creed, sex, occupation, geographical area, place of origin, language, income levels, age, etc. For a group to have affinity, some amount of homogeneity is necessary, but this does not mean that all homogenous groups are affinity groups or vice versa.



Photo: Samrakshan Trust

Participants sharing a light moment during a meeting

The table below provides an overview of the currently existing groups.

S. No.	Group Name	Category	No of Me.	Aking	Date of First Meeting	Day Of Meeting	Time Of Meeting
1.	Pring Prang SHG	Female	10	Ampangre	03-09-2004	Saturday	7 am
2.	Simsang SHG	Female	12	Alokpang	28-08-2004	Saturday	7 am
3.	Balsrigittim Male SHG	Male	9	Alokpang	17-07-2004	Sunday	6 am
4.	Dokua SHG	Mix	7	Ampangre	20-02-2005	Saturday	4 pm
5.	Balsrigittim Women SHG	Female	10	Alokpang	03-04-2005	Saturday	7 pm
6.	Bulakawe SHG	Mix	9	Alokpang	07-04-2001	Sunday	4 pm
7.	Rongcholgittim Male SHG	Male	11	Alokpang	06-08-2005	Saturday	4 pm
8.	Chitmang Songgital SHG	Male	11	Gongrot	22-01-2005	Wednesday	7 pm
9.	Dosigipil SHG	Female	10	Gongrot	23-01-2005	Sunday	1 pm
10.	Dosingkal Chiring SHG	Mix	5	Gongrot	01-04-2005	Sunday	1 pm

Note

These are groups that were functioning regularly as on reporting date. An equal number of groups that have been fostered over this period have disintegrated. Details of groups that have disintegrated have not been reported in this table.

2.3 RULES FOLLOWED BY EACH SHG

1. Regular weekly meeting - all groups meet at least once each week at a day, time and location decided by them.
2. Regular attendance and savings during meetings – group members save amounts ranging from Rs. 2 to Rs 10, depending on their capacity, during each meeting.
3. Recording of proceedings of meetings. The discussions and happenings of each meeting are clearly recorded in a separate register maintained for the purpose. These minutes are read out before the start and end of meeting. At the end of a meeting all members who are present are required to
4. Discuss various issues relevant to the members, giving equal opportunity to all members to participate in deliberations.
5. Appointing 2 representatives for the SHG. Two members are appointed for a term of 6 or 12 months to represent the group at banks, government departments and other such places.
6. Formulating rules and regulations of the SHG and adhering to the same. Each SHG makes its own rules and regulations that are recorded in a register and members have to ensure that the same are strictly followed. These pertain to amount of savings to be carried out, rules for availing loans, repayment rules, other matters pertaining to issues relevant to the village – education, health, management of natural resources and so on.
7. Attending trainings conducted by Samrakshan Trust members. Trainings conducted for the groups have to be attended by all the members. The members have to make effort to understand the content of the training.

S. No.	Particulars	Group Number										Total	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		
5	Exposure visits												-
a.	SHG membs	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
b.	Non SHG members	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
6	Loans												-
a.	No of loans given	3	5	-	1	11	-	2	-	-	-	-	22
b.	Amount given	450	700	-	200	3,850	-	200	-	-	-	-	5,400
c.	No of loans returned	1	-	-	-	8	-	-	-	-	-	-	9
d.	Amount returned	50	-	-	-	2,090	-	-	-	-	-	-	2,140
7	Interest Collected on loans	-	-	-	-	190	-	-	-	-	-	-	190
8	Fines collected	384	1,451	25	81	-	-	-	150	520	-	-	2,611
9	Cash Status								-	-	-	-	-
a.	In hand status	359	70	258	817	561	-	25	339	74	91	-	2,594
b.	Cash at bank	3,400	4,000	2,000	-	-	-	-	1,500	2,000	-	-	12,900
10	Income earned	2,220	2,198	1,464	510	1,665	-	-	2,250	1,800	-	-	12,107

Notes

- Group numbers correspond to names of groups in the previous table.
- Non-members will be a part of trainings pertaining to livelihood issues such as homesteads or vegetable gardens. These have been initiated September 2005 onwards and will now be an integral part of the SHG schedule.
- The number of trainings does not include trainings on 'book keeping' as they are more hands on besides being almost perennial in nature.

2.6 CAPACITY BUILDING OF SHGs

Robust capacity building is at the core of the SHG-centric model of community based natural resource management. A south India based organisation MYRADA (www.myrada.org), which is one of the pioneers of the SHG concept, has generated a user-friendly capacity building manual for SHG practitioners. Samrakshan has adapted this to make it conducive to conditions prevalent in the Garo hills.

Effective use of charts and games is made to enhance the learning experience and make the training sessions interesting. A training session usually lasts up to one hour, though there are some sessions that may stretch up to two hours as well – depending upon the topic, methodology and age of the group.

