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NGOs as a Major Contribution towards Environmental Protection: A Special Reference to the Kaziranga National Park of Assam

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Abstract

The Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs) came up in the front of a remarkable movement by the end of the Second World War But, it experienced a massive growth and captured a position of remarkable sector in the world only during the middle of 1970s. Since then they are playing an increasing role in influencing conservation and environmental protection and the wildlife and biodiversity conservation, NGOs play a major role all over the world by initiating field projects and practical application of conservation philosophy. In India as well as in Assam, the NGOs and community based organisations have been using a wide variety of means to raise awareness about the protection and conservation of environment. Hence an attempt has been made to briefly identify the NGOs working for environment and discuss its involvement in Assam with special reference to the Kaziranga National Park of Assam.

Keywords: Non-government organisations (NGOs), environment, wildlife, Kaziranga national park, Assam

1. Introduction

The Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) is defined as the privately owned organizations which undertake various activities to help the suffering people, to fight for and promote the interests of the poor and to protect the environment. Over all, it can be said that NGO provides basic social services and undertake other activities for the community development as a whole. NGOs, now a day plays a major role in various fields. With respect to the environmental protection and the wildlife and biodiversity conservation, NGOs plays a major role all over the world. Considering the present day dilemma of environmental degradation and destruction of wildlife and their habitats, various NGOs have initiated numbers of protection, conservation and awareness programs. NGOs also started initiating field projects and concentrated on the practical application of conservation philosophy.

The socio-ecological NGOs, which were mainly founded at the time of the preparations for the Rio Conference, have entered as actors of special importance and interest. These NGOs have 'discovered' the local people issue as a new field of action for themselves. Consequently, they engaged in to a number of projects in the protected areas as well as into political lobbying for the interests of their inhabitants (Roper, 2000) [4]. At the local level NGOs are in a good position to keep track of critical issues on a continuing basis and, in many cases; NGOs complement the work of government institutions and cooperate with law enforcement authorities.

In India as well as in Assam, the NGOs working for the cause of the environment and wildlife came into being since 1970s.

There are numerous NGOs and community-based organizations using a wide variety of means to raise awareness. At present, in Assam, various NGOs are working in the different parts of the State in the field of environment and biodiversity. But, during the 1980s and 1990s, a large number of NGOs dealing specially with the environment and the wildlife has emerged in the State and are still actively involved in the field of conservation, Nature's Beckon (1982), Aaranyak Nature Club (1989), WWF-NE Region (1997) etc. It is seen that these NGOs are increasingly contributing efforts towards sustainable development through participation, monitoring and by conducting various researches (related to wildlife), advocacy, framing and implementing projects as well as cooperation and networking with other national and international NGOs and government departments. Some of these NGOs at the same time work on environment and development, recognizing that environmental problems are rooted in our economic and social systems.

1.1. Profile of the Study Area

In present days, many of the greenery and wilderness of Assam which provides an ideal habitat for a wide variety of species are endangered and their habitats are limited to small areas within the state of Assam-most notably Kaziranga National Park (KNP). KNP is renowned as one of the finest and most picturesque wildlife refuges in Southern Asia which is home to the world's largest population of Indian One Horned Rhinoceros.

Kaziranga National park is situated in middle Assam; it is having boundaries with the districts of Golaghat, Nogaon, Sonitpur and Karbi Anglong. The park is of rough oval shape, approximately 50 km along the south bank of the Brahmaputra River and 16 km wide at its broadest point. It lies on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra. Karbi Anglong Hills lies to the south of Kaziranga National Park (KNP). The 54 km length of the National Highway (NH-37) runs parallel on the southern boundary of KNP between Bokaghat to Ghorakati range divides the landscape between the low-lying grasslands in the North and the elevated Karbi Anglong hills to the south. Its southern boundary follows for the most part of the river Mora Diphlu that runs parallel to NH 37. The two other rivers, Diphlu and Bhengraj flow through it and a number of small streams originating in the Karbi Anglong hills drains into these rivers and beels in the park. On the three sides of the Park there is human settlements and tea plantations (at least 4 tea gardens), the fourth side being the river Brahmaputra. The park covers 430 sq km and there are proposals to add an area of 454.50 sq km by including the Brahmaputra River to the North, and part of the Mikir Hills to the south.

