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A Critical Review on Manas National Park and Its Future Prospect

Dipankar Choudhury
Department of Mathematics, Bhawanipur Anchalik College, Barpeta, Assam, India

Abstract

Manas National Park in Assam, India, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and part of an Indian Tiger Reserve, Elephant Reserve and Biosphere Reserve. During late 1980's & 1990's it faced tremendous anthropogenic pressure due to ethnic agitation in the area resulting in large scale destruction of the forest and its wildlife. However, after the resolution of this agitation, Manas is on its way back to normalcy. Camera trapping surveys that were conducted to determine tiger and prey status also helped in obtaining the first detailed baseline data of carnivores in the park in the post-conflict period. In this paper I am going to discuss various issue related to Manas national Park such as to protect the presence resources, manage them, and detect to changes them and also understand the natural dynamics and processes of populations, ecosystems, and other park resources.

Introduction:

Manas National Park is located in the State of Assam in North-East India, a biodiversity hotspot. The name 'Manas' is derived from the Hindu deity, the snake goddess 'Manasa' and is also shared with the Manas river that transverses through the park. Covering an area of 39,100 hectares, it spans the Manas River and is bounded to the north by the forests of Bhutan. The Manas National Park is part of the core zone of the 283,700 hectares Manas Tiger Reserve, and lies alongside the shifting river channels of the Manas River.

In December 1985, the UNESCO declared it as a World Heritage Site and in 1992, it was declared as a World Heritage site in danger by the UNESCO, due to the rampant poaching and terrorist activities that took place in the nineties.

The park has two biomes; grassland and forest. About the half of the Park is covered by Grasslands of Terai and Bhabar type, the riparian areas have colonizing grasslands and woodlands of several species. The sanctuary has recorded 55 species of mammals, 380 species of birds, 50 of reptiles, and 3 species of amphibians. Out of these wildlife, 21 mammals are India's Schedule I mammals and 31 of them are threatened.

The fauna of the park include Asian Elephants, Indian Rhinoceros, Gaurs, Asian Water Buffaloes, Barasingha, Tigers, Leopards, Clouded Leopards, Asian golden cat, Capped Langurs, Golden Langurs, Assamese Macaques, Slow Loris, Hoolock Gibbons, Smooth-coated Otters, Sloth Bears, Barking Deer, Hog Deer, Black Panther, Sambar Deer and Chital.The park is well known for its rare and endangered wildlife which is not found anywhere else in the world like the Assam Roofed Turtle, Hispid Hare, Golden Langur and Pygmy Hog.

The park is divided into three ranges. The western range is based at Panbari, the central at Bansbari near Barpeta Road, and the eastern at Bhuiyapara near Pathsala. The ranges are not well connected; while two major rivers need to be forded in going from the centre to the Panbari, there is a rough trail (The Daimari road) connecting the central to the eastern range.

Manas is recognized not only for its rich biodiversity but also for its spectacular scenery and natural landscape which includes a range of forested hills, alluvial grasslands and tropical evergreen forests. Its home to India's second-largest tiger population. Manas harbours the maximum number of endangered species from India as listed in the IUCN Red Book.

Importance for the Study:

The importance of study in the national park system has never been greater than it is today. The study of the situation of National Park must generate sound information to help resource managers' deal with increasingly serious and complex threats, withstand increasingly detailed scrutiny, and enhance public understanding, and foster cooperation with outside scientists and other agencies. Because many issues that affect parks, such as like poaching, smuggling, presence of extremist elements and also existence of the park. We cannot be confined within park boundaries, proposed solutions can affect areas that surround the parks and require regional cooperation. Even when management decisions apply strictly within park boundaries, public review can be contentious. Moreover, because litigation and other challenges to federal land management decisions have become commonplace, the quality and validity of research is critical when park management decisions come before the courts and other arenas of public exposure and scrutiny.

