
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT FOR CONSERVATION AROUND KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK



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Assam is evidently a biodiversity hotspot, boasting of several endemics in flora as well as fauna. With 22.21% of the total land area under forest cover, the state has five national parks, 17 wild life sanctuaries and more than 200 reserve forests. However, the elements of biological diversity are not isolated as islands in themselves. These protected areas for the conservation of the diverse animal and plant species are also nestled near areas of human habitation. The local communities inhabiting the fringe villages around the protected areas remain a key stakeholder in the overarching goal of conservation. Studies show that meaningful engagement with the local communities yield positive results in the protection and management of protected areas. It is this approach which has been sought to be employed under the aegis of UNESCO's World Heritage Biodiversity Project implemented by Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) in association

with the Forest Department in Assam. This article focuses on specific activities undertaken around the Kaziranga National Park.

Background:

Pride of place in the protected area network of the state, and of the country as well, is occupied by Kaziranga National Park. Kaziranga is a name renowned globally for its success in the conservation history of the great Indian one-horned rhinoceros. It also harbours apex carnivores, large herbivores, avifauna wetland values. Kaziranga contains the most important and significant natural habitat for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation. The above mentioned values and criteria helped Kaziranga National Park's inscription on the World Heritage List of the "Convention on the

Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage" in the year 1985. It is only one of the five natural World Heritage Sites in the country.

Kaziranga is spread over civil jurisdictions of Nagaon and Golaghat districts in Assam with Brahmaputra river on the north and Karbi Anglong hills on the south. There are about 74 revenue villages along the southern boundary of the park inhabited by more than 50 thousand people. The people belong to different communities and tribes, the prominent among them are the Assamese, Nepali & Santhals, tribal communities of Karbis, the Misings and the Mikirs. Most people are marginal agriculturists and are in need of more fertile land. Crop depredation by wild animals, particularly elephants, is common. A compensation mechanism exists for the affected people which is provided by the Forest Department and supported by conservation organization like WWF. The local communities are not generally antagonistic towards wild animals. During the monsoon season when floods inundate three-fourths of the area of the park, wild animals take shelter near the villages and homesteads of the local people who do not disturb unless it becomes inevitable. People protect distressed animals and help the forest

department to take mitigation measures. Retaliatory or malafide injury to wild animals is very rare. However there are cases where a few opportunist individuals from the villages have collaborated with poachers coming from outside to locate and poach rhinos for their horn in lieu of monetary benefit.

The national park management has been trying to involve the fringe villages in developmental activities so as to make them stakeholders in conservation. 55 Eco-Development Committees (EDCs) have been constituted among the fringe villages and registered under the Eastern Assam Wildlife Division Forest Development Agency with an objective to build up capacity for sustainable socio-economic development. About 220 SHGs have already been constituted under the EDCs with similar objectives. Further efforts are on to increase the numbers of EDCs/SHGs. There is a huge problem of unemployment among the youth which sometimes lead to frustration and anti-social activities in the absence of alternative opportunities. The perennial problem of floods, coupled with the lack of basic facilities like health care, drinking water, rural roads etc lead to anomy among some local inhabitants who perceive themselves as net losers in the background of the national park attracting

huge tourists and revenue.

UNESCO World Heritage Biodiversity Project

ATREE is implementing a four-year project under the aegis of UNESCO's World Heritage Biodiversity Project with Kaziranga National Park as one of the beneficiary sites. The overall objective is to preserve, protect and promote the profile of the World Heritage Site. The means of achieving the objective is provided through strengthening capacity for effective management, research and monitoring, management and governance, raising the profile and the critical component of engaging with local communities. Effective engagement of local communities requires a multi-pronged approach by involving them in planning such activities, offering incentives, ensuring motivation, providing opportunities for income generation and facilitating their own community-based mechanisms.

In the first instance, it is necessary to gather as much information as possible on the local communities including their socio-economic condition, their dependence on the forest products, human-wildlife conflict, problems & priorities as well as their orientation and views towards the park. The study and analysis of these factors are extremely

important. Here comes the importance of PRA or Participatory Rural Appraisal. PRA methods are useful for gaining a preliminary understanding of the fringe village in a relatively short period—usually between three days to three weeks. PRA is based on interdisciplinary, exploratory studies relying on a high use of community interaction and indigenous knowledge. The approach utilizes semi-structured interviewing techniques with extensive data analysis. PRA can help generate information on the socio-economic and ecological conditions prevailing in the village which are extremely valuable in planning for effective community engagement. During the last couple of years, the project facilitated PRAs to be conducted in select fringe villages in Kaziranga covering eight EDCs. The PRA's were followed up with development of Micro-Plans for the same EDCs. These plan documents will aid the Forest Department in initiating development activities in the villages. The project will also support income generating activities in the form of fishery, piggery, duckery, handicrafts and eco-tourism enterprise by the local communities.

In order to support basic medical facilities in the fringe villages, an ambulance vehicle was provided to the national park for the purpose of

emergency transportation of patients to well-equipped hospitals. Further, medical health camps were also held in all the ranges of the park with access to the local population and frontline forest staff.

As part of community mechanisms for addressing human-wildlife conflict, the project has supported anti-depredation watch-towers in the fringe areas of the park. These are simple concrete structures which help the local communities from warding away elephants from depredation in their crop fields. These also serve as anti-poaching outposts for forest staff as they are located in strategic areas.

A unique scholarship scheme was initiated for students of schools in the fringe villages of the national park. The larger aim was to encourage students in their studies and raise their awareness about the importance of conservation in Kaziranga. Nearly 300 primary school students and about 200 high school students received a scholarship. This scheme has provided a useful platform

for undertaking awareness and nature orientation campaigns not only for the students but also for the teachers and parents.

Conclusion :

Given the large population and limited scale of the project, it would be premature to state that the impact has been significant enough to be characterized with specific indicators like poverty reduction, increase in income level or employment generation. Nevertheless, the initial pilot phase has demonstrated the potential for planned socio-economic interventions and its real impact would crystallize in the forthcoming years. Project activities can at best supplement efforts of the government in general and coordination among the different departments like forest, health, water, agriculture, irrigation, public works, rural development and the likes is essential and need of the hour. Clearly, the desirable approach is engaging the local communities as partners in the conservation process. ●

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