Situated against the beautiful backdrop of the forest covered karbi Anglong hills, Kaziranga National park occupies the attraction of masses. The terrain of the park consists of a vast stretch of coarse, sheer forest, tall elephant grass, marsh land and dense tropical forest. Comparatively higher grounds of KNP are occupied by the tree forest along the central and the eastern portion of the park. The main species are Bombax Ceiba, Albizzia procera, Dillenia pentagyna, jujuba etc. The $\frac{2}{3}$ rd of the KNP is covered by grassland consisting of both grass and reeds.

KNP supports more than 35 species of mammals. It is a home to about 60% of the world population of the Indian One-Horned Rhino which is the largest single population (more than 1500) in the world. Besides Rhino, the park is also known for the tiger. The park has the highest density of tigers in the country. The park provides the favorable natural shelter to this species of tigers and has resulted in the remarkable increment of its population. In 1972 there were 29 tigers. In 1995, it increased to 72 tigers. Other than these the major wild attractions include the Asiatic Buffalo and the eastern swamp deer, elephants, Hog Deer, Sloth Bears, Jungle Cats, Otter, wild Boar etc.

The KNP is a birding paradise. More than 400 bird species (terrestrial and water fowl) including a good diversity of raptors have been documented in the park, some are Oriental Honey Buzzard, and Black shouldered Kites, Griffon etc. Numerous water bodies constitute rich reservoir of food and thousands Migratory birds.

1.2. Relevance of the Study

KNP of Assam is one of the most precious natural resources, as it holds not only the beautiful scenic sites, recreational and valuable biodiversity but also provides certain other use values and non-use values to the people. Such recreational sites attract huge number of tourists and thus turn out to be a source of income to the Government and also generate lots of direct and indirect benefits and income of the local people too. But, such type or resources are nowadays facing severe problems and challenges from the developmental activities. The KNP is facing various challenges like the poaching, illegal grazing, and threat from the upstream tea garden and industries and also from the stone quarry in the hill side. KNP being the government managed Park, for its protection

government has been undertaking various remarkable plans and policies from time to time. As a supplement to governmental effort, the NGOs from all over the world have always been ready with all their helping hands towards the conservation and protection of the area. So, it is important to study the working of NGOs and their extent of involvement in the conservation activities of KNP.

2. Objectives

- i). To find out the NGOs involved in the protection and conservation of KNP of Assam.
- ii). To Study the activities undertaken by the NGOs for the protection of the environment and wildlife with reference to KNP of Assam.

3. Methodology

Data are collected from primary and secondary sources. Descriptive method was used for the study.

4. Discussion and Analysis

4.1. NGOs in KNP

Although the government is doing all the needful things and undertaking various plans and policies for the conservation of such area, it seems to be insufficient in balancing the natural resources and growing need of the ever increasing self-centric population. So, though KNP is the Government managed Park but there are lots of NGOs supporting the government in their task of management either financially or any other kind. They perform various roles to maintain the Park, protecting its wildlife, providing facilities to the tourists, organization of health camps, etc. The local, regional and the national NGOs have emerged as major players and partners in both development and conservation activities in Kaziranga. Even the international NGOs are also there to support the KNP. The range of activities undertaken by these environmental NGOs has broadened in recent years. They work not only for raising the environmental awareness among the local people and act as a pressure group but undertake and initiate various other wide range of activities related to the conservation of the Park and its wildlife, like, environmental monitoring; promoting environmental education, training and capacity-building; initiating and implementing various projects; conducting advocacy work in partnership with the government. Sometime they also get involved in the practical management of conservation areas, and promote community or individual action and campaign for greater accountability on the part of the government and corporate sector. The dedication of these nonprofit organizations for uplifting the honor of the Park and to conserve the endangered species by providing all kinds of medical facilities and post flood management are significant. In brief the task of such NGOs' could be summarized as:

- It serves as watchdogs on the management of government.
- It helps in implementing park design and management.
- It provides information and know-how that enables government to engage citizens and communities.
- It helps in providing financial resources for proper management of the Park and wildlife and also for meeting emergencies like flood.

