



Conservation Watch - Nepal

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Wetlands bio-diversity deteriorating

The bio-diversity of the internationally important wetlands in the Nepal continues to deteriorate due to lack of efficient incentives by the government toward encouraging sustainable management of wetlands.

A recent study on the ecological status of Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (KTWR) between 2006-2008 said encroachment of wetland area and its surroundings by alien invasive species is posing serious threat to the wildlife reserve.

The Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) conducted the study as part of preparing Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) of KTWR. The Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve is one of the Ramsar sites in the country.



The existence of wetland is seriously challenged by overuse of resources that has led to the degradation and gradual loss of habitat, the study said.

Study identified that the number of water birds in the KTWR has decreased significantly. The number of some magnificent species including Gharial crocodile, gangetic dolphin and wild water buffalo have also been affected due to the habitat loss. Food shortages caused by over fishing and poisoning of waters have led to sharp drop in the number of water birds in the internationally important wetland site.

About 64 percent of wetland birds are considered critically threatened or endangered in KTWR. Some wetland species including Brahminy Kite Haliatus

Indus, Caspian Tern Sterna, Black bellied tern have shown precipitous decline over recent years.

Besides KTWR, the first wetland to be included in the list of internationally important Ramsar sites in 1987, most of the sites of the country are in critical condition.

Bishnu Bhandari, chief technical advisor of wetland management at the World Conservation Union (IUCN) said despite the global importance of the wetlands, these ecosystems are still perceived as wastelands by decision-makers in our country. "Lack of coordinated approach among the line ministries, wetland and bio-diversity conservation is very poor," he said.

Among the eight Ramsar sites of the country, KTWR and Ghodaghodi Lake are facing serious threats. Increased encroachment by the invasive species like *Ipomoea carnus* (water spinach), *Eicchornia crassipes* (water hyacinth species) and negligence by authorities in its sustainable management are creating havoc for the species. Also, the sites are much affected by agricultural runoff and other human activities causing pollution.

In the meantime, concerned over the degradation of wetland bio-diversity, the government has already started to strengthen conservation programs. According to Jhamak Karki, ecologist at Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), a five-year wetland project was launched this year which will work in KTWR and Ghodaghodi. Similarly, government with support from Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN) is already working in Jagdishpur site for the last two years, he said.

Flood devastation hit Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve

Flood devastation triggered by collapse in SaptaKoshi river embankment has put the wildlifes at Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (KTWR) in peril. On 18th August, eastern embankment of SaptaKoshi river burst which has rendered more than 50 thousand Nepalese of Sunsari district homeless.

The reserve spreads over Saptari and Sunsari districts in East Nepal, defined by the eastern and western embankments of Koshi River. The reserve was gazetted in 1976 to preserve habitat for the only remaining population of Wild Buffalo, Arna (*Bubalus arnee*). The 176 sq. km. reserve is Nepal's smallest wildlife reserve. The eastern and western embankments of the SaptaKoshi River define the area. In 1987, Koshi Tappu was declared a Ramsar site, a wetland of international significance.

Due to the heavy flooding inside the reserve, the wetlands and buffer-zone areas of the reserve have been severely hit by the flood. Most of the grassland areas that serve as habitat for dozens of grassland bird species, reptiles and some mammals are totally submerged in the water.

Government of Nepal has been grappling with rescue, relief and rehabilitation of the displaced populace and thus situation of KTWR has not drawn attention comparing the humanitarian crisis. All the staff meant for the conservation of the animals are helping in the rescue operations and are distributing relief materials to the flood victims.

