



Community Conservation, Inc.

2015 Summer Newsletter

Community Conservation a Heroic Solution to the Environmental Crisis

Today we seem to be living in an environmental world touched either with a major sense of doom and gloom or an atmosphere of unreality. Our newspapers, and other media and our scientific journals are filled with report after report of the environmental crisis we face. Wildlife stories, books and movies tout "the last tiger... a world without apes...the last orangutan". Yet all of the airline magazines and tourism advertisements invite us to visit an untouched piece of paradise or virgin forests with an overabundance of wildlife that we will be privy to in an isolated environment untainted with other humans and tourists.

Yet the world of we, who work in community conservation, is one of realistic optimism where we, with our many village partners, can still see and protect many of the earth's diverse ecosystems and its biodiversity. It is neither the end of the world nor some land of rose-colored glasses, but rather, a world of hope for humanity living in relative harmony with nature while maintaining a constant vigil for conflicts between people who live in the natural environment and many of the species they share it with.

In my 30 years of working to involve communities in on-the-ground conservation, I have been puzzled by this paradox. Although I have seen many more cut trees than most people, I have also been humbled by the graciousness and power of my community partners who are protecting some of the most biodiverse environments in the world. What I have seen with a growing optimism is that communities who live in and near our natural areas are the solution to the environmental degradation, the loss of the earth's biodiversity and its resultant climate change that we all have been seeing in recent years.

The fact that communities are the solution to the vast environmental degradation we are currently suffering seems to be a secret that the general public, the academic and traditional conservation communities either do not know about or refuse to see. There is money and power in broadcasting "doom and gloom", it disseminates fear and gathers great coffers of money. As conservation collections to major conservation organizations increase, the problems remain the same with the same impotent attempts at solutions. The public has contributed large amounts of money to create major initiatives to save tigers. Yet tigers have continually and steadily declined since the 1960's until today there are estimated to be only approximately 3000 tigers in the wild. In Assam, our community partners are protecting a viable population of tigers. Yet we rarely speak of them because they come along with our focal golden langurs and elephants - no charge tigers. How are we able to protect the vast biodiversity of Assam, India for less than \$25US per square kilometer? Our community partners do it; they are the unsung heroes of conservation.

When asked by academic participants in a recent conference, why these rural people, who we have come to blame for the world's environmental problems, protect their forests, my response was, that they do it for the same reason we do, because it is the right thing to do and because they see the environment degrading day by day with no one doing anything about it. Although many of these rural villagers are poor, to see them as only poor is a grave injustice and paternalistic. When asked for their help they have never refused to overwhelmingly respond positively to my request. Working with communities has been the best job change I ever made and an inspiration to me every day although a financially

impoverished choice. These villagers, often poor with little formal education are doing what governments are often unable to do. They are the strongest most consistent conservationists. This has been shown to me personally where I live in Wisconsin and where I first worked in Belize.

Politicians can be fickle as are the governments they manage. In the 1990s, a Republican governor created, two community managed conservation areas, the Lower Wisconsin Riverway and the Kickapoo Reserve, along the northern Kickapoo River. In 2015, another Republican governor disregarded his party's environmental legacy by attempting to politically change the local control of those areas. Citizens, through their representatives fought back to maintain the Kickapoo Reserve but the status of the Lower Wisconsin Riverway is still in limbo. Belize, a small English speaking nation in Central America pioneered a co-management system of protected areas beginning in 1982. It successfully was co-managed with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) for over 30 years. In 2014 the government decided to drill for oil in these co-managed national parks. They leveraged NGOs to sign faulty co-management contracts through restricting funds so NGOs were coerced to sign the contracts but the Indigenous Mayan and Garifuna NGOs and community co-managers refused to sign the contracts. Some Mayans have even taken the government to court on the issues.

I have recently begun a new project in Nepal to encourage or create a corridor between Chitwan National Park and the Manas Biosphere Reserve, which according to tiger experts, are the two most promising areas for tiger conservation. I initiated this ambitious

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Goal because, despite the long downward trend of the world's tigers, the communities in these two areas are powerful partners helping tiger populations. Yet when I broach this possibility, funders and some researchers and conservationists imply that it is not possible. Yet our recent visits to eastern Nepal showed that what the conservation pundits say is impossible is already being done by community forest committees in Nepal's eastern terai area. It brings to mind a saying attributed to some anonymous person "those that say it can't be done should get out of the way of those doing it."

My good friend and colleague the late Rajen Islari was one such villager who accomplished extraordinary deeds in catalyzing and motivating the villagers of many towns and villages to protect the lands of the 285,000 hectare Manas Biosphere Reserve, most of which had never been protected before. Rajen was a Christian Minister whose passion was bringing the Manas forests back after illegal loggers had decimated 50% of those forests due to a complex and chaotic political situation with militants in the forest threatening the Forestry staff interspersed with ethnic violence and major flooding of the Brahmaputra Valley. His leadership helped to bring government agencies, NGOs and communities together to bring Manas forests back. As reforestation occurred and deforestation ceased, the golden langur population increased four fold and tiger and elephant populations remained steady, possibly increasing.

Roland Acquah, a regional politician and villager head of the Cape Three Points CREMA, a community group in Ghana, on hearing about and seeing video evidence of gold mining in that Reserve Forest, took immediate action. He went to the Chiefs in the area to learn about the situation and then brought it to some of the regional assemblies. Gold mining is just one type of mining that threatens the world's rural waters. Mercury used in the mining process will pollute the waters creating severe health problems for the villagers.



