

HELP Tourism



Community Workshops (above left) are jointly held by Wildlife Protection Society of India, Bali Nature and Wildlife Conservation Society and HELP Tourism in the Sundarbans. In the Manas Maozigendri Conservation area, the first community buffer of Northeast India, a team of 1,000 volunteers (above right) help the forest department to patrol and protect the park round the clock.

Human-animal conflict is increasing at an alarming rate in most villages close to Protected Areas and the problem is chipping away at what little remains of our green cover. This is because of an increasing human population, expanding natural resource extraction, and conversion of forest lands to agricultural farms.

It is to tackle these problems that a group of young activists from Siliguri in North West Bengal launched a social enterprise called HELP (Heritage, Environment, Livelihood, Prosperity-Peace-Protection) Tourism in 1991. The organisation soon found supporters across the country and the world, and experienced individuals, including Supratim Basu, Sanjib Saha and Asit Biswas provided the direction. HELP Tourism operates in the East Himalaya Region, which includes Orissa, West Bengal, Sikkim, Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Mizoram, Tripura and Manipur in India. They also work in Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. This entire region is rich in both culture and wild nature. HELP Tourism hopes to connect this diversity with tourism, through community tourism initiatives.

HELP Tourism seeks to link people's livelihoods, by offering them ownership through tourism – the first step towards

conservation. Their Community Partnership Tourism models have helped replace anti-environment livelihood patterns of many communities through alternative employment opportunities.

In the Garumara National Park in West Bengal, local villagers involved in illicit timber felling were convinced to stop this and become shareholders in tourism instead. The economy of nearby villages has benefitted in the process. In Bali, a small island village on the fringes of the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, where extreme poverty drove women to collect prawn seeds and the men to collect honey and kill tigers that entered the villages, local youths were enlisted to work for wildlife. These young men, most of whom were poachers, were motivated by the Field Director of the tiger reserve and the WWF India state office to rescue tigers that strayed into villages. To prevent them from returning to their previous professions, HELP Tourism helped create a community tourism demonstration project that currently influences other young villagers to the point where prawn seed collection in the area has been reduced by as much as 90 per cent.

In Kamardisa, a village on the eastern side of the core area of the Manas Tiger Reserve in Assam, HELP Tourism joined hands with

the All Bodo Students Union to set up an ecotourism wing and restore part of the ravaged forest. Working with locals and the forest department, they are trying to return Manas to a measure of its old glory, prior to the park being ravaged by political insurgents and terrorists.

One of their more recent initiatives is the Brahmaputra Project, in association with the Inland Water Transport (IWT) Board. The aim is to highlight the cultural and natural history of the river, spread awareness about keeping it clean and pollution-free, declare it a 'No Plastic Zone' and revive the folktales and myths associated with the river. They even organise medical assistance programmes for river bank communities, and hope to revive old tea routes and thus return a conservation ethos to tea estates whose worker families can earn money from handicrafts and the display of folk culture.

A cross-border conservation project in the Kamlang Wildlife Sanctuary and Namdapha Tiger Reserve in Arunachal Pradesh and Hukawng Valley Tiger Reserve in Northern Myanmar (the world's largest at 22,000 sq. km.) hopes to help conserve the rich biodiversity of these areas. The *Apatani* Plateau Initiative in central Arunachal Pradesh aims to preserve the unique cultural and conservation tradition of

the *Apatani* tribal people. HELP Tourism, in association with Inner Asian Conservation (IAC), a USA-based conservation NGO, has also proposed that a 900 sq. km. Protected Area be declared the Tangsa Community Conservation Reserve to preserve the forests, wildlife and traditional way of life in the Tangsa area in eastern Arunachal Pradesh.

An active involvement with the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (DHR) Society in both London and India will bring in revenue to local communities through the DHR, which enjoys World Heritage status from UNESCO. With a major focus on wildlife, HELP Tourism seeks to work with communities on the conservation and monitoring programmes of the Bengal Florican, the Great Hornbill and the golden langur in the Manas Tiger Reserve. Through the Bird Conservation and Awareness Programme in the North Bengal Dooars and Darjeeling Himalayas, a campaign has been launched to encourage locals to stop hunting birds with catapults and other weapons. In the Sundarbans National Park, a conservation and monitoring programme for lesser cats and wintering waterfowl and reptiles has been initiated.