Any examination of the national park system can uncover many cases in which a lack of scientific understanding of park resources led to problems—loss of resource integrity, increases in conflicts between visitors and resources, or escalation of minor issues into major problems. For instance, visitor facilities were developed in habitat critical to endangered species before the concept of endangered species was appreciated. A common thread in these examples is that almost invariably, the establishment and early management of the parks were done with inadequate scientific knowledge of these ecological systems.

Objective for the Study:

- To determine what resources are present in order to protect them, manage them, and detect changes in them.
- To understand the natural dynamics and processes of populations, ecosystems, and other park resources.
- To assess the effects of specific threats and to devise and evaluate management responses.

Methodology:

The data use in preparing the topic is the primary and secondary data. The primary data are collected from the people living nearby Bhuyapara and Bansbari rang and also forest security guard in the both Bhuyapara and Bansbari range. The secondary data are collected from government documents, periodicals, books, Newspapers and internet. These data are collected and analyzed in systematic order .

Threat to Manas National Park:

At a time when the Manas National Park, which is also a Project Tiger area, has been facing serious problems like poaching, smuggling and presence of extremist elements, a new problem has surfaced to threaten the very existence of the park. Encroachment on some vital parts of the park has made the situation so grave that even the World Heritage Committee has noted it with serious concern with a warning to inscribe the park as a World Heritage Site in Danger.

The Bhuyapara Range is the worst affected as about 150 hectares of land are in the grip of encroachers. Most areas at Betbari, Natun Betbari and Agrang beats under the Bhuyapara Range have been occupied by them. The land has been gradually occupied by sections of residents of the fringe villages. Though they have not constructed any permanent structures on the occupied land, they have been cultivating crops after destroying the forest cover. With no obstruction from any quarters, the encroachers are fast approaching the park and more and more areas are being occupied every year.

The situation under the Panbari Range is also not different from that in Bhuyapara. Though the land under encroachment is less than Bhuyapara, some people have already built houses and are refusing to move away.

Neither the park authority nor the Government has undertaken any steps to evict the encroachers and free the land. As a result, the world famous park has lost a vast area and if the current situation prevails for a few more years, both the Bhuyapara and Panbari ranges will cease to exist on the map of the park.

The issue of encroachment has been taken very seriously by the World Heritage Committee, which has warned that if the Government fails to check encroachment, it may lead to such a situation that the park may be inscribed as a World Heritage Site in Danger.

The smuggling of timber has also added to the woes of the park. The felling of valuable and old trees is going on unabated in the Betbari, Tangonmara, Koirbari, Agrang Digjira and Panda areas under the Bhuyapara Range. Large areas in the eastern part of the range office have been denuded. There is no forest cover in these areas, compelling the wildlife to shift to other crowded habitats.

It is learnt that the World Heritage Committee has urged the Government to adopt measures to conserve the park and strengthen the security system. It has also instructed the Government to inform the committee about the measures adopted by February, 2015. If the Government fails to comply with this directive, the park may lose the status of a World Heritage Site for the second time after 1992.

The Manas National Park was declared a World Heritage Site in 1985. But due to the devastation during the Bodo agitation in the late 1990s, it lost the status and was enlisted as a World Heritage Site in Danger. Rigorous efforts by the BTAD and the park authority enabled it to retain the honor for the second time after 19 years in 2011.But the prevailing situation in the park is not at all satisfactory, which has attracted the ire of the World Heritage Committee under the UNESCO.

Also the illegal hunting is main threat to the Manas national park. Commercial and frequent hunting can quickly reach unsustainable levels, leading to local extinction of the targeted wildlife species. In Manas, species in danger not only include the larger mammals, such as elephants, rhinos and other primates, but also tiger, deer etc... Bush-meat hunting and trading has now become big business and is one of the main threats to many of the major species in Manas. Another species under threat from poaching is the rhinoceros. Rhinoceros horn is used in traditional Asian medicine, believed to reduce fevers and even prevent loss of life. Other parts of the rhino, including the skin and bones, are also used for their supposed medicinal qualities. Demand for rhino horn has increased substantially in recent years. However, recent investigations have shown that hunters are abusing regulations and entering rhino horn into commercial trade involving organized crime, corruption, abuse of diplomatic privileges and money laundering. Intelligence gathering, regular monitoring and strict enforcement are effective ways of curtailing both illegal logging and poaching activities in forests. The participation of local communities in these activities can facilitate implementation of laws and regulations and secure sustainability.

