

## **Project Update: May 2009**

The project activities have continued smoothly with increasing involvement of local community in rhino conservation. Though there is significant improvement of security scenario, with active participation of local conservation volunteers, we noticed that, some fringe villages on southern side of Manas Biosphere Reserve and buffer areas were still sensitive in terms of exploitation of forest resources. These buffer areas are mainly covered by volunteers of different local NGOs. Secondly, it may be mentioned that these local NGOs and conservation groups around Manas have individually come forward to develop ecotourism as an alternative livelihood and took risks in investing a good amount of rupees in developing infrastructure. Ecotourism is still in initial stage in Manas and it will take more time to get the benefit for the community. Considering the important services provided by the conservation volunteers in forest protection and promoting ecotourism, we added our volunteer service in raising funds through ecotourism for these local groups. In collaboration with a local NGO, about 100,000 Indian rupees (£ 1370) were raised from the nature loving tourists during a critical period to supply rations to 80 conservation volunteers patrolling the eastern range of Manas Biosphere Reserve. We also helped in direct interaction between tourists and local self help groups and NGO members including ex-poachers turned conservation volunteers. This unique method worked in many ways: firstly, encouraging the ground workers who proudly described their project activities, and became more responsible to continue the work; secondly, incorporation of ideas/advice of visitors to improve these local activities. It also helped in evaluating our project. We also campaigned with support of visiting travel writers and tourist consultants through their webpage for promoting ecotourism of local NGOs in Manas and Orang. For the next season, already another group will visit Manas and Orang in December 2009. Now three other local conservation groups are requesting us to promote ecotourism in their area also. We also started working with them to help in their ecotourism but always encourage all local conservation groups to develop the village economy first through agricultural and veterinary based local resources. The development of rural economy involves investing of less money and benefits more people in less time than ecotourism.

Considering the stray of translocated rhino in fringe villages and forests of eastern buffer, anthropogenic disturbances and less focus on the same type of good work of another local NGO, we extended our project activities in buffers also. The ex-poachers cum conservation volunteers of another NGO informed us that earlier rhinos from core area and Bhutan visited the aquatic bodies of the buffer areas. Some of them also revealed that they went for rhino poaching in core zone of Manas even sometimes were hired to kill rhino in Kaziranga National Park. Therefore with support of this group that provided good volunteer services during the stray of translocated rhino and its safe tranquilization, we organized capacity building in community conservation programme. We collaborated with Department of Rural Development and Botany Department, Gauhati University jointly organized a seven days training programme on beekeeping and allied subjects like sericulture. Amongst the total 30 participants from 16 fringe villages of buffer zones, 20 persons selected beekeeping as a preferred item. After the training, bee boxes and one live bee hive captured were distributed amongst the 10 SHGs

formed by beneficiaries. The beneficiaries are from forest dependents and ex-poachers of the area. We also linked them with agencies for marketing the honey.

In this spring season we will take more suitable items on alternative livelihoods like horticultural crops. We will also see if duck can be introduced as last year we dropped the idea at last moment due to severe bird flu in Assam.

We participated in rhino census in Orang National Park. Minimum rhino estimated is 64 which are very promising growth of the population despite the death of about 30 since 2006 due to natural causes and poaching incidents. In fringes of Orang, the riparian side, that is villages in sandbars of Brahmaputra, needs more attention regarding rhino conservation awareness plus to find alternative to cattle farming or improving it so that the grazing pressure can be minimized in the grassland.

Recently some wildlife parts are rescued by the forest departments from the nearby town of Manas and according to one local source some of these items are fresh and persons involved were from villages that was just 6 km from the core of Manas Biosphere Reserve. Further wildlife parts are also recovered from a well known astrologer in Guwahati city. Both incidents indicated that wildlife traders are very much active, superstition to use wildlife parts in astrology continued as well as potential threat to restoring biodiversity of Manas as well as other rhino protected areas.

#### *Some impact of our project is*

The repeated discussion with local NGO members about the anthropogenic pressure like cattle grazing, illegal burning, spread of invasive species in rhino habitat helped in increasing awareness level. We observed some positive initiative of local groups to minimize these pressures gradually.

The school kits helped children to continue their study. This unique work helped in increasing awareness amongst local community and NGOs and they have come forward to provide facilities to education. Secondly to our surprise one conservation volunteers (a hardcore ex-poacher) proudly described before international tourists that last year, his daughter got first position in the class.

Though new in their works, the performances of the Self Help Groups (SHG) are satisfactory. There is increasing interest about alternative livelihoods based on agricultural and veterinary products. When piggeries are most preferred they showed interest in multiple horticultural item like citrus mixed with zinger and related items. The most important point is the gradual change of the behaviour of the poor forest dependents and involve in resource generation and understanding the need of school education for their children.