The SHGs are responsible for getting all members of their group to attend the trainings. On occasions, some training sessions need to be repeated. The SHG members have to record, in a register maintained for this purpose, the learning from the training and the decisions on future action taken by the group based on the training. The trainings sessions consisted of the following topics.

Serial No.	Topics
1	Introduction To SHG
2	Structure and Function of SHG
3	Concept and Importance of Book Keeping
4	Manuring
5	Communication
6	Loans

2.7 BOOK KEEPING

Book keeping skills are relevant to SHG members not only for proper functioning of the group but also in their day-to-day lives, and particularly when they undertake livelihood-enhancing activities. In many ways book-keeping is thus the cornerstone of robust institutions, particularly in rural areas where

- Literacy levels are low
- People are reluctant or not habituated to recording things in writing

To overcome these Samrakshan Trust has

1. Designed a hands-on book keeping training schedule that is ongoing and not carried out in a one-off manner
2. Introduced books in phases depending on the capacities and willingness of each group
3. Initiated an exercise where members are given basic literacy skills that enable them to write their name and be aware to the financial transactions of the group

Books being maintained by various groups

S. No.	Book Name
1	Attendance Register (shows attendance of members in each meeting)
2	Minute Book (contains all details pertaining to the group – financial and non financial)
3	Admission Book (contains details like family, landholding etc of each member at time of joining the group)
4	Cash Book (contains all transactions that affect the cash or bank balance of the group)
5	Pass Book (shows the status of member's savings and loans)

2.8 AGRICULTURAL IMPROVEMENT

The goal of the community institutions (SHGs) is to enhance livelihood security in a manner that is sensitive towards the conservation needs of the landscape. The institutions are a tool that would play a pivotal role in achieving these goals. Since agriculture is the primary source of income for the people, we decided to focus on optimizing the yield that people are able to get from their agricultural fields. Overtime we would also look at diversifying the income earning basket. However at this stage our focus is on assisting people to optimize yields from existing agricultural fields. Such an approach would also reduce the impetus to bring fresh natural vegetation under the plough.

The North East Region Community Resource Management Project (NERCRMP) operational in our neighboring district of West Garo Hills has demonstrated effective techniques of intensive utilization of limited tracts of land for boosting agricultural productivity. In order to learn from the experiences of the NERCRMP, one of their technical officers was invited to visit our target area and advise about methods of improving productivity. Accordingly, Mr. Senti Kemba Jamir, the Project Technical Officer with NERCRMP (Tura) visited Samrakshan Trust's Baghmara field office for 2 days during 2nd and 3rd March 2005. He visited Samrakshan's target *Akings* where there were SHGs that were a few months old and ready to undertake livelihood activities

The aim of the visit was to:

1. Understand existing cultivation practices in the *Akings*.
2. Suggest improved practices suitable for the area and other livelihood enhancing interventions that could be taken up by the SHGs.

Observations.

1. Majority of area of these two *Akings* is covered by orchards, a large majority of which are cashew. All or most of the orchards give very low yields in spite of good soil conditions and availability of sufficient water.
2. Technical inputs are not considered in either initiating or maintaining of the orchards. This leads to the orchards having abysmally low yields.
 - a) Spacing between two cashew trees is very less.
 - b) Improper mix of trees is being grown in the same orchard e.g. teak and areca nut; this does allow either of the trees to grow appropriately.
 - c) No manure is being used.
 - d) Maintenance efforts are minimal.
3. The vegetable fields are left barren for major part of the year i.e. people grow vegetables for only 3 out of 12 months in a year.
4. Proportion of land under shifting cultivation is very small.

Recommendations

1. Improving yield of cashew orchards
 - a) Large chunk of land is under cashew orchards that are giving extremely poor yields. So we need to work on existing orchards to give better yield rather than initiating new orchards.
 - b) This activity would be taken with household as the unit as ownership of the orchards lie with households.
 - c) Involve the Block office and the District Horticulture Office in the efforts and procure technical inputs from them.

2. Introduce vegetable gardens

- a) This activity can be taken up initially as a group activity and then transferred on to individual members after a year.
- b) Encourage people to take up vegetable cultivation across the year.
- c) Getting in touch with the Block Office and the District Agriculture Office from the onset and seeking their inputs. This could mean:
 - ⇒ Obtaining calendar showing vegetables to be grown during each month.
 - ⇒ Inviting them to train the group members on the technical aspects.
 - ⇒ Getting tangible inputs like seeds at concessional rates.
- d) Vegetables previously grown in jhum fields can be reintroduced in vegetable gardens.

3. Maintenance and manuring

- a) People are using manure neither for orchards nor for vegetable gardens. Because of this the productivity of both is very low. We need to motivate the people to use manure. This can be done by
 - ⇒ Explaining the benefits.
 - ⇒ Demonstrating the methodology.
- b) This manure would be bio waste and would not require any additional investment from them.

