

Bibhuti Lahkar: Grassland Warrior

N northeasttoday.in/bibhuti-lahkar-grassland-warrior/

by Northeast Today

3/14/2017



February Edition, In Conversation, NET Bureau, Nayanjyoti Medhi

Bibhuti Lahkar is a conservationist and ecologist from Assam whose work inside the Manas National Park, in conservation, habitat development and grassland research won him the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) Heritage Hero Award 2016. Working tirelessly in the area for nearly two decades amidst periods of socio-political unrest, Lakhar is the first Asian to be nominated for the award. Northeast Today caught up with the passionate and unassuming environmentalist for a chat.

I am with Manas

Located at the foothills of the Himalayas, Manas National Park or Manas Wildlife Sanctuary is an Indian national park, UNESCO Natural World Heritage site, Project Tiger reserve, elephant reserve and a biosphere reserve. Home to the critically endangered pygmy hog and many other rare species, the park is contiguous to the Royal Manas National Park in Bhutan. Listed as a World Heritage site in 1985 by UNESCO, Manas was declared a World Heritage in Danger in 1992, due to excessive poaching and militant activities. Bibhuti Lahkar's work in Manas, starting from 1993 as a volunteer of NGO Araanyak, was one of the key drivers in UNESCO dropping the "World Heritage in Danger" tag in 2011. He was also instrumental in connecting the park with the Royal Manas National Park in Bhutan, providing a pan national monitoring structure and a continuous ranging habitat for wildlife.

Everyone likes nature, but nature is too far to reach

"I first went to Manas when I was in college. That would be 1993. Then, we had to change three buses from Barpeta and walk some distance to reach Bansbari range. We used cycles at first. I was involved with Araanyak and that served as an inspiration to take up work in the national park. Manas lies in one of the most important biodiversity regions of the world. Most of it is grassland and home to many important species like pygmy hog, golden langur, hispid hare, swamp deer, wild buffalo and one horned rhinoceros including 23 Schedule I animals. Some of these species are found only in the grasslands of Manas. It is also an important migratory route for birds and log range

animal like elephants. I started working with an aim to protect this grassland while researching for my thesis. There were and are many problems. Socio-political unrest had put an immense pressure on the sustainability of the park. Surrounded by villages, the park was fragmented due to development and livestock grazing due to population increase near the fringe areas inflicted some damage. There is another problem regarding movement of vehicles from Bhutan, more so during the orange season.”

For long term conservation, habitat must be restored

“The formation of the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) and end to militancy has helped in conservation efforts. Growth of grassroot NGOs have also contributed much to the efforts. I have worked both in research and livelihood sectors in the national park area. I have tried to involve the local youths in the process and have trained and guided more than 100 of them. Many of these youths are now working in conservation and it is my dream to set up a training and development institute where I can impart my knowledge to the youth. Also, it has to be seen that national parks and wildlife sanctuaries are not encroached upon. The role of Eco Development Committees is important. Transparency and awareness among people living in the areas is a must. A sustainable community should be grown and we are working with the locals in the fringe areas of the park to achieve that.”

Development should not be at the cost of nature

“Loss of habitat is posing a serious threat to the forest cover and wildlife not only in Assam, but across the Northeast. Commercial tourism is one of the reasons for this loss. I think that eco tourism models should be popularized and local village communities near the protected areas involved in the process. One such example is the various camps and lodges run by villagers in parts of West Bengal and Sikkim in collaboration with the Forest Department. The BTC’s role in this is praiseworthy and there is a visible effort by the council to conserve and develop the area near the Manas National Park for creating a sustainable habitat.”

IUCN Heritage Hero award has increased my zeal

“Manas had always negative connotations. More than me receiving the award, this presented an opportunity for me to highlight conservation efforts in the national park at a global stage and show the immense strides that Manas has taken. The award has made people, especially the government, aware of conservation efforts and people have started taking us seriously. We have started writing to various organizations and I have been asked to speak about conservation in many universities and colleges. This has increased awareness.”

“We have no problems of funding in Assam for the purpose of wildlife conservation. What we require is more dedicated persons working at the ground. There is a positive trend now with some students taking up conservation and ecology professionally. With development, the environment will keep on degrading and we need our youths to come out for conserving the forests and wildlife of the state. There is an immense amount of hardwork in the field and the interest for environment sciences needs to be developed from the school stages.”