

Partnership key to wildlife conservation efforts in Assam

WHENEVER we think about a special wild animal of Assam, the greater one-horned rhino often comes to the mind first as the rhino reflects the epitome of conservation movement in Assam since the 19th century. Similarly, when we talk about an area of the state's wilderness, obviously Kaziranga National Park (KNP) comes to mind promptly because of its sheer diversity of wildlife. What is important is that wildlife sighting in Kaziranga is probably the best not only in Assam, but also in the entire country. Conservation is a shared responsibility of the government and people, but government has to take the lead so that people could assist.

Conservation efforts often get a shot in the arm when partnership among government, non-government organisations (NGOs), local institutions working in the field of conservation and local communities are established to mutually assist each other to achieve better conservation outputs. If the government can appreciate the voice and wishes of the people in terms of better conservation efforts, and the civil society, people in general, could realise some of the limitations of the government's systems, it will help facilitate conducive partnership among government agencies, civil societies and local communities which could further make conservation efforts more meaningful and beneficial for wildlife and forests.

In order to strengthen conservation of wildlife in Assam, Aaranyak, the NGO that I founded with some of my colleagues in the year 1989, has tried to complement the efforts of the government of Assam by generating financial resources to sponsor wireless communication equipment for Kaziranga, in association with the UK-based, David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation, since 2003, and so far sponsored over 250 wireless handsets, about 50 wireless base stations, 45 solar panels and 650



BIBHAB KUMAR TALUKDAR

Assam government has decided to deploy over 300 Assam Forest Protection Force staff to KNP to strengthen protection and vigil to check further rhino poaching

raincoats for frontline staff.

Further, to strengthen patrol and vigil in river Brahmaputra in northern part of Kaziranga, Aaranyak and David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation sponsored two anti-poaching floating boat camps. It may also be mentioned that the Rhino Foundation for North East India and WWF-India also have provided few boats to Kaziranga in the past few years to enhance vigil along the Park's river front. It is imperative that these boats, sponsored by various partners, are fully utilised and run by KNP authorities so as to effectively cover vigil along the Brahmaputra river front to the park's north. Organisations like ATREE have also extended support towards infrastructure development in the two World Heritage Sites of Assam, KNP and Manas National Park.

There are many other civil society organisations in Assam carrying out grassroots conservation awareness in many parts of the



Aaranyak

A file photo of an anti-poaching boat patrolling the riverine areas along Kaziranga National Park.

state, which in turn has increased the level of conservation awareness to a great extent leading to increased alertness among general public with regard to conservation of wildlife and its habitat. Building good community relationship by government agencies engaged in conservation of wildlife is crucial and helpful towards successful conservation efforts. In order to achieve such organising, frequent get-togethers among partners is essential to discuss issues of common interest and garner much needed community support in the field of conservation.

As challenges posed by rhino poachers in Assam have become alarming since last year, with as many as 12 rhinos being poached in the state in first two months of 2013, government agencies should really re-think on the strategy to further strengthen local community engagement in conservation to craft the second line of defence around national parks and wildlife sanctuaries supportive to

conservation efforts of the government agencies.

Assam government should start recruiting forest staffs working as frontline staffs in national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and other forests areas and thereby optimise field staff density, rather than just increasing higher officers' density in the capital city. Maintaining good staff relationship by the concerned government agency is crucial to win the support and active engagement of the frontline staffs. Moreover, ensuring that the frontline staffs get their salaries and other support on time is even more critical. What is needed is to ensure intensive vigil by every forest official, including the frontline staffs working in protected areas on ground, as many times as possible to unearth illegal activities within and outside the protected areas to check further assault on rhinos and other species of wildlife.

If government agencies engaged in protection and conservation of wildlife in and around protected areas of

the state could check further killing of wildlife and nab as many poachers involved in wildlife crime, arrest and put them behind bars, community support and faith in government agencies could be restored which is very much needed to rebuild and re-strengthen government-public relationship. To win the support of people in general, government should also fix responsibilities and hold government officials accountable whenever the results are negative and detrimental to overall wildlife conservation ethos. A culture of accountability must be developed at all levels as priority to strengthen overall administration.

It is essential to conduct security risk and vulnerability assessment in rhino-bearing areas of Assam at least once every quarter. Garnering support of local communities to identify suspected poachers hiding in nearby villages is important and again, a good partnership among government agencies, civil society organisations and local com-

munities could be the answer. Vulnerable areas within and outside protected areas which are often targeted by poachers, need to be identified. Vulnerabilities can be easily identified and resolved given the commitment and resources and taking the local communities into confidence.

It is good to note that the state government has decided to deploy over 300 Assam Forest Protection Force staff to Kaziranga to strengthen protection and vigil to check further rhino poaching with newly procured SLR guns. These newly posted scouts of the Assam Forest Protection Force need to maintain higher standard of alertness and reaction to combat armed incursion and should show their efficacy to check further attempts of poachers to kill rhinos.

If this so-called elite forest battalion can't assist and lead the existing forest guards and foresters, working as frontline staffs in rhino-bearing areas, to check further poaching, and if poachers continue to have their way, it would put the future of the precious rhinos at stake not only in Kaziranga, but also in other rhino-bearing areas. It is encouraging to hear that two poachers were shot dead in eastern range of KNP few days back in an encounter which could act as a further deterrent in checking rhino poaching. While government is only trying to strengthen protection regime in Kaziranga with an aim to reduce poaching, it could make groups of poachers and wildlife smugglers to shift their eye to other rhino bearing areas in Assam. As such, government should equally give emphasis to strengthen protection shield in other wildlife areas of the state with a short-term crisis management plan, followed by a long-term vision.

The writer is a conservation biologist working in the field of wildlife conservation since 1989. He can be contacted at bibhab@aaranyak.org