2.9 MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Close monitoring of the SHG development process is a significant pre requisite for the effective development of these institutions. In the Garo Hills, where this concept is relatively new, the importance of close monitoring and hand holding cannot be overemphasized. In view of these facts, Samrakshan has evolved a two pronged approach for monitoring and evaluation of the SHG process:

1. External monitoring by MYRADA personnel;
2. Intensive concurrent internal monitoring based on a monitoring plan prepared with the assistance of MYRADA.

Accordingly MYRADA personnel visited Samrakshan's field area in February 2005 and evaluated the progress of the effort. Further, an internal concurrent monitoring plan has been developed geared towards closely following the development of each group and addressing lacuna as soon as they emerge. These are primarily quantitative in nature, though there are some qualitative parameters as well.

A summary of indicators on the basis of which this monitoring is carried out is presented below:

1. Number of members of SHGs
 2. Number of meetings of each SHG
 3. Regularity of the SHG meetings
 4. Maintenance of records of procedures
 5. Maintenance of accounts
 6. Training programmes attended by individual SHG members
 7. Participation of SHG members in exposure visits
 8. The amount of members' savings and funds raised
 9. Degree of rotation of savings for loans to group members
 10. Percentage of group members who know the financial situation of the group
 11. The degree of active participation by group members in group discussions and decision making.
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PART 3

MAPPING THE LANDSCAPE

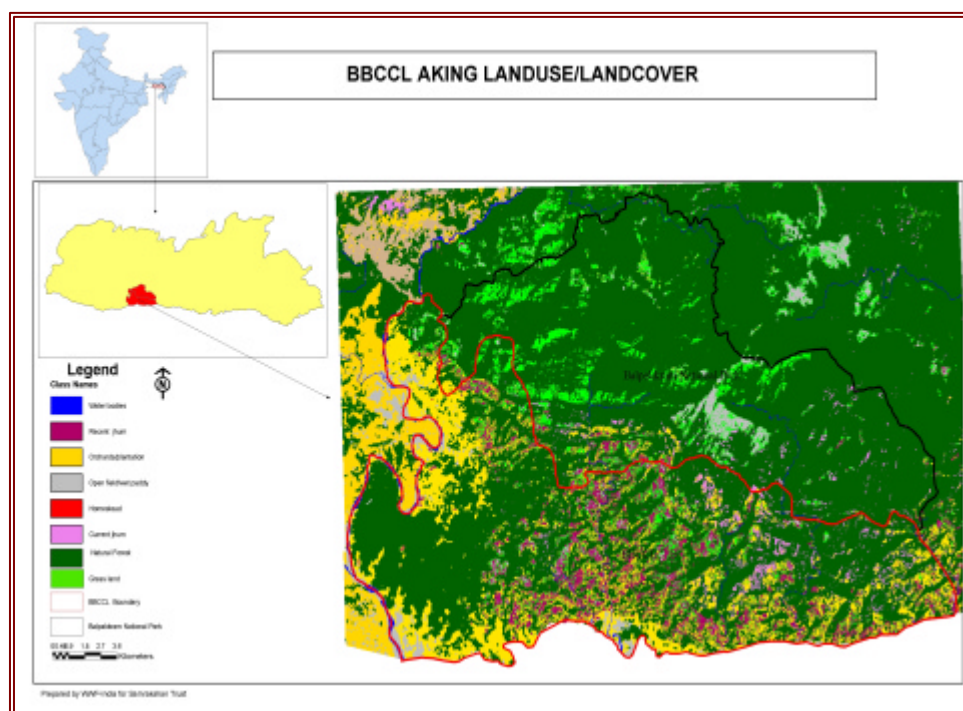
Any effective programme to address the conservation needs of a large mammal like the elephant and associated livelihood needs of people who share the landscape needs to be based on a bedrock of sound information about prevalent land use practices in the landscape, particularly the spatial distribution of habitation and agriculture. Unfortunately the Garo hills are plagued by a crippling lack of information about the following parameters:

1. Maps and locations of villages/*Akings*. Political maps available do not depict the necessary details and topographical sheets for this area are not available due to close proximity to the international border.
2. An exhaustive listing of all the *Akings* within the geographical limits of the BBCCL was not available. Similarly information on villages and populations was dated and did not always conform to ground reality.
3. There was no specific information on land use practices within the *Akings* and the location of landmarks like rivers and roads was vague.

These gaps posed severe problems for Samrakshan's functioning and it became apparent early in the intervention that such basic information will need to be speedily put together if the intervention is have the expected benefits. In order to overcome these lacunae Samrakshan undertook the exercises described below:

- A. Samrakshan carried out a survey across the landscape which bought out details of the number of *Akings* across the landscape, the clan that owned them and the current headman, approximate number of households in each *Aking* and the market on which the people in each *Aking* were dependent for their basic needs.
- B. Samrakshan contracted the Indira Gandhi Conservation Monitoring Centre of WWF India create a digital database and interpret broad class vegetation types in the BBCCL using remote sensing and G.I.S. techniques. This presented us with:
 - (i) A clear picture about the land use categories prevalent through out the BBCCL
 - (ii) Total area of the BBCCL and area under each category of land use.

