

Birds and People: The New Relationship

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In our last article, we described traditional conservation of birds as continuing into present times. In this follow up article, we shall talk some more initiatives taken by communities to conserve bird habitats and populations. Though we focus here only on efforts specific to birds, it should be noted that the more general ecosystem conservation efforts of communities also help in bird conservation.

Where, how and what do people protect?

Many bird habitats and populations have recently been converted to Community Conserved Areas (CCAs). Wetlands are more common amongst them. At the edge of Chilka lagoon, an IBA in Orissa, for instance, the village Mangalajodi witnessed a remarkable turn-around in the last decade or so. From a settlement, where nearly everyone hunted birds, to one where



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Birds flock to the Mangalajodi wetland, unmindful of villagers carrying about their business

Communities also conserve

everyone zealously protects them has been a remarkable journey (*Hornbill* Jan-Mar, 2006). In the winter of 2005-2006, several hundred thousand waterbirds and waders were noticed in the wetland around Mangalajodi. Two ex-hunters, who rowed us through the marshes, proudly gave us names of birds in English and Oriya, and explained their motivation for protecting the birds. A part of it was ethical (they had earlier sworn by the Chilka lake deity, Maa Kalijai, not to harm nature), a part of it was pride in being able to harbour such a spectacular assemblage of birds, and a part was the hope that visiting bird watchers would bring some income their way. Mangalajodi's villagers, Wild Orissa – an NGO, and the Orissa Forest Department are now trying to see if this initiative could spread to neighbouring villages, to help spread a ring of protection around Chilika.

Though, perhaps not as remarkable in terms

of bird numbers and diversity, there are a number of other waterbodies that have come under recent protection by communities. In 1994, villagers of Udupuria (near Kota in Rajasthan) noticed the influx of Painted Storks in their two-hectare wetland. Subsequently, some bird watchers noticed the congregation, and also that water hyacinth was beginning to threaten the wetland. They convinced the villagers to take action on this. Through the participation of the entire settlement and a local NGO, Hadothi Naturalist's Society, the water hyacinth was cleared and villagers started actively protecting the storks. Some 250 storks were counted in later years, with several dozen able to nest. Villagers have also done some plantation along the wetland, to provide greater nesting sites. Other waterbirds have also benefited, including Black-necked Storks, several species of ducks, waders and peafowl.

At Kallagadu village, Karnataka, people experienced a strange phenomenon in 1999. Hundreds of Painted Storks arrived and started building nests on privately owned as well as government owned tamarind trees. A local farmer, who was aware about the threatened status of migratory birds, called upon the villagers to do their best to protect these unusual guests. Subsequently an NGO, Wildlife Nature Club, also got involved. Many villagers have even abandoned the sale of tamarind from the nesting trees, and have persuaded the government to do the same for the trees owned by it.

There are initiatives relating to the habitats of threatened terrestrial birds. Amongst the most interesting is that of Khonoma village in Nagaland. In 1998, this picturesque village decided to stop all hunting (previously rampant) and to declare a part of their territory as the Khonoma Nature Conservation and Tragopan Sanctuary. This extends over about 2,000 ha, but a much larger surrounding area is also protected from all hunting, and from destructive resource uses. The Angami tribals of this village are now discussing with their counterparts in neighbouring villages to see if the CCA could be extended to cover the whole of the Dzuku valley, an enormously critical area for several endemic and threatened species.



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Forests in the Khonoma Nature Conservation and Tragopan Sanctuary, Nagaland, protected by villagers

Khonoma is not alone in its efforts. Several dozen other Naga villages have banned hunting or declared forest/wildlife reserves, though most of them are more general habitat conservation initiatives not necessarily aimed at specific bird species or populations. One other that is specifically for birds is Ghoshu Bird Reserve, declared by Gikhiye village in Zunehboto district. This preceded Khonoma by several years. Villagers explained that they had been witnessing here a unique phenomenon of thousands of birds congregating at a salt lick at the foot of the forest, and had decided to stop the earlier practice of hunting in the area.

There is also revival of traditional practices that may have died down. For instance, in Sangti Valley of Arunachal Pradesh, the age-old tolerance of villagers towards Black-necked Cranes was being affected by new practices, such as excessive use of pesticides and fertilizers and noisy picnics. In 1991, after ornithologist Dr. Prakash Gole came upon this site conservation was resumed with the help of the villagers, a local school teacher, the army and the Forest Department.

Emerging threats

Some of the threats that we spoke of in the previous article, relevant to traditional bird conservation, are also faced by the new initiatives. There is at times conflict with neighbouring villages or hunting communities, who come to hunt birds, steal eggs, or carry out unsustainable commercial fishing. A number of bird CCAs are affected by the increasing use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers in agriculture and effluents from industries. Many are threatened by insensitive 'development' activities imposed by the government or by private corporations, including mining, dams, and industries. Tourism, unless well regulated from the start, could cause disturbance.

What can be done?

As in the case of traditional bird conservation, new initiatives also need urgent attention if they are to continue to flourish. They need more documentation, which includes their wildlife and socio-economic values. Local people,

especially the youth, could do with some inputs of modern science to supplement the traditional knowledge their elders can give them. Awareness needs to be raised in adjacent urban areas (e.g. in Bhubaneswar relating to Mangalajodi), so that town dwellers can appreciate the efforts of communities and extend a supporting hand through sensitive community-based bird tourism. Facilitating activities by NGOs and officials need to be encouraged.



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Local participation has benefited a number of bird species like the Painted Stork at Udpuria village

Finally, all these initiatives need appropriate legal backing, which could safeguard them against external threats. This is unfortunately not available in the Wildlife Act 2003, since the category of 'Community Reserve' applies only to private or community lands, whereas most CCAs are on government land (other than those in states like Nagaland). The use of the Village Forest category in the Forest Act 1927, the environmentally sensitive areas designation under the Environment Protection Act, Biodiversity Heritage Sites under the Biological Diversity Act (though this is yet to be defined), and others under various state laws, needs to be explored.

Most of all, the country's conservation organizations need to recognize that community conservation of birds and bird habitats is a growing phenomenon, and we must concentrate on it as much as we focus on government managed protected areas.