There are a good number of NGOs both national and international coming forward for helping KNP. Some of the NGOs including the local NGO clubs of KNP are-Environment Investigation Agency (EIA), Aaranyak, Kaziranga Wildlife Society (KWS), World Wildlife Fund (WWF)-India, International Union for Conservation of Nature

(IUCN), Asiatic Society, Green Horn Society, Wildlife Trust of India (WTI), Wild Grass, Kaziranga, The Bombay Natural Historical Society (BNHS), Wildlife Preservation Eastern Region, The Rhino Foundation for Nature, Nature's Beckon of Assam etc. These NGOs highlight various specific environmental and wildlife related issues through research and surveys and based on these, they carry out various campaigns. They also complement the work of the Government i.e. the forest department.

4.2. Role of NGOs

All these nonprofit societies are always linked with the KNP, organizing and performing all kinds of required activities of continuance and uplifting the glory of the Heritage Site. Briefly the overall activities of the NGOs in KNP can be summarized as follows:

- Some NGOs always come forward to solve the insurgency problem. Insurgency became one of the most acute problems of Assam and indirectly affects the peaceful existence of KNP, its wildlife, its management as well as its security.
- It works against all kinds of illegal trade relation with the wildlife. It helps in developing the anti-poaching activities across the KNP.
- It plays a special role in imparting motivation training to the people for the betterment of the denizens. It helps in generating awareness among the people about the wildlife, environment, natural resources of KNP and its usefulness.
- 'Awareness motivation' to the people through various programs, meetings, melas, exhibitions and facility of medical services are also arranged to raise the awareness of governments and the general public with regard to the loss of fauna and flora species.
- From time to time NGOs organizes the workshop, melas, animal husbandry in local villages and also the vaccination programs etc.
- Development of logistic materials to the head offices of the KNP constitutes one of its important roles. It provides wireless phones, motor boats, jeeps etc. During the post flood period NGOs supplies all kind of financial as well as physical support to the whole unit of KNP.
- NGOs are increasingly involved in various policies related works and playing a key role in assisting government agencies to meet the requirements of the Park as well as the environmental management. Sometimes, the NGOs focus on the policy work and thus play a vital role in the identification of the weaknesses and gaps in current policy or legal frameworks.
- Helping the development and promoting the tourism at KNP by increased publicity, advertisement and providing other facilities to the tourists constitute one of the major roles of NGOs.
- Apart from all these, NGOs helps the government in various ways-by analyzing the drawbacks of any kind of havoc and informing the government for the time bound actions and also reporting the government about possible illegal activities. It helps the government in the development of infrastructure and regarding the mode of administration during the flood havoc. In the year 2009, census was conducted by the Assam Forest Department in collaboration with Asian Rhino Specialist Group and with support from Aaranyak, International Rhino Foundation and WWF AREAS program. The census operations drew the attention of a lot of environmentalists and NGO's.

Senior Forest officials were also a part of the census. (Jungle Express, April, 2009).

4.3. Some Important NGOs Associated with KNP

There are various NGOs working for the better conservation of KNP, some of the notable NGOs and their activities are briefly summarized below:

4.3.1. Kaziranga Wildlife Society (KWS): KWS is the local NGO club of Kaziranga formed in the year 1969. KWS could be termed as the oldest NGO in the whole of Northeast India. Its registered office is in Kohora, Golaghat and its working office is in Guwahati. The Society aims at protection, preservation and promotion of wildlife. Other activities includes-publication of periodicals, news bulletins, arrangement of film shows, study circles on wildlife, and creation of all possible facilities for members to carry on systematic study and research on wildlife. The society members assisted in wildlife census held in the National Park from time to time. In order to facilitate the researcher, a reference Library named 'Robin Banerjee Library' was opened at KWS complex in the year 1998. KWS opened a Medicare Fund by collecting small subscriptions through issue of Donation Cards and Coupons. From this fund the society offered medicines for treatment of ailing elephants of Kohora. It has been publishing an annual magazine named "The Rhino." KWS has undertaken several Environmental Education Programs.