S. No.	Land Use Classes	Histogram	Area in acres
1	Forest/Close Forest/Dense Forest	1292106	232759.9748
2	Mixed Forest	222652	40108.53128
3	Open forest	276628	49831.76792
4	Vegetation/Orchard/Plantation	418621	75410.38694
5	Agriculture	339227	61108.35178
6	Fallow Land	25441	4582.94174
7	Open Land	552636	99551.84904
8	River	34282	6175.55948
9	Water Bodies/Lakes/Ponds	16641	2997.70974
10	Settlement	1396.00	251.47544
	Total	4471736	572778.5482



PART 4

ENGENDERING CONSERVATION CONSCIOUSNESS

4.1. SCREENING OF CONSERVATION FILMS IN COMMUNITY LANDS

Need and Approach

The Garo community has shared this landscape with wildlife for generations. Various customs and traditions have developed in the shadow of the incomparable natural values that occur here. As is the case with nearly all forest dwelling societies, hunting is an integral part of the social life and wildlife is often perceived to have a functional nutritive value. With an increase in human population and easy availability of guns, hunting has obviously taken a heavy toll on all forms of wildlife.

In order to create an atmosphere conducive to the persistence of wildlife, Samrakshan has attempted to devise a structured and dynamic approach for addressing this significant threat. On a pilot basis, an exercise has been initiated in our target *Akings* of screening wildlife films depicting charismatic wildlife and followed by discussion groups. The immediate objective is to engender greater pride among community members within the BBCCL for wildlife in their lands, particularly flagship species such as the elephant. Though the Garo Hills has one of the highest densities of elephants in India, this population is poorly protected and is increasingly coming into conflict with humans. Thus by engendering such conservation consciousness the local community would be encouraged to desist from activities that degrade elephant habitat and cause general harm to wildlife. Further, such inputs also provide a degree of indemnity against possible reprisals against elephants when they enter crop fields. Such awareness building also helps generate the vital link between the community development component of Samrakshan's work and conservation, particularly preventing elephant habitats from being degraded. Eventually we hope to generate a cadre of local land stewards who value the wildlife occurring in their lands and are committed to its protection.

Films Screened in the *Akings*

S. No.	Name of the Film	Language	Producer(s)
1.	Living with Giants	English & Hindi	Ashish & Shanti Chandola
2.	Birds of the Indian Monsoon	Hindi	Stanley Breeden & Belinda Wright
3.	Elephant – A God in Distress	Hindi	Earth Care Films
4.	Nagarhole – Tales From an Indian Jungle	English	Shekar Dattatri
5.	Silent Valley – An Indian Rainforest	English	Shekar Dattatri



Photo: Samrakshan Trust

Film Show in Progress : Alokpang *Aking*

The Process

All the films are on compact disks and are screened either at a small video hall in Alokpang *Aking* or at the residence of any villager who has a television set and VCD player. While Panda is the only *Aking* that is electrified, in rest of the *Akings*, the television sets run on batteries while the video hall mentioned above has a generator set.

The people are given prior information about a screening and each film show is followed by discussions on the theme highlighted in the film and linking it to the situation in the Garo Hills. Samrakshan team members have prepared short notes that are used to guide these discussions that centre on the following themes:

1. Elephants and their lives;
2. Birds found in the area;
3. Importance of conservation.

Apart from creating a climate in favour of elephants, such discussions also help Samrakshan members understand the perceptions of the community vis-à-vis particular wild animals and towards nature in general. Further, such discussions have generated valuable information ranging from local names of specific animals to reasons for decline in population of animals like Hoolock gibbons in the area.

These film shows were initiated during April 2005 and by August 2005 16 films were screened over a period of 5 months. The total number of people who have viewed the films stands at 775. People from 6 *Akings* (Alokpang, Ampangre, Halwa Atong, Gongrot, Panda and Rongrengpal) have been a part of this exercise so far.

Tangible Benefits Accruing from this Exercise

1. The greatest benefit has been the role of films in increasing the sensitivity of our team members towards conservation issues. This is significance of this development accrues from the fact that team members have been drawn from the same community with which we are working – a community where hunting and conservation are non issues. Our team members are now confidently able to broach such issues within the community and talk about protecting forests and animals.
2. The sensitivity of people towards wildlife appears to have increased following this process. There is now a realization that the best place for wildlife is their natural habitat. The slow loris incident described earlier in the report is reflective of this change in attitude. Further, people from these *Akings* have begun sharing information on activities that threaten wildlife. For instance in August 2005, information was made available to Samrakshan about a prospective hunter who was planning a kill in one of the *Akings*. Similarly we have received information about the sale of wild meat originating from the *Akings* in the Baghmara market. In general any information of related to wildlife is now readily passed on to Samrakshan in the *Akings* where we work.
3. This exercise has helped build a platform from which Samrakshan Trust members can address various conservation issues within the community - it has provided a lever to initiate a discussion with people on wildlife and conservation.
4. The films have helped in mobilizing support of the head men and other influential people towards conservation actions like participatory elephant monitoring being carried out in the *Akings*.