Roland Acquah (center) and David Osei of WAPCA confront illegal gold miner

It's not just the leaders who have become conservationists. Whole community groups have become empowered educators, protectors and conservationists. A group of adivasi women from Lalkura, Assam, India with little formal education, were protecting what little was left of their forest, from other women who were decimating it for fuelwood. These women stopped the encroachers and told them that they could no longer take wood from their forest. When the encroaching women, said " what will we do for fuelwood ?" The lalkura women answered, "you must grow your own as we do". Then they gave the outsiders some of their culled wood from their regenerating forest. These were powerful conservationists, first protecting the forest, second educating the other women and finally showing compassion to these outsiders.

Thirty-four other villages patrolled and protected the 17km² Kakoijana Reserve Forest and brought it back from 5% forest canopy to over 80% canopy in about 10 years. Their golden langurs increased from less than a hundred langurs to over 500 in that time.

But it was not enough that these dedicated conservationists had to face encroachers, some were arrested as encroachers themselves. They were arrested as terrorists due to a rumor and they were brought in front of a woman judge who, once she heard of their good work, immediately dismissed the charges, returned their cutlasses and other forest tools and presented them with papers clearing them of the charges. Below the author celebrates their legal victory and is shown the product of it during their celebration in their forest.



Kakoijana forest protectors celebrate release from jail in Kakoijana Reserve Forest with CC Director Horwich



Rajen Islari confiscating illegal logs in Ripu Reserve Forest



Lalkura woman telling her story

Members of Gendrabil, a Bodo tribal community in a nearby area told us of how they had watched others cut their nearby sal forest three times but they said that they were ashamed that they had let this happen and would no longer allow it in the future. On a later visit, they proudly showed me the new growth and told me stories of how the small barking deer were returning

to their forest. But they were followed by hunters, so their villagers were de-



Gendrabil leader tells his story

stroying the hides of hunters coming to shoot them.

On the first evening we went to the Assam Forest in Kuklung, it was dark due to an electric failure. As I entered, mysteriously, a shoeless man dressed in a dhoti, quietly made direct eye contact with me, then bent over deeply and touched my feet (a gesture of honor). I was surprised by this action from a stranger but I was informed later that he had been trying to save the forests and knew why I had come to his village. The next morning we returned to talk to members of the Kuklung community, telling them about their special golden langurs and how we needed their help to protect their forest. We asked for

their help. Shortly after, as I was leaving India that trip, I received a phone call from an Indian colleague saying that these villagers had confiscated 22 bullock carts with illegal logs on their own recognizance. They then formed the Raigajli Eco-tourism and Social Welfare Society, built a camp for patrollers and began protecting the Reserve Forest north of Kuklung. When I returned in the following year to visit the Raigajli camp, they told me a frightening story of how over a hundred illegal loggers had attacked them

and destroyed their camp but they had rebuilt it already. Later in that visit they had another tale of violence. While their men were patrolling the forest, an illegal logger warned his fellow encroachers who felled a tree to block the forest protector's patrol truck. As the protectors were moving the obstructing log, they were set upon by a gang of encroachers and beaten badly so they had to be taken to the hospital to recuperate from their head wounds.



Felled tree to block and ambush the Kuklung Volunteers' passage, report of the incident and injuries suffered from attack



Kuklung forest protectors led by Bhimel Basumatary, President of the Unified Forest Conservation Network (center)



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In order to promote global biodiversity and sustainable land use, Community Conservation catalyzes, facilitates, and empowers local people to manage and conserve natural resources within the social, cultural, and economic context of their communities and facilitates widespread, global adoption of community-based conservation.

Here in my state of Wisconsin where corporations and their politician colleagues dominate and have reduced the power of local rural governments, Edie Ehlert and Kathy Byrne of the tiny Crawford Stewardship Project have motivated commu-



Edie Ehlert addresses fracking forum

nity members from throughout the Kickapoo Valley, in Crawford, Vernon and Richland Counties and across the Mississippi River into Iowa, against the fracking industry that pollutes and disrupts our rural communities to produce the last vestiges of US gas and oil that will be sent over-

seas, at the expense of the air and waters of our rural US communities, that our politicians turn a blind eye to.

The doom and gloom resides in the greed of a minority in our governments, corporations and conservation agencies that cannot see beyond their own jobs and static thoughts. Yet, when I review the 26 projects I have been involved with in the past 30 years, all but one are on-going many for 23 to 30 years.

In the fifteen projects that focused on primates, communities are protecting populations of 43 primates. Depending on the taxonomy, that many species represents 12 to 23% of all of the world's primates including the entire ranges of rare primates such as the golden langur, the rolaway monkey, the white-naped mangabey, the San Martin Titi, the Andean night monkey and the yellow tailed woolly monkey. And these are just the flagship species. In the community-protected Assam jungles, tigers, clouded leopards, marbled cats and their feline relatives, elephants, rhinos, many species of hornbills and myriads of other birds, reptiles, amphibians and insects roam those beau-

tiful tropical rainforests under the umbrella of the golden langurs. Our community projects are cost effective as well, costing under \$25 to protect square kilometer while tiger experts project a cost of \$925 per square kilometer.

If the conservation community looked to the optimism of community conservation and joined with community partners, in 10 years all of our forests could become healthy regenerating forests contributing to reducing climate change, for three or four billion dollars per year, just a drop in the bucket of the world's economy.

The solution is simple, creating an army of thousands, no - millions of on-the-ground community conservationists to change the gloom and doom paradigm to one of optimism that promotes healthy viable communities for humans, plants and animals.

**Learn more about CC's work on our website:
www.communityconservation.org**