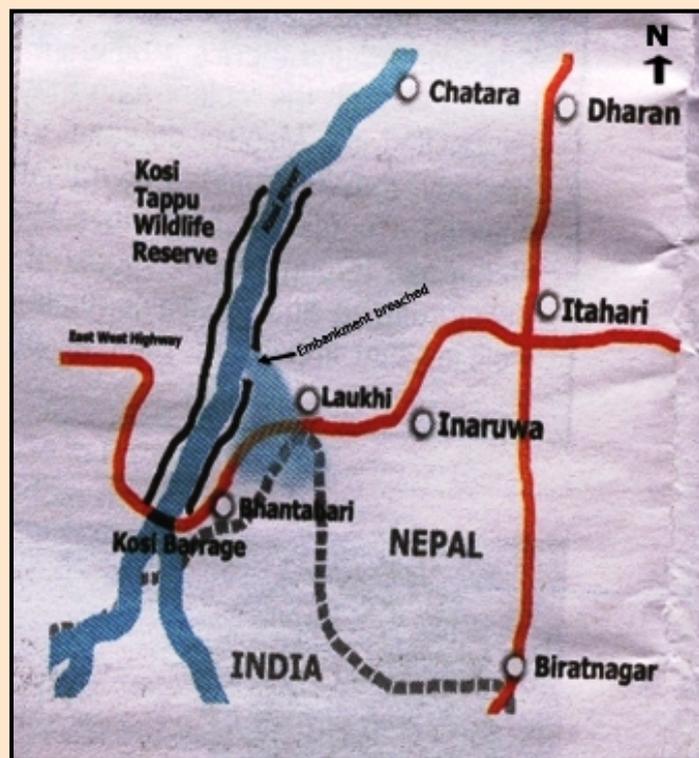
According to the Sher Singh Thaggunna, planning officer of Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), monitoring of the reserve and ascertaining wildlife casualties has not been succeed due to the heavy inundation in reserve area. "It will take a few weeks to come up with the actual data on casualties of the animals inside the reserve," he said. DNPWC has recently provided KTWR with two sets of satellite phones in order to facilitate communication.

A team comprising Park officials and Nepal Army personnel along with four elephants are being mobilized for the rescue of both human and animals in the affected areas.

Koshi Tappu is also renowned for the presence of globally threatened bird species. Around 441 species of birds-many seen no where else in Nepal have been recorded, including duck species, Ibis species, white tailed stonechat, Striated marsh warbler, shore birds, water birds and the endangered swamp partridge and Bengal florican.

The Koshi Barrage is an extremely important resting place for many migratory birds, containing winter and trans-Himalayan migratory species. Since KTWR is a floodplain containing loose soil and most nesting trees are falling down, it might pose threat for the bird species. The future of the breeding colony of the bird species like Egret, Heron, Cormorants and Stork that harbors more than 20,000 breeding birds inside the KTWR is under alarming threat. Flood could also alter the composition of birds during the migrating season.

The reserve is also home to around 20 other animal species such as Hog deer, Wild boar, spotted deer, Blue bull, and Rock Python etc.



Stress on governance in protected areas

Various experts associated with the field of conservation of natural resources and diversities stressed that governance is a key factor for the effective and equitable protected area management systems for the country like Nepal.

Although the governance of the protected areas has relatively been a new concept in the area of conservation, it needed to be recognised as a centrally important factor, they said.

Speaking at a discussion programme jointly organised by the International Union for Conservation of Nature-Nepal (IUCN-Nepal) and World Commission on Protected Area- South Asia (WCPA) on 9th August, Narayan Belbase, country representative of IUCN Nepal, said that Community Conserved Area (CCAs) have gained acceptance in recent years and the confusion on its concept should be dealt with collectively by the conservation community for further successful conservation initiatives.

Belbase said that IUCN was always ready and providing support and technical advice to the Nepal government in achieving national and international protected area management commitments.

Dr. Uday Raj Sharma, vice-chairman of WCPA-South Asia, stressed the need for the recognition and promotion of various protected area governance types in line with national law and applicable international obligations.

"Nepal has earned reputation for progressive community-based conservation in its protected area management practice and the government has also recognised several forms of community-based conservation within its protected area system", said Dr. Annapurna Das, director general of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation.

