

TRIBUTES

A jungle in mourning: Nepal loses its leading defenders of large mammals

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On 23 September 2006, Dr Tirtha Man Maskey, Mr Narayan Poudel, Mr Mingma Norbu Sherpa and Dr Chandra Prasad Gurung perished along with seven other irreplaceable leaders in conservation in a helicopter crash on the steep slopes below Mt Kangchenjunga, the third highest peak in the world. The team had just departed from Ghunsa village in eastern Nepal after officially handing over the recently created Kangchenjunga Conservation Area—the centerpiece of WWF’s Sacred Himalayan Landscape—to local communities to manage.

I cannot recall any time in recent history when a single nation suffered the loss of so many top conservationists in a single tragic accident. This memorial dwells not on the staggering void created by their deaths but rather highlights the magnitude of their accomplishments as well as their endeavours to save large Asian mammals.

Not long ago I had the good fortune to accompany them in the Terai Arc Landscape in the plains of southern Nepal. This was the spring of 2004. This landscape is the site of an ambitious plan to reconnect 12 parks and reserves through some of the world’s most densely populated areas spanning 950 km in lowland Nepal and continuing through northern India. It has the goal of managing Asia’s megavertebrates, which include the tiger, the Asian elephant and the greater one-horned rhinoceros as a single population linked by dispersal or translocations.

We met in Chitwan National Park to help shoot a segment on rhinoceros translocation for the CBS news show *60 Minutes-II*. After an hour on elephant-back of searching for rhinos, some of our elephants suddenly formed a circle around a female rhinoceros standing defiantly in the tall grass. The driver of one



WWF/ASRSG office, Kathmandu

The late Dr Tirtha Man Maskey

of the domestic elephants positioned himself to allow Dr Tirtha Man Maskey, then director general of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, get a clean shot with a tranquilizer dart.

It was fitting that Dr Maskey be given the honour of darting the rhino as he served as the first warden of



The late Mr Mingma Norbu Sherpa



The late Dr Chandra Prasad Gurung

Chitwan back in 1972 and as director general, had stressed the need to translocate large mammals to re-establish extirpated populations in the Terai reserves. The operation was routine because Nepal's wildlife officials had embarked upon a ground-breaking effort in 1986 to be the first nation to capture, radiocollar,

study, and eventually translocate this species to reserves where they historically occurred but had been poached to extinction more than two centuries ago. By this point in the spring of 2004, more than 150 rhinos had been captured either for research or for translocation to Bardia or Sukla Phanta National Parks in Nepal's western lowlands, without a single mortality during capture.

Also on hand were Dr Chandra Gurung, the country representative of WWF-Nepal, and Mingma Norbu Sherpa, an early protégé of Sir Edmund Hillary and the first Sherpa warden of Mt Everest National Park. For many years Mingma served as WWF's director for the Eastern Himalayas programme, which included Nepal, India, Bhutan and Tibet Autonomous Region.

Chandra and Mingma had garnered international acclaim for their efforts to create the Annapurna Conservation Area, the first large landscape managed by an NGO for the benefit of montane wildlife and mountain peoples. Chandra hailed from a Gurung village several days' walk from Pokhara, on the slopes of Annapurna. He was a local hero, well recognized for his achievements. Mingma joined Chandra in an effort to create a conservation area with an innovative self-financing mechanism that set the stage for a tremendous leap forward promoted under Maskey's tenure as director general: the government of Nepal declared that 50% of all revenue generated by parks be recycled to buffer zones surrounding nature reserves rather than deposited in the national treasury. Overnight, those living around parks had a much larger stake in conservation.

Maskey hailed from Kathmandu, but between his stint as warden of Chitwan and his pioneering dissertation field work on the biology of the gharial, an endangered crocodylian, he was at home in the hot and steamy terai jungle. Mingma and Chandra were two Himalayan mountain men, but together with Maskey, they were the driving force behind the creation of the Terai Arc Landscape. While Chandra and Mingma helped secure funds and bring global attention to this landscape, Maskey was their government ally, often working behind the scenes to leap bureaucratic hurdles. Their efforts culminated when the Nepal government made the Terai Arc Landscape part of its five-year plan and recently even created an office in the Department of Forests dedicated to implementing the Terai Arc Landscape plan.

Mr Narayan Poudel had half a year ago been promoted to director general of the Department of Na-

tional Parks and Wildlife Conservation, taking over the helm from Dr Maskey. He did his bachelor's and master's degrees in botany in the USA. He was one of the key persons in establishing Makalu-Barun National Park. Recently he was faced with the difficult task of restoring security in Nepal's rhino areas after a spate of poaching caused by the political unrest of the last two years had reduced the number of rhino by about one-third.

None of these four were men of modest dreams. They envisioned vast landscapes in the eastern Himalayas region where corridors connected protected areas, spanned elevational gradients and transcended national boundaries. Above all, they also envisioned involving local people from the outset in planning these conservation areas, and in entrusting them with stewardship of managing these landscapes. Their vision was to fully integrate community-based conservation with contemporary conservation biology.

They were doers who served as the best role models for aspiring Asian conservationists. They could grasp new ideas and adapt them to local realities; they were willing to take risks and be on the leading edge

of conservation techniques. They cut through bureaucracy and red tape, ensured that field efforts were based on the best science, championed the causes of those living near parks, and charmed international donors into supporting their field programmes. They impressed everyone with their field experience and their professionalism.

Maskey used to say, 'If you are a friend of wild-life you are my friend.' He applied this to everyone, no matter what their country of origin. At the time of his death he was the Co-Chair of the Asian Rhino Specialist Group, thus assuming a leadership role to ensure the future of Asia's rhinos. Mingma and Chandra were committed to seeing the blueprints and foundations of the Sacred Himalayan Landscape and the Terai Arc Landscape, two big landscapes they championed nationally, regionally and globally to become a reality, and the successes achieved there are testament to their leadership.

Conservation and the large mammals of Nepal have lost four of their greatest friends and defenders. The world should honour them by picking up where they left off and completing their noble mission.

Andries Marthinus (Clem) Coetsee

13 May 1939–4 September 2006

Russell Taylor

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A world without Clem is hard to believe. We all thought Clem would endure forever and that he was without time. This modest, unassuming man was unsparing of himself for the wildlife he loved and served so well. His commitment, dedication and compassion for both his fellowmen (especially children!) and the wildlife he worked so hard for are immeasurable.

Clem's outstanding and exemplary wildlife conservation career in the Zimbabwe Game Department and later the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management, began with Tsetse Control Operations in the early 1960s, in the Copper Queen and Gokwe areas of the Sebungwe District, south of the then newly filling Lake Kariba. With his brother Paul and others, he was responsible for large-scale game

control activities, and together these two men become legendary for their bushcraft and hunting skills.

Clem then moved closer to the Zambezi Valley, firstly to Mana Pools, his favourite and probably most loved station, and then in the early 1970s on to Matusiadonha Game Reserve, as it was then known. He was also intimately involved at this time with the early capture and translocation of black rhinos from newly settled areas in Binga and Gokwe. He continued with the early work of developing Matusadona National Park, which Rob Francis had so ably commenced at the end of the 1960s.

The next posting Clem took up was that of running the Game Management Unit at Umtshibi in Hwange National Park. Here he was responsible for