Steps to be taken by Forest authority:

1. Management of Park areas and Buffer zone:
    - By preparation of management plan/operational plan and implementation.
    - By defining priority species, critical habitats and ecosystems for conservation of ecological integrity of the park.
    - Zonation and boundary demarcation of park area into different zones such as core zone, buffer zone and multiple use zones.
    - Control of human-wildlife conflicts by establishing the appropriate approaches/measures.

- Allocating adequate fund and Infrastructural development in place along with the necessary equipment's to accomplish their tasks.
- Strengthen the staff strength and build up the capabilities of staffs through training, study tour, refresher courses, subject matter workshops and on-the-job training both in-country and ex-country.

2. Control of Poaching:
   - Develop effectives and efficient patrolling and anti-poaching strategies, strengthening the staff strength, collaborating with the Bhutan counter parts.
   - Identification of poaching areas/illegal routes and species subject to poaching threats.
   - Establishment of guard posts, patrol trials, watch tower in the strategy points.
   - Awareness rising through EE programmes conducting public meetings/workshop and relaying through media.
3. Integrated conservation and development programmes (ICDP):
   - Formulate guidelines for planning, implementing and monitoring process of ICDP's in collaboration with relevant agencies.
   - Improve information through surveys and in consultation with relevant stakeholders on existing resource use pattern, problems and opportunities, and resource management system.
   - Ensure a multidisciplinary ICDP planning process to ensure conservation impacts.
   - Provide support and back stopping to geographical staff and community to integrate conservation issues and preparation of Community based natural resource management plan.
4. Environment Education:
   - Develop and implement an environment education program in the park to enhance environmental awareness and develop sense of responsibilities towards environment conservation.
   - Institutionalize participatory approaches in the park management from inventory to planning and monitoring.
   - Enhanced capacity at decentralized levels to plan and implement conservation efforts by providing training for teachers and other staffs, local leaders and communities in the park, rendering support to school nature clubs.
   - Improve access to the parks for the public for educational and recreational purposes; establish visitors/interpretation/information centers in the park.
5. Research, Survey and Monitoring:
   - Maintain data and information base on biological values, at species, habitats and ecosystem level through survey, research and monitoring.
   - Setting up of permanent monitoring plots to generate information for long term monitoring and planning purpose.

- Improving the knowledge and technical skills of field staffs through training on relevant and emerging applicable survey and monitoring techniques.
- Procuring and supplying adequate field guides, field equipment's and field gears for survey and monitoring.
- Establish a computerized data base of all collected data.

Conclusion:

Forests and the products they provide are universally required for the continuation of human society as we know it. To change our society to one that does not depend on the forest (to the forest's detriment) and its associated benefits requires such an enormous paradigm shift that we generally do not even consider it worthy of further investigation. Given this situation therefore, it is imperative that we discover mechanisms to manage the forest for all the benefits it can provide, in a sustainable manner.

Few countries have all the answers to all the issues faced, thus there exists a real need for international cooperation. Loss of forest resources transcends national boundaries and affects the entire planet. Given this, the roles of various agencies become vitally important in order to minimize any potential downside and to maximize the upside. Governments, NGOs, intergovernmental panels and the like must work more closely in order to resolve the pressing issues facing the forests. In many cases a collaborative approach will provide a solution which is more acceptable to all parties, and more robust than a solution that is developed unilaterally.

Societies around the world are beginning to face up to the reality that as a species man requires forest resources - both the wood and non-wood products a sustainably managed forest can provide. As the guardians of those resources our performance has to date been abysmal. It is with a great deal of urgency that we must turn that record around and ensure that we have sustainably managed forests for the generations that are to follow. Only a long term global commitment to conservation and sustainable development can reverse the tide of uncontrolled deforestation. A sound policy framework is central to this commitment.

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