Nepal has also handed over considerable management authority to the local institutions in conservation area and in buffer zones in and around national parks and wildlife reserves, Dr. Das added. "We have provided full recognition of indigenous peoples' cultural, religious and customary use of biological resources in accordance with traditional cultural practices and conservation goals," he said.

A number of key issues on protected area management practices were raised and discussed including, among others, the opportunities and risks associated with recognising protected area as a CCA, the effectiveness of participatory governance mechanisms and the context-specific nature of equity.

Delivering the concluding remark, Dr. Sharma said that the discussion has provided a good starting point to take stock of the specific situation facing emerging management practices, and urged members of the WCPA's open-ended Protected Area Support Group to identify key concerns with regard to communities, equity, benefit sharing and participation, generate thought-provoking research papers in analysing CCA as a management tool to conservation, and discuss at the national level.

Dr. Sharma further said that the mechanism for the implementation of CCA in Nepal needs to be closely examined by the Protected Area Support Group to provide policy inputs to government agencies. The Group will also advise on the required legislative framework to implement CCA in Nepal, and its findings can provide guidance on protected area management to make appropriate changes in the current legislation.

The meeting provided a unique opportunity for diverse protected area management professionals and stakeholders to share perspectives and seek solutions to the most challenging issues facing protected area management and governance today.

The meeting brought together some of the most knowledgeable and experienced minds in the conservation field to enhance ongoing protected area management efforts and arrive at innovative solutions on management modalities. Although most of the participants were in favour of CCA, however extensive discussion was felt necessary to develop Nepal-specific CCA model.

Staff crunch hits conservation efforts in CNP

Staff crunch in Chitwan National Park (CNP) has seriously affected the conservation efforts to protect endangered one-horned rhinos. According to AnaNath Baral, assistant conservation officer at CNP, there is problem in patrolling inside the park due to lack of enough human resources.

"At least ten staffs should be deployed each time. However, due to lack of enough staffs, patrolling is not done properly," he said. There are 150 staffs working in CNP though the government has allocated quota of 243 staffs.

The park administration is facing problem in conservation of endangered rhino after the poachers perished three rhinos in last five months. There are cases of poachers being active inside park area utilizing the opportunities. Similarly, CNP is also reeling under serious threats in conservation of wildlife.

According to MeghNath Pandey, chief conservation officer at CNP, increased poaching, habitat destruction due to pollution and encroachment and shrinking grasslands are among the major problems CNP is facing at present. "Lack of government's commitment to conservation has affected our conservation efforts," he said.

Policy to regulate foreign wildlife experts

The Department of National Park and Wildlife Conservation is coming up with a policy to regulate activities of foreigners in national parks and other protected areas. According to the department, a new policy aims to regulate activities of foreign experts and conservationists in protected areas," said DNPWC director-general Annapurna Das.

According to him, the policy will not allow foreign experts to violate laws. "We will make the foreigners sign a special document before they leave Kathmandu for other parts of the country. The document will have a list of do's and don'ts." They would have to clarify which areas they are visiting and for what purpose, he said.

However, this rule will not apply to tourists, who want to visit new places and enjoy natural beauty or study culture. The tourists will be informed about rules and regulations. Due to legal loopholes, some experts had stoked controversy in the country's history of nature conservation. DNPWC will prepare a sheet with government rules and make them sign it so that we would be able to take action against the persons if they are found crossing the limit.

American expert Professor Stan Stevenson had declared a certain area of the Sagarmatha National Park (SNP) "Khumbu Community Conservation Area" in May without informing the government and other stakeholders involved in nature conservation.

The department grilled the IUCN, as Stevenson was a member of the international organisation. However, the IUCN ruled out its involvement in the episode. The DNPWC carried out an investigation into the incident. The department had summoned the warden of the Sagarmatha National Park Tulsi Ram Sharma and interrogated him over his duty and his possible role in the illegal declaration of Khumbu Community Conservation Area inside Sagarmatha National Park.