In 2001, a decade after its launch, HELP established an NGO – Association for Conservation and Tourism (ACT) to conduct training and awareness programmes and workshops. Nature Clubs too have been founded to involve the students and youth. The Edu-Camp – an activity-based outdoor programme for students is organised twice a

year to instill a sense of adventure, and conservation in young community members. ACT hosts a month-long East Himalaya festival that acts as an umbrella for several local festivals and events in the region. Their various tourist facilities include home-stays that allow visitors to learn about the local way of life.

Environment programmes for village committees, lodge operators, trip organisers, boat operators, nature guides, local schools and families and visitors are organised to motivate them to protect the environment, use non-biodegradable materials and locally-grown organic vegetables and farm products. A waste-management system helps keep trails clean, and water harvesting and the use of renewables are widely practised.

ACT has also undertaken a cross-border conservation Project between the Royal Manas Park in Bhutan and Manas Tiger Reserve in India and other Protected Areas between the two countries. Ecotourism and school-level programmes have been identified as two major instruments to achieve the goal and also to attract international support for the project. In some of the villages in Manas, Sundarbans and North Bengal, HELP organises free medical camps twice a month where free medicines are distributed.

HELP's future plans will involve efforts to win local support for sustainable tourism initiatives, particularly in territorial and

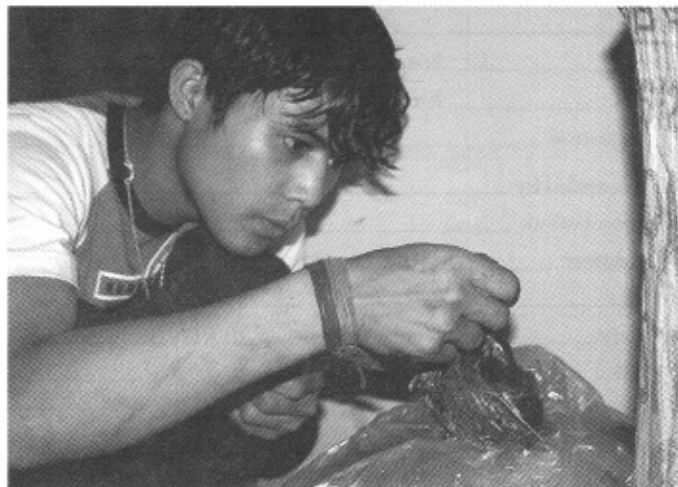
corridor forests where wildlife is sought to be reestablished. The geographical focus includes Bardia, Chitwan and Koshi Tapu in Nepal – in areas that are contiguous with Mahananda, Garumara, Jaldapara and Buxa in West Bengal. Further east, these habitats join Manas, Orang, Nameri and Kaziranga in Assam and Kamlang and Namdapha in Arunachal Pradesh.

To date, working with forest department staff, HELP Tourism has worked in 19 villages in the Northeast to win support for nature conservation. While the concept of using tourism to aid wildlife conservation is not new, the concerted efforts of HELP Tourism to ensure that local communities, their culture and way of life benefit is more than praiseworthy. Hopefully, such models will establish themselves and be replicated, to the benefit of wild India. 🌿

For more details about their work, write to:

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The boy (above left) seen feeding a rescued Mountain Bulbul in Ranglum village in eastern Arunachal Pradesh paid from his pocket to rescue the bird from the hunter and saved its life. With Inner Asian Conservation and Association for Conservation and Tourism's initiatives, hunting has been controlled to a large extent and local people have been motivated to protect the forests and wildlife. In the proposed Tangsa CCR, local villagers help build a hide (above right) inside the forest as part of the first biodiversity survey. Once approved, this will be the first CCR of Northeast India and will protect the contiguous forests and biodiversity of eastern Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar across the Patkai range.

