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Protects Wildlife Habitats

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Tribal Community Conservation Model Protects Wildlife Habitats

15-year-old community conserved area (CCA) model followed in Western Arunachal Pradesh has helped in involving the villagers in conservation initiatives in forests that lie outside protected areas by ensuring security to their traditional custodianship and user rights over the natural resources.

“Entire villages have come together to secure our natural heritage that we have inherited from our forefathers,” says Jam Tsering, Secretary, Thembang Bapu Community Conserved Area Management Committee.

Communities in Arunachal Pradesh have voluntarily declared nine community conserved areas over 15 years which cover roughly 1500 sq km of forests. These cover significant habitat of forests which are home to the red panda, Himalayan goral, serow, takin, small cats and contains high altitude lakes. WWF-India had

introduced the concept of community conserved area in 2004.

The community-based tourism set up by the community conserved area committees provides home stays, a glimpse of local art and culture, organises treks and provides trained service providers like guides, cooks, and porters. At the Thembang Bapu Community Conserved Area (TBCCA), the local community has initiated a process to notify one-third of TBCCA as a Community Reserve (CR) under the provision of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. The community reserve notification will legitimise the protection mechanism of community forests.

Thembang, one of the Community Conserved Areas in Arunachal Pradesh, has been practicing community-based tourism for over a decade. It has increased revenue four-fold since inception as of 2019.

Tsering Khandu, the Gaon Burah (village head) of the recently declared Chug community-conserved area in West Kameng district speaks of the cultural importance of animals such as red panda,

takin, musk deer, Asiatic black bear and others which the community believes has to be conserved to ensure the existence of the villagers. “The forest with rich forest and animals would keep their deity happy so it would bring good luck to the villagers and they could stay healthy and happy,” he says.

Community custodianship

According to the IUCN, community-conserved areas can be described as, “natural and/or modified ecosystems containing significant biodiversity values and ecological services, voluntarily conserved by (sedentary and mobile) indigenous and local communities, through customary laws or other effective means.”

According to Kamal Medhi, landscape coordinator of the Western Arunachal Landscape at WWF India, Arunachal Pradesh is considered as a legal pluralist state as both indigenous laws of traditional institutions and formal law enacted both at the state and central level in the country, governs different spheres of the lives of the local tribal communities. “There is a need to actively

involve the villagers in the conservation initiatives within the forests beyond Protected Areas by ensuring security to their traditional custodianship and user rights over the natural resources. To ensure long term success of such community initiatives, suitable livelihood options need to be promoted as incentives for biodiversity conservation” he says.

Large parts of the forested area in Arunachal Pradesh (more than 60 percent of forests accounting for 3.1 million hectares are categorised as unclassed state forests) are *de facto* under community custodianship and are managed by clans, traditional village institutions and individuals.

Communities in Arunachal Pradesh have voluntarily declared nine community conserved areas over 15 years which cover roughly 1500 sq km of forests.

WWF-India had introduced the concept of community conserved area in 2004 since most of the forest land is owned by local communities in

this landscape with the focus on strengthening community-based conservation initiatives.

The community conserved area comprises panchayat members, village elders and youth who work for the conservation and management of their forests, to secure the habitats of red pandas, musk deer, serow, goral, Himalayan black bear, Siberian weasel, leopard and wild dogs.

The model is being implemented in Western Arunachal Landscape (WAL) which is predominantly occupied by the Monpa tribe, who are highly dependent on forest and natural resources for their livelihood needs. The communities share strong religious ties and cultural values with their natural surroundings. They exercise their traditional rights of collection of fuelwood, pole (timber), non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and medicinal plants in these forests.



Medhi points out “With regular interaction and conservation education programme, there has been increased ownership among the local communities towards wildlife and overall biodiversity. The people feel proud about their conservation initiatives. A couple of CCAs also received awards and recognition from state and other agencies for conservation and initiatives on the community-based tourism.”.

The community-based tourism (CBT) initiative in Thembang, one of the CCAs, is now in its decade-long intervention. It has increased revenue four-fold since inception, amounting to Rs 2.81 million (USD 40,000) as of 2019. Home stays are provided, and treks are organised for tourists.

Villagers of Senge-dzong, another CCA have carried out detailed biodiversity assessment and socio-economic surveys are conducted and WWF-India, in collaboration with the CCA management committee is working to develop livelihood augmentation programme to meet both ecological and livelihood needs.

In Arunachal Pradesh, both indigenous laws of traditional institutions and formal law govern different spheres of the lives of the local tribal communities.

Pema Wange , senior project officer (Western Arunachal Landscape), WWF-India who looks after Chug community conserved area says it has installed solar fencing in Pangsa (1 km) before and then in Tsangpa (2 km) after the declaration of CCA. “We have helped the villagers in

ploughing an open area where we have installed solar fencing with a tractor which happened for the first time.

“We have also tied-up with the Krishi Vigyan Kendra for the promotion of vegetable gardens through which they have also distributed various seeds” he said.

Forests under community ownership

According to Pijush Dutta, lead community engagement for WWF India, northeast India has nearly 58% of total forest, which is nearly 14% of total forest of India, under de facto traditional ownership of local communities. “This provides the best opportunity to demonstrate how to achieve conservation objectives without compromising development objectives by proper planning and execution of inclusive conservation through CCA model of conservation to the global communities. Special provisions of the Constitution of India, applicable in northeastern states also provide the necessary space for the required legal provisions to support such community initiatives.

“However, for this, it is important to ensure that, community based conservation initiatives in this region is not just limited to securing small isolated forest areas or just ban on hunting of any species, as this will be underutilization of the opportunity and will not attract support and appreciation of global communities. It should be designed to achieve holistic conservation goals like maintenance of habitat contiguity and habitat quality along with the wildlife species, connectivity among the ecosystems along altitudinal gradients etc. which in turn will also help to promote strong conservation linked economic incentives for local villagers through sustainable use of natural resources, which is not possible in small area” he said.