4.2. SKETCHING COMPETITION FOR CHILDREN

Need and Approach

While the film shows are primarily targeted at adults (though children also attend them), a strong need was felt to address another important segment of the community - children. Anecdotal information revealed that children cause significant damage to birds and small wildlife by

1. Extensively using catapults to kill birds and squirrels.
2. Disturbing nests, removing eggs and fledglings.

It was therefore felt that the effort to inculcate conservation consciousness should also explicitly target children. On an experimental basis we decided to organise a sketching and coloring competition in Gongrot, the most remote *Aking* where we work. The idea was to ask the children to draw the birds they saw around their dwelling place. This would create an opportunity for us to interact with the children on the subject of birds (and other wildlife). Accordingly, after discussions with village elders and school teachers, a sketching contest was organised.

Date	22 nd June 2005
Time	7.00 a.m.
Duration	1.45 hours
Participants	21
Age Group of participants	5 to 13 years
Venue	Government Lower Primary School
Location	Songgitcham gittim in Gongrot <i>Aking</i>

A poster depicting hornbills found in North East India was displayed at the venue. The competition was held after regular classes had finished and some children (who had not attended regular school on that day) turned up only for the competition! After distributing the chart papers and the crayons the organizers came out of the rooms that the participants occupied. This enabled the children to be creative without being overly conscious of the presence of elders in the room. The children enjoyed themselves while putting on paper colours and shapes of the birds they had seen. They chatted excitedly and showed their creations to each other. The chart papers were duly collected and the teachers present selected the winners. The winners were given prizes while chocolates distributed amongst all participants after a brief talk by Samrakshan members focusing on how birds play a vital role in the forest system. Hornbills, for example, found in their *Aking* play a very crucial role in disbursing seeds of different plants and trees in the forests, enabling them to grow at different places. Trees cannot move from place to place, but hornbills can, they drop the seeds of the fruits they eat. These seeds then grow into trees. They were lucky to have hornbills and other amazing birds in their *Aking* and should be proud of it. Just as the birds show their affection for us by nesting in our *Aking*, we too should care for them by desisting killing them or disturbing their nests. Birds, like us, feel happy being at home with their parents and enjoy being free with friends. We should not cage them. The children were encouraged to share these ideas with their parents and friends as well.

Conclusion

This activity is to be extended after modifications based on the lessons emerging out of this pilot exercise. Recognizing that altering behavior is a long term process, we consider the Gongrot competition a beginning that will be extended over time.

PEOPLE AND ELEPHANTS: COMMUNITY BASED MONITORING OF ELEPHANTS

5.1. THE PROBLEM

A significant hindrance in our effort towards safeguarding habitat integrity in community lands for the persistence of elephants has been the absence of reliable information on the distribution and movement of elephants in the *Akings*. The lack of such information prevents the optimization of the conservation benefits from social outreach activities since the targeting of these interventions becomes somewhat inaccurate. Specifically, the lack of accurate information about elephants inhibits our ability to identify spaces that are critical for elephants and therefore hinders us from strategically targeting our activities to secure such spaces on priority. Further, such information, if available, can be shared with various developmental agencies and line departments to enable them to undertake development activities like schools, roads and other future development interventions in the *Akings* in a manner that is not in conflict with elephant habitats.

It was therefore decided to embark upon this additional activity that was designed through consultations with Dr. Christy Williams and Dr. M.D. Madhusudan, our advisors on technical aspects of conservation biology.

5.2. METHODOLOGY

The following methodology is adopted for this exercise:

1. A reliable local person who can act as a record-keeper has been identified for each *Aking*. These selected record keepers will be trained in methods of gathering and maintaining information about elephant activity in their respective *Akings*. Each record-keeper is given an exercise book in which data will be recorded according to a given format:
2. For the purpose of this exercise, the support and cooperation of the headman of the *Aking* (the *Nokma*) and other influential people of the *Aking* has been enlisted by holding several meetings with them, during which the value of this exercise has been demonstrated. It has been emphasised that through such a process, conflict with elephants can be reduced by minimising human-elephant interactions.
3. The objectives and purpose of this exercise have been publicized among the villagers through similar meetings.
4. The villagers have been requested to pass on the following information about every instance of elephant presence in their *Aking* to the record keeper:
 - a) Location - Record any landmark near which elephants were sighted
 - b) When were they there – date and approximate time when the animals were sighted
 - c) How many were there - record group size
 - d) Any other unusual characteristic.
5. Based on information reported by villagers, the record keeper fills the data sheet in his/her exercise book.
6. This information is collated monthly at the Samrakshan field office. In order to ensure that the information is systematically gathered, Samrakshan team members visit the record-keeper at the end of each week. This is possible as Samrakshan members are anyway working in these *Akings* on a variety of other activities. Such regular interaction with the record keepers ensures reliability of the data, as any errors that might creep in, either during data gathering or recording are rapidly detected and corrected.