4.3.2. Nature's Beckon: Nature's Beckon is an independent environmental activist group of the North East India. Since its inception in the year 1982, the Organization has been doing vital work in the field of conservation of wildlife, awareness creation, environmental education, scientific research and documentation and socioeconomic development of the forest fringe villages. It has persistently worked to prevent poaching of wild animals and to stop the illegal trade of wildlife and their parts.

Nature's Beckon is working for the betterment of KNP in all possible ways. It produces various communication tools like books, booklets, brochures, posters, stickers, audio-visuals, slides, photographs etc., and extensively used those throughout the state to create awareness and hence to prevent poaching of wildlife in Assam. It also organizes various nature camps where amateur activities are taught about jungle trekking, bird watching, species & their habitat conservation. Moreover, personality & communication skills development, group discussion & capacity building trainings are also done in such Nature camps. Nature's Beckon even went to the extent of exposing the involvement of some of the government employees in poaching. Nature's Beckon pointed out that a huge amount of grants and donations are received every year for the welfare of wildlife and maintenance of the KNP. But, almost all of these funds are made to vanish by the corrupt forest officials and the politicians under whose guidance the officials operate (Datta, 2008) [2].

4.3.3 Aaranyak: Aaranyak is termed as one of the leading active wildlife NGOs of Northeast India. Situated in Guwahati, its mission is 'to foster conservation of biodiversity in Northeast India through research, environmental education, capacity building and advocacy for legal and policy reform to usher a new era of ecological security.' Aaranyak actively work in collaboration with other organizations-both national and international. In association with KNP Authorities of Assam Forest Department, Aaranyak has started tiger monitoring in KNP using camera traps in June 2008. This is basically done to generate the required information on tiger

and to initiate appropriate conservation measures to ensure long term conservation and protection of tiger in KNP. The camera trapping equipment and funds was made available by Aaranyak which comes from the UK's David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation and the Rufford Small Grants Foundation (Aaranyak, 2010) ^[1]. Moreover, Aaranyak in association with the David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation and BBC Wildlife Fund has delivered the wireless communication equipment various, solar panels and floating boats to the KNP authorities.

Aaranyak has for the first time in North East India, Aaranyak has started the legal orientation programme for the forest officials working in the Wildlife Sanctuaries and National Parks in Assam in 1996. Since then, it covered almost all the protected areas of Assam. Aaranyak also initiated a leopard research and conservation by launching a New Project on Leopard entitled "Assam Leopard Conservation and Information Facility (ALCIF)" in order to assess the current state of the leopard conservation in Assam and to find out the current distribution range of leopard in Assam both within and outside the protected area network.

Aaranyak took an initiative in achieving the long term protection and survival of wild tigers and their habitat particularly in KNP and other national parks of Assam. It aims to involve the stakeholders in formulating and implementing this program through gathering information, assessment of the best strategies, and identification of the resources necessary to implement a comprehensive conservation and education programme which is designed to promote the participation of local villagers, community organizations, NGOs and government officials. Further, it would help in initiating and maintaining a network of individuals, organizations and institutions interested in contributing towards long term conservation of tigers and their habitat. In addition, it aimed to train a set of young biologists and conservation educators to implement long term research, conservation and education.

Apart from above discussed local NGOs of Northeast India, there are various other national and international organizations which never hesitate to extend their help for the conservation of wildlife and protection of the environment. KNP always get support from such organizations from time to time. Some of those include-*Environment Investigation Agency (EIA)*, *World Wildlife Fund (WWF)-India*, *Wildlife Trust of India (WTI)*, *David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation (DSWF)* etc.

Conclusion

It is true that the dedication of both Government and NGOs towards the proper management and protection of KNP is worth mentioning. But, some drawbacks and inadequacy remains in some aspects. It is to be noted here that in case of such inefficiency or shortfall, NGOs are the prime detector of the fault of the Park management authorities. Hence, the conviction that NGOs and government agencies can and should work together in a complementary relationship has become stronger. Also the reliability of some devoted NGOs, which is acquired from successful campaigns and various welfare tasks, has created strong and growing public support for their new advocacies. While, it is to be noted here that the whole responsibility and the task of protecting and preserving KNP and its wildlife is not only on the Government and the concerned NGOs but, one of the most important things is the involvement of local people and their cooperation and support to the Park authority.

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