"The activities of the American professor have opened our eyes. We can now imagine to what extent the so-called experts might have been influencing the locals for their vested interest," said Das.

Salt water lake awaits scientific test

A long time has elapsed since an area endowed with "salty water and salt mine" was explored in Dang district of Mid-West Nepal. But carrying out scientific research of the salt seems nowhere in sight. According to locals, salty water comes out from the 10-ropani treeless area in Satbariya-8 and chunks of salt during winter. Salt quarry lies in the north and south of East-West Highway's Lamahi-Kohalpur road section, locals said.

Senior citizens say people from Dang used to bring their cattle in the area to feed salt a long time ago. There is a belief that infertility and various diseases never afflict the cattle nourished with salt. Constructing cowsheds in the area, people used to take their cattle in the area to feed salt since 1960s. The soil, too, is salty there.

Locals have been using salty water and sand in cleaning clothes and as medicine. People belonging to Yadav community in Deukhuri area take home the sand of the area and use it to wash clothes. At a time locals have sought scientific research, the Nepal Salt Trading Corporation (NSTC), however, said the office is clueless about the fact. NSTC Dang office chief Shailesh Kumar Pandey said they were unaware of the salt water lake. He assured to take initiatives to get the scientific test.

Rare python rescued and released

A rare python has been found in Prakashpur VDC of Sunsari. The Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve (KTWR) rescued the python and released it within the reserve area.

The rare python weighing 10 kg and measuring 7 feet in length was found in a land owned by Prakash Dahal, according to Major Purushottam Khadka of Nepal Army, which has been involved in reserve security.

The rare pythons, usually found in the reserve area, are also found in villages adjoining the reserve. This year, at least 16 pythons were found in the reserve area. Of late, news reports of smugglers smuggling pythons to India have also come out. Major Khadka said security patrol has been intensified to check any smuggling of pythons.

So far, a python found in Titriban area a few months ago was the biggest python found in and around the reserve. Khadka said it weighed 16 kg and measured 12 feet.

Cops arrest five with wildlife skins

A team of police personnel of District Police Office, Banke, along with support from Wildlife Conservation Nepal (WCN) on 12th August evening arrested two people with three leopard skins at Kohalpur, Banke district. Banke is India-bordering district.



The two people involved in the illegal wildlife trade are Gauri Kanta Acharya and Tara Devi Rokaya. Both were arrested along with three leopard skins measuring more than eight-feet long. Acharya is a district treasurer of Nepal Worker's and Peasants Party (NWPP), said police. The skins handed over to District Forest Office had bullet holes.

Likewise, a team of police persons from Metropolitan Crime Division along with the support from Wildlife Conservation Nepal (WCN) arrested three people along with two endangered red panda skins on 7th August. According to the police, the red panda skins was confiscated from the house of Buddhilal Maharjan at Dhaugal, Sasto Bazaar in Lalitpur district. Among the three arrested in illegal trade of the red panda skins include Buddilal Maharjun, 64, of Lalitpur district, Ram

Bahadur Tamang, 51, of Sheshnarayan-6, Kathmandu district and Binod Kumar Mahat.

Brief news

Langtang National Park has mobilized forest spies to discourage illegal trade in wildlife and conserve the biodiversity. The park office said many people have been involved in illegal trade of wildlife ever since the conflict period and the forest spies were mobilized to bring the smugglers to the book. The park covers land in Rasuwa, Nuwakot and Sindhupalchowk districts.

A breeding center has been established to conserve the endemic as well as endangered Himalayan newt (*salamanders-tylototriton verrucosus*) commonly known as Thakthake in Puwamajhuwa area of Ilam district. The breeding center has been established under the Patenagi Bio-diversity Conservation project run by the United Nations Development Fund.

More than 150 of these endangered species are kept inside an enclosed area covering about two ropani. The Himalayan newt has been placed in the endangered list. It is also used as medicine for malnutrition and typhoid.