The record keepers do not proactively search for elephant presence in their respective *Akings*. Rather they record information brought to them by villagers. They also attempt to collect information from villagers from common gathering points such as tea shops, bus waiting sheds and churches. The scale of effort required for pro active data collection in terms of human resource capacity and funds is currently not available. We have therefore chosen an approach that will help optimise the human and financial resources available, while ensuring that data from a significantly large area is collected.

5.3 RESULTS

Between June 2005 and August 2005, such monitoring has been carried out in 5 *Akings* and the following principal findings are now available:

1. A total of 47 sightings of elephant were reported from the *Akings* during these three months.
2. Out of the total 47 sightings, 22 have been of solitary animals. The sightings of solitary animals as a proportion of total animals is thus 47%.
3. On 3 occasions herds of 10 or more animals have been noticed. This comes to 6% of the total sightings.
4. Out of the above sightings, on 38 occasions (81%) elephants were observed to be feeding and the balance 9 (19%) sightings were of animals moving from one location to another. The elephants have been observed eating a variety of agricultural produce from paddy and yam from jhum fields to jackfruit and bananas from orchards.
5. 23 out of the total 47 sightings have been recorded at Rongrengpal *Aking*, all of them during August 2005.

6. In the 24 sightings that were at places other than at Rongrengpal, all the elephants visited the *Akings* at night. In 22 instances they visited the *Akings* at night and left. Only in 2 cases did the elephants stay behind during the day time too.

The findings from this preliminary exercise are being shared with Samrakshan's technical advisors for review. We hope to make any modifications that are necessary to the methodology before extending it to other *Akings*.



Photo: Samrakshan Trust

Training of Record Keepers at Samrakshan's office

Capacity Building of Record Keepers

In order to streamline the monitoring exercise and lend it greater uniformity, the need was felt to organise a training and interaction session for all the record-keepers and other influential people.

The goals of such a training session were:

1. To help the participants better understand the rationale behind this exercise.
2. Clearly understanding the methodology of the exercise to ensure uniformity.

Thus a training session was organised for record-keepers and village headmen from the five *Akings* on 4 August 2005 at Samrakshan Trust's Baghmara Field Office. The session started at 10:30 AM and was attended by 8 persons. The gathering began with introductions and with various participants, who were from different villages and *Akings*, interacting with each other and sharing their experiences about their association with Samrakshan Trust – some of them were also members of the community institutions being fostered by Samrakshan.

The film 'Nagarahole – Tales From An Indian Jungle' by Shekar Dattatri was screened; some parts of the film were translated for better comprehension. The film brought out the participants' sensitivity on issues pertaining to wildlife and conservation and set the tone for the day. During the course of the film itself they began discussing about various wild animals they saw in the film, their local names, whether they were seen in their region and in which *Akings*. They also expressed their sympathy towards the elephants (shown in the film) suffering because of drought-induced starvation. The film was followed by a discussion facilitated by Samrakshan personnel, the crux of which was:

1. We should save animals & birds and avoid unnecessary felling of trees.
2. Conservation of natural wealth is ultimately done by people themselves for their own good.

We then discussed the primary purpose of the gathering – recording of elephant presence in the *Akings*. The data collection format that had been given to the record-keepers was also discussed threadbare, to ensure that all the record-keepers and Samrakshan Trust members had a similar understanding of the format and uniformity was maintained in information collection. Mock exercises were also carried out with the record keepers. There were several questions on part of the participants about recording information – for instance one of the participants asked if the duration of elephants' stay in their *Aking* was also to be recorded.

The training session helped create greater ownership among the record-keepers and the village head men (*Nokmas*) for this process. Not only were functional matters pertaining to data collection resolved, the participants went back feeling proud of their association with this exercise and with Samrakshan. There was sufficient confidence among the participants to be able to spread the message about this process among other people in their *Aking* – a crucial requisite for the success of this process. The session helped in dispelling numerous doubts that the record keepers and *Nokmas* had about the process as well as the purpose of this exercise.

