

KUNO INITIATIVE : AN UPDATE (III)

Samrakshan Trust, August 2001

Here is the third in the series of updates we have been posting on the lion reintroduction project, Kuno sanctuary:

Relocation of Villages - Current Status

On the front of relocation and rehabilitation of villages, 22 of the total of 26 villages have moved out of the sanctuary so far. Of these 18 have been allotted land, and have begun cultivation at the new site. They have also received installments of cash for house construction. Other rehabilitation benefits are likely to be provided to them over the next couple of years.

Four villages have moved out without official sanction, and have not yet started getting any rehabilitation benefits. The primary reason for shifting out early is security problems faced inside the sanctuary due to their relative isolation.

Drinking water, Irrigation and Watershed development

Fortunately, this year the monsoon has been very good. We were very apprehensive, because if the rains had failed this year also (as they had for the past 2 years) the project ran a very real risk of being derailed. The water harvesting structures built by the relocated people, as well as those built by the forest department are showing good results, and we hope that these structures will be an insurance against future rain failure.

The Samrakshan field team had worked intensively with the displaced villages to mobilize them for building these structures, as part of a package of measures for soil and water conservation. We had also assisted the forest department in the choice of design and location of their structures, through an NRM expert that we had arranged through Action Aid Bhopal. This expert also helped us to go in for detailed village wise watershed planning, and we are now in the process of getting these plans implemented (through the forest department for the high-cost structures, and through village mobilization and shramdaan for the smaller structures).

Community Mobilization

Further, in 4 villages, the people have come together formally to form village development societies (or samitis) that will serve as a forum for community-based decision making on all crucial issues of concern to the village. In most other villages, loose groupings have already been formed, and we are in the process of mobilizing the community into giving a formal shape to these groupings. We have tried to maximize participation by women and tribals in these samitis, while also taking care to ensure that there is fair representation of all power groups within the village in these samitis. The samitis have started meeting regularly, and among other issues, have taken up the following type of cases:

- In Ahirwani, the samiti oversaw the construction of 10 small loose-stone check dams on the Ahirwani nallah
- The Ahirwani samiti also decided to support a literate adivasi from their own village with contributions of food grains, in return for education of their children in an informal school run by him.
- In Khallai and Paira Kushwaha, the samiti mobilized the village to take up the issue of non-payment of interest on house construction grant by the Chambal Regional Grameen Bank, where they have their accounts.
- In Taparpura, the samiti helped to compile a list of families where there had been a delay in receipt of further installments of the house construction grant from the forest department. It also raised the village's concern for a school to be set up for their children.

- In villages like Jakhoda, Meghpura, Chhoti Khajuri, Paira Adivasi and Khera, the loose groups of community representatives have come together to raise issues like wage payment for government works, need for schools, need for watershed activities, poor quality of agricultural land allotted to some families and so on.

Thus, by all accounts, the intervention is well on its way to enhancing community participation in decision making, and identification and capacity-building of individuals with leadership qualities from within the displaced community.

Quality of Agricultural Land

Another major issue on which there has been progress pertains to families who had got poor quality of agricultural land plots. Following a visit to the field by a team of senior state and central government forest officials in May 2001, an additional amount of Rs. 10 lakhs has been sanctioned to the PA management from the Centre. This amount would be used for another round of deep ploughing by bulldozers for identified plots, to remove surface and sub-surface stones. It has also been committed that if any families are left that still have poor quality of land after this process, they would be given alternative land. This would also be facilitated by the fact that the MP forest department's proposal for de-notification of an additional 3 compartments of forest land (1,483 hectares) has been cleared by the Ministry of Environment & Forests.

Progress in the overall Lion Project

There has also been significant progress with regard to restocking the prey base in the sanctuary. 3 Neelgai (2 females and 1 male) have been captured from the ravines of Chambal and released in the sanctuary. This was a joint operation of the Wildlife Institute of India and the MP forest department. The animals are being monitored in Kuno and this is a precursor to a much larger effort, to improve the prey base at Kuno for the lions. The WII is also working on placing a team of researchers in the sanctuary, who would monitor various ecological parameters on a regular basis. Meanwhile the PA management has already initiated monitoring activities in the sanctuary. The monitoring work has been greatly facilitated by aid given by the Wildlife Trust of India to Kuno. WTI has donated 30 bicycles and watches, using which forest guards carry out fortnightly counts in the sanctuary. As mentioned in one of our previous updates, Wildlife Institute of India had earlier trained the field staff of Kuno for this purpose.

Meeting of Central Govt. Committee

Of late, the lion project has been receiving much needed attention from the MoEF as well. On 3rd May 2001, the first meeting of the central committee formed to oversee the lion reintroduction project was convened. Minutes of this meeting are not available with us as yet. Later in the same month, a team comprising of the forest secretary - Government of India, Director - Project Tiger, and the Chief Wildlife Warden of MP visited the sanctuary and the village rehabilitation site. The team met the PA management as well as relocated villagers, and gave a number of assurances for action regarding immediate problems like staffing, and funds for land development and irrigation.

We hope that the programme will continue to command increasing attention on part of various authorities. We will continue to post regular progress reports on this subject. We would welcome queries for more details about the project and Samrakshans work.

Arpan Sharma
Trustee
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