



Report on Wildlife Week Celebrations - 2007



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Introduction:

Samrakshan Trust has been working in Rongara block of South Garo Hills since 2004 with an objective to conserve the rich biodiversity (floral and faunal) of the region through the active involvement of the local community. An important component of the work has been to foster strong community based institutions that serve as a platform for judicious landuse planning which on the one hand ensures that the livelihood and income needs of the people are met and on the other protects the forests and the rich biodiversity they harbour. The team strength is seventeen and is divided into three programmatic areas – Environment Awareness, Wildlife Monitoring and Livelihood Support.

In an effort to create greater awareness and pride within the community towards the rare flora and fauna that are found in the Garo Hills and the need to protect these, we have been implementing several environmental awareness programmes for the community which includes screenings of wildlife films, sensitizing school children on the need to protect the environment, celebrating World Environment Day and Wildlife Week among others.

This year as well Wildlife Week was celebrated with great enthusiasm, and separate programmes were organized for children and elders from across six Aking¹. The programme at the Aking level was held between October 1st and 4th. We began on October 1st with Rewak Aking, followed by Panda on October 2nd, Halwa Atong on October 3rd and ended with Bulawe on October 4th. A small programme was also organized in Baghmara town on October 9th, representatives of all government departments at the district level, non-government organizations and some schoolteachers from Baghmara town were invited. The Project Director, District Rural Development Agency and a few other invitees participated in the meet.

Planning for the event:

A lot of planning and preparation went into ensuring that the programme would go off without any hitch. As shared above separate programmes were planned for children and for elders. This meant that letters had to be sent well in advance to all the school headmasters in each Aking, as also to the School Committee informing them of the date, time and venue of the event. This was followed up by meetings with the concerned teachers as also with the School Committee representatives and the Aking Nokma (headman). The programme for the children was held from 9:30 AM to 12:30 PM. Four schools were selected as the main venue for the programme, Rewak Government Lower Primary School for all the primary Schools from Rewak Aking, Panda Chikasin Government Lower Primary School for all primary schools from Panda Aking, Halwa Atong Government Lower Primary School for the primary schools from Halwa Atong, Gongrot and Halwa Ambeng Aking, Bulawe Government Lower Primary School for Naweram EGS, Rongru Asim Government Lower Primary School and Bulawe Government Lower Primary School students.

Similarly for the programme with the elders, team members met with all the Self Help Groups (SHG) in the Aking as also with non-SHG members informing them of the time and venue, this in all cases being a large field or a playground that could accommodate around 300 people, the time being between 5:00 PM and 7:00 PM. The programme for the elders was held in the same Aking where the programme for the school children was held in the morning. One SHG was asked to take the responsibility of organizing tea and other refreshments for all participants both in the morning as well as in the evening.

All purchases for the event including crayons for the children and all other necessary stationary was made a week in advance, and all the material required for refreshments were also bought in advance after estimating how many participants were expected in each Aking. Upon request the District Administration provided their LCD projector.

¹ An Aking is a unit of land under the ownership of the community. Predominantly inhabited by members of the same clan, an Aking can comprise several habitations and vary in size from 3-4 sq. km. to 30 sq. km.

In addition to the programmes at the Aking level and in Baghmara town, it was also thought efforts need to be made to reach out to a larger community across Garo Hills. For this a poster both in Garo and English was designed. 1000 copies of the poster were printed and plans drawn up to paste these across the three districts of Garo Hills – South Garo Hills, West Garo Hills and East Garo Hills. A list of public places across the three districts was drawn up and plans made to ensure that the posters were up before Wildlife Week commenced. The support of NERCORMP² was solicited to put up the posters in all their project villages in West Garo Hills. Over 800 posters were pasted across the three districts before October 1st.

Celebrating Wildlife Week

The programme for the children would start with a small introduction by one of the team members on why we were conducting the programme; this was followed by a sketching event. For the event, special pages showcasing four species occurring locally were developed; these were the Asian Elephant, the Hoolock Gibbon, the Bengal Tiger, and the Black Rumped Flameback Woodpecker. Each child received any one of the pages, which had a picture of the animal, a small write-up on it in Garo and an outline for the child to colour. A box of crayons was also provided to each child. It took around half an hour for the children to finish, after which they were shown the sketch of each animal on screen and each point in the write-up was explained to them. This done the children would settle down to watch an animated film – Brother Bear, about a human child who upon killing a Bear is transformed into a Bear himself, and learns to see and understand the world from a Bear's perspective. A small talk about the film and its message preceded the screening. At the end of the programme one of the teachers was invited to speak a few words on the occasion, and most of them spoke animatedly about the need to conserve nature. Around 700 children and their teachers participated in the programme over the four days.



Children holding aloft pictures coloured by them



Film screening at a school

The elders would start gathering at the designated venue by around 5:00 in the evening, and after a brief introduction the programme would begin with a presentation on the data and information gathered by informants appointed from within the community on Elephant presence and movement in their Aking. The information was gathered as part of the Participatory Elephant Monitoring Programme being implemented by Samrakshan Trust across 11 Akings over the past three years. Simple graphs depicting the number of times Elephants had visited the Aking each year between 2005 to 2007, the months in which Elephant presence and activity in the Aking peaked and ebbed, and the number of occasions when the animals had just passed through and the number of times they had caused damage to farms and orchards was shared. It was thought necessary to share this information with the community as they are the primary information providers, and also to convey to them that while Elephants are causing damage they do not do so on all occasions when they are within Aking boundaries, and that if their behaviour was better understood through such exercises in information gathering it would help in minimizing conflict between Humans and Elephants.

² The North East Region Community Resource Management Project (NERCORMP) is a North East Council and IFAD project being implemented in six districts across the North-Eastern Region and West Garo Hills district is one such project district.

The second presentation was one that showcased the landscape and biodiversity of South Garo Hills. Using images taken by team members, and of landscapes and species that are from the region a narrative was woven together on the need to conserve to protect the forests and rich biodiversity of the region.



Presenting information on Elephant Presence



Showcasing the Biodiversity of Garo Hills

The presentations were followed by screening of a short film titled 'Wilderness Nepal', which was on the forests and biodiversity of the Terai region of Nepal. At the end of the programme in each Aking the concerned Nokma was invited to come and speak a few words on the event. Close to 1500 persons, around 1000 elders and 500 children attended the evening programmes in all the four locations.

Programme in Baghmara town

The people of Baghmara town are also closely linked to the forests and rural community of South Garo Hills. The Baghmara Reserve Forest adjoins the town, and the townsfolk also source a lot of natural products such as bamboo and timber from the forests in the community lands. Again most of the staff of all the government departments also reside in Baghmara and decisions on development programmes undertaken by them affect landuse across the region. It is thus thought necessary to engage with the people of Baghmara town and convey to them that they have a crucial role to play in protecting the forests and wildlife of South Garo Hills.

For the programme on October 9th held at the Circuit House in Baghmara, the presentation on the Participatory Elephant Monitoring Programme was modified and further information added on the Garo Hills Elephant Reserve, Elephant behaviour, and the need to factor these into all development planning for the region. Also presented were the findings from a Participatory Wildlife Assessment exercise undertaken by the organization last year. This was followed by a film show and the film Silent Valley – An Indian Rainforest was screened. Though the participation in the programme in Baghmara town was lower than what we would have liked, a beginning was made and the presence of a senior District level official was encouragement enough for a follow-up to be attempted sometime in the near future.

Acknowledgements

The community of Rewak, Panda, Halwa Atong, Halwa Ambeng, Gongrot and Bulawe

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