PART 6 CAPACITY BUILDING

Samrakshan's effort in the Garo hills focuses strongly on nurturing a team of local conservation leaders who can eventually become the fulcrum of future conservation activities. The aim is to minimize import of expertise from outside in the long run. We also see this as an opportunity to develop and nurture a sense of pride and ownership among the local community towards its natural heritage. Such a message is likely to be much better received if delivered by others who share similar ethnicity. With these aims in view, Samrakshan has invested significant time and resources in capacity building and providing exposure to a team recruited from the town of Baghmara, where our field office is located. Details of various training programmes attended by Samrakshan team members during the reporting period are provided below:

S. No.	Particulars	Conducted By	Attended by	Month & Year	Duration (Days)
1.	Nurturing of Community Institutions and their Capacity Building.	MYRADA (Bangalore)	1. Agatha Sangma 2. Orak Marak 3. Arpan Sharma 4. Nimesh Ved	August 2004	6
2.	Awareness Module on Conservation Biology with special focus on Asian Elephant.	A.E.R.C.C. – I.I.Sc. (Indian Institute of Science - Bangalore)	1. Agatha Sangma 2. Orak Marak 3. Arpan Sharma 4. Nimesh Ved	August 2004	6
3.	Project Management	I.R.M.A. (Institute of Rural Management - Anand)	1. Nimesh Ved	September 2004	6
4.	Participatory Rural Appraisal	I.G.S.S.S. (Indo Global Social Service Society - Guwahati)	1. Nova Sangma 2. Agatha Sangma	January 2005	6
5.	Team Building	I.R.M.A. (Institute of Rural Management - Anand)	1. Nimesh Ved	February 2005	3
6.	Human Elephant Conflict – Lessons and Experiences from South Asia	W.W.F. (World Wildlife Fund - Kathmandu)	1. Nimesh Ved	June 2005	3
7.	Participatory Perspective Planning	I.G.S.S.S (Indo Global Social Service Society - Guwahati)	1. Nova Sangma 2. Nimesh Ved	July 2005	3
8.	Shifting Cultivation – Regional Workshop	N.E.R.I.W.A.L.M. (North Eastern Regional Institute of Water and Land Management - Tejpur)	1. Nimesh Ved	July 2005	2

PART 7

PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS

During the course of our work, we have developed linkages with a number of experienced agencies and individuals in order to avail of the best possible expertise for our work. The most significant development that has come about during the reporting period has been the partnership developed with the state government of Meghalaya (box item):

MOBILISING RESOURCES FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND CONSERVATION

In August 2005, Samrakshan was invited by the District Administration of South Garo Hills to enter into a formal MOU with the District Rural Development Agency (DRDA) in order to foster and train community based institutions in a part of the Rongara Community Development Block (roughly coinciding with the BBCCL) on behalf of the DRDA. Samrakshan thus now has an official mandate to enhance social development within the BBCCL. This development provides Samrakshan with a unique position to be able to work towards the twin goals of livelihood security and elephant habitat preservation in the following ways:

1. It opens up the door to considerable state funding for groups fostered by Samrakshan. Thus, Samrakshan has successfully linked its activities and groups to state programs.
2. This development implies that funding made available to Samrakshan from its donors becomes catalytic with the state pitching in with significant funding for specific income enhancing activities that the groups will undertake.
3. This reduces the burden from Samrakshan of securing funds for investment in various groups that it is fostering for their income enhancing activities.
4. Apart from making potentially limitless funding available to our groups, this development will also help offset some of the costs associated with Samrakshan's village outreach activities and capacity enhancement programs for its personnel.
5. Finally and most significantly this development is evidence of the recognition of Samrakshan's work from the state government of Meghalaya.

The validity of the MOU is for a period of two years and is extendable thereafter.

1. Our primary partner in the Garo Hills is the North East Community Resource Management Project (NERCRMP). The NERCRMP project in the neighboring district of West Garo Hills has evolved a number of approaches for assisting upland communities to improve livelihood security through intensification of cultivation and other income generating methods. Samrakshan is trying to build upon the learning's emerging out of the NERCRMP's experience and adapt them to the conditions prevalent in the South Garo Hills since the primary tool for safe guarding elephant habitats from further degradation is to enable people to intensively cultivate small plots of land, thus leaving at least some portions of the *Aking* free for use by elephants and other wildlife.
2. Our team has toured extensively the villages where the NERCRMP has been working, and our team members have been interacting regularly with NERCRMP personnel. Exposure visits are organised for Samrakshan fostered community-based groups to NERCRMP villages. Thus our partnership with the NERCRMP provides us larger policy direction as well as assistance with specific aspects of our work.
3. We have also established a collaboration with Myrada, an organisation based in south India, widely credited as being the pioneer of the "SHG" micro credit concept and focusing on mobilising and nurturing appropriate people's institutions. Not only has our team been trained at Myrada's training centre, senior Myrada staff also visit our field area to help assess the progress of the groups we are nurturing and to identify and overcome major gaps in our community based initiatives.
4. In order to access cutting edge knowledge regarding elephant ecology and in order to integrate it with land use planning, Samrakshan has teamed up with WWF India. Apart from the GIS unit of WWF India providing us expertise for preparing a land use map of the BBCCL, our team members have visited a WWF projects in Assam that focus on mitigating human-elephant conflict. Further Dr. Christy Williams, a conservation biologist with WWF and the only person to have carried out scientific surveys on the elephants of Meghalaya, visits us to assist with monitoring of habitat use by elephants. Dr. Williams is committed to spending 30 days in a year with our team providing technical oversight.
5. Our team has received basic training in elephant biology, behavior, conservation problems and their possible solutions at the Asian Elephant Research and Conservation Centre housed within the Indian Institute of Science at Bangalore. This was a particularly enriching experience for our team as the training programme was a judicious mix of classroom theory and fieldwork in the Bandipur National Park and Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary. This experience enhanced our ability to "think from the elephant's point of view"
6. Dr. M. D. Madhusudan, conservation biologist with the Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF), made a 10-day visit to Samrakshan Trust's field base in the Garo Hills during April 2005, and helped design wildlife and conservation related surveys, which are currently being carried out by the Samrakshan team in the BBCCL.



