

Project Update: November 2009

Learning from action ~ Conservation Education with schools at Saiha (Mizoram).

The things we have to learn before we do them, we learn by doing them.

- Aristotle

Samrakshan's Mizoram field base works for conservation education at Saiha, a remote location that houses some of the best remaining rainforests in these parts of our country. Forests, that people share with wild species, across the landscape. We organize regular programmes with school going children as also members of youth associations, village councils (*governing bodies*) and forest department personnel. We seek and work on opportunities that help us dovetail conservation education to regular education and social action in the landscape thus mainstreaming it. Stress is laid to stimulate a programme sensitive to cultural values and mores; both in content and tone. These are documented to allow us to further immerse in the process, get energised for further actions as also to seek feedback.

I take this space to share some of our experiences, moments that have taken us and programme forward.



Left: Scanning field-guides. Right: Inquisitive eyes!

Interactions with students have led to my realizing that when putting across a novel idea, concept or even a name of wild species **comparisons and examples** are of immense utility. While talking of serow (*Naemorhedus sumatraensis*), the state animal, we discussed how its ears resembled that of a domestic donkey while its body was larger than that of a domestic goat.

While discussing Mizoram's wildlife where we talked of National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries, [Important Bird Areas](#), State Bird & State Animal; to put across the concept of state bird and state animal as being species that were relatively more charismatic than other species, we discussed how select political leaders were more charismatic than their counterparts! And

when the focus shifted to National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries, to share with the participants that these were not necessarily “*large areas of forests away from towns and full of wild animals*” we gave examples with photographs; making attempts to restrict the examples to this part of our county so as to enable the participants to relate better. We talked of the [Nokrek National Park](#) (*West Garo Hills, Meghalaya*) that has primarily been created to preserve the citrus species occurring in wild in the landscape and the Pitcher Plant Sanctuary ([South Garo Hills, Meghalaya](#)) that is less than 1 sq km in area and has been created (*primarily*) to protect primarily one plant species – the pitcher plant (*Nepenthis khasiana*).



Left: Watching a film! Right: Questioning faces!

Another issue has been **pace**. We have realized that pace of our “implementing” planned action with students needs to vary depending on factors ranging from the location of school (*a school located in an small and remote village was different from the Don Bosco School at district headquarters*) to the familiarity of the topic to the students ([Palak lake](#) of the myths and folklores was different from the Palak lake that was an Important Bird Area). At Kaisih (*near Phura*) during interactions on “Wildlife in Saiha” during the initial 15 minutes I discovered new levels of lack of interest with one 1 student out of 14 coming up with any kind of responses! We took an unplanned “water break”. As the students returned (*afresh after a playful encounter with water*) we began to discuss issues on their village that they possessed proficiency on and got them talking and involved and then got them one by one to read the slides that we had prepared. They enjoyed a break, the pace slowed down and programme got a boost! On similar lines, during a session focusing on “Hoolock Gibbons” at Donbosco School Saiha I figured that on account of our familiarity with the topic we were rushing away without forging the desired level of connect with the students (*read failing in our efforts*). Changing gears, we slowed down the pace by talking, one after another, in Mizo (*local language*) and English in lieu of only one language and also got on to lengthier interactions on local names of wild species by asking students to come and write the respective names on the board.

Degree by which I have been and continue to be baffled by **simplicity** (*in communications*) far exceeds the concern it generates for the programme! Listening to some views on our programme made me realize that we need to work on becoming simple with respect to our

communications else we were simply not communicating or worse in some cases espousing miscommunication!

I recall using "*herpetofauna*" in the slides meant for middle school children! The connect that the earlier slides had helped establish and interest that the pictures had generated took very little time to vanish. Ponder over it later the very day I wondered why we had not thought of using "frogs - snakes - lizards" earlier. I and my colleagues have perhaps found this task 'of making this simple' to be the most invigorating and difficult task; "wildlife values" is now "wild animals and birds" and so is "fauna and avian fauna" while "memorandum of understanding" has changed to "partnership"!



Left: Filling questionnaires. Right: Amused at it all!

Inculcating **feedback** within our ongoing conservation education and awareness programme is an action the need for which we have ever agreed upon but seldom moved beyond! Seeking feedback by way of feedback forms towards end of sessions is an idea that has never appealed to me, however, select communications in course of our efforts; have led me to understand that the programme is moving ahead on desired lines. A student from Donbosco school met me recently in the market and asked if we would during the coming academic year organize programmes for the class he has just moved to? The smile and affirmative nod on my face had him immediately suggest that unlike the previous year where we only 'talked' of usage of binoculars we should arrange for him and other participants to feel and use them! I loved the excitement in his eyes! The other day I got a call from a teacher at Donbosco who has been closely associated with our programmes saying he had just returned from a visit to a friend where he had seen a pet ~ a baby monkey from the wild. He thought it was the [Hoolock gibbon](#) (*Hoolock hoolock*) that we had discussed (*with help of pictures*) in course of our sessions but was unsure on account of the baby being very young. He asked if I could come with him, take pictures and explore possibilities of the ape getting to its 'actual' home.

I look forward too many such moments. They add spark not just to programme but to life as well and make me look towards an equally exciting tomorrow!