Photo: Samrakshan Trust

Myrada personnel interacting with SHG at Ampangre Aking during their visit

Visitors

S. No.	Name	Designation	Organization	Month & Year
1.	Dr. Christy Williams	Coordinator WWF AREAS	WWF Nepal	September 2004
2.	Mr. Daniel Ingty	Project Manager	NERCRMP – Tura	October 2004
3.	Mr. Pradip Boro	Programme Officer	CEE – Guwahati	November 2004
4.	Mr. K. P. Somaiah & Mr. Yengirappa	Programme Officer	MYRADA – Bangalore	January 2005
5.	Dr. Gautam Narain & Ms. Nandita Hazarika	Trustees	Ecosystems India – Guwahati	February 2005
6.	Mr. Zubin Zaman	Field Executive	IGSSS – Guwahati	March 2005
7.	Mr. Senti Jamir	Project Technical Officer	NERCRMP – Tura	March 2005
8.	Mr. G Areendran	Head – IGCMC	WWF India	April 2005
9.	Dr. M .D. Madhusudan & Ms. Pavithra Sankaran	Wildlife Ecologist and Trustee	NCF - Mysore	April 2005

Acronyms used

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| a) A.R.E.A.S | Asian Rhino and Elephant Action Strategy. |
| b) W.W.F. | World Wildlife Fund. |
| c) N.E.R.C.R.M.P. | North Eastern Region Community Resource Management Project. |
| d) C.E.E. | Centre For Environment Education. |
| e) I.G.S.S.S. | Indo Global Social Service Society. |
| f) N.C.F. | Nature Conservation Foundation. |
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PART 8 THE TEAM

We believe that nurturing and enhancing capacity of a team consisting of local youth is the optimal approach towards building a sustainable and effective work force. Samrakshan Trust spends significant resources in training of local staff and the Meghalaya team today consists of 6 personnel out of whom 5 are locals. One third of the total team consists of female members.

S. No.	Name	Sex	Designation	Educational Qualification	Age	Organizational Role
1.	Nova Sangma	Female	Project Officer	2 nd Year BA.	25	Community Mobilizer
2.	Idalisha Marak	Female	Project Officer	2 nd Year BA.	25	Community Mobilizer
3.	Mohanto Momin	Male	Project Officer	1 st Year BA.	22	Community Mobilizer
4.	Bensen Sangma	Male	Project Officer	12 th Class.	21	Wildlife related surveys and tracks.
5.	Lambu Sangma	Male	Project Assistant	9 th Class.	31	Campus Help
6.	Nimesh Ved	Male	Team Leader	B.Com	29	Coordinator

1. Nova Sangma

Nova is responsible for Samrakshan's activities in Gongrot and Halwa Atong *Aking*s. She also interacts with the forest department personnel informing them about the wildlife scenario in the *Aking*s. Her keen interest in birding has led to her working towards a bird list of the area.

2. Idalisha Marak.

Idalisha oversees Samrakshan Trust's community mobilisation work in Ampangre and Alokpong *Aking*s. Also plays a major role in regular interactions with various government authorities, line departments and agencies such as banks that play an important role in the development of community institutions.

3. Mohanto Momin.

Mohanto works on community mobilisation at Panda, the *Aking* Samrakshan Trust has recently begun its intervention at. His sincerity in approach and concern for the community has led to Samrakshan making an effective start in the *Aking*.

4. Bensen Sangma.

Bensen hails from Gongrot *Aking*, his keen interest and intricate knowledge of wildlife and forest issues had led to his being a part of the Samrakshan team. He conducts wildlife related surveys and guides Samrakshan members on trails in the forested areas.

5. Lambu Sangma

Lambu is the live wire on Samrakshan's campus in Baghmara. He helps with the overall administration and maintenance of the campus and local day-to-day activities.

6. Nimesh Ved

Nimesh was based at Samrakshan's Madhya Pradesh field office since 2002, involved with the education project as well as an applied research project on a local hunting tribe. Prior to that he worked in a bank but preferred to shift jobs to the conservation sector. He brings to the organisation his experience of the corporate sector. He is responsible for the day-to-day conduct of the Baghmara field office. This includes planning the future course of action and interacting with various stakeholders on a regular basis. He also helps with oversight on social development issues and synthesis of conservation dimensions into social development activities.
