

CONSULTATION ON TRANS-BOUNDARY AGREEMENT TO DEVELOP INDO-NEPAL ELEPHANT CONSERVATION PLAN

(Minutes of the meeting held on 24th May 2011 at Bahundangi, Jhapa District, Nepal)



Venue: Bahundangi Elephant View Resort, Jhapa

Participants : 96 participants from Nepal and India

A meeting cum workshop was organized by WWF-India, WBSO in association with Nature Conservation Society, Bahundangi, Nepal on 24th May 2011. The programme started with the welcome address by **Ms. Saswati Sen**, Director WWF-India, WBSO and introduction of all the participants. **Dr. Sangita Mitra**, Coordinator from WBSO and the co-investigator of this project explained the need of developing a transboundary conservation plan and the purpose of this meet in Nepal with the local stakeholders. The meet was attended by a large number of people from both the countries including senior officers from Forest Directorate in Nepal, representative from WWF-Nepal, frontline staffs of the forests department from both the countries, administrative officers and security personnel of Nepal Government, local NGOs from India and Nepal.

The working session started with a deliberation from **Mr. Braj Kishor Yadav**, Regional Director, Eastern Regional Forest Directorate, Nepal. His positive opinions reminded the audience about the religious sentiments of Hindus in both countries who generally worship Elephants as God. He also spoke about the migration of elephants, need for larger forest landscape and destruction of forests by man. He stressed that elephants and other natural objects belong to this planet irrespective of any country. Hence they shouldn't be tagged as Indian or Nepalese. In his opinion, if Maoist issue was managed by the government then why not this trans-border conflict related with elephants? He emphasized on provisions for better management of these animals and securing people's livelihood in the trans-boundary conservation plan.

Mr. Hemlal Aryal, Undersecretary, Dept. of Forest, Nepal mentioned that people of Bahundangi has been suffering since last 4/5 decades with respect to elephant depredation and elephants from neighbouring Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary has the record of trans-boundary movement every year. As the former DFO in Jhapa, he experienced the situations and had interactions with the Indian counterparts. He admitted that both the countries are parties to conserve biological diversity and his suggestions are :

- To find out the reasons behind every Human –elephant conflict.
- Harmonise the relationship between man and elephant
- To recognize Bahundangi as an “Impact Zone”.

He mentioned his experiences while visiting Dudhwa Tiger Reserve in India where peaceful coexistence of man and elephant has become possible. He also explained that a problem can be an opportunity. Tourism could be a source of livelihood generation from any conservation area. In his opinion people are not well compensated in Nepal as in India, especially in Bahundangi which doesn't come under the protected area schemes. Hence there needs to be a special provision to address the grievances of local community. He also favours developing of a joint mechanism between India and Nepal to resolve the matter.

The next speaker was **Mr. Sudhir Koirala**, DFO Jhapa who had also attended the first meeting of this programme held in India. He had some practical observations on this issue. He also told that people often feel sad if elephants don't pay their

visit. However it's true that people on both the sides of the border are suffering in terms of loss of property, life and livelihood. He feels that understanding the sentiments of people is also important and community groups like Nature Conservation Society have a long way to go. The issue has gained a momentum and such activities have started. Fortunately WWF has also helped the Jhapa people earlier to manage the conflict. Mr. Koirala expressed helplessness because of extensive paddy and maize cultivation all around, which earlier had forest areas. Growing of fodder plants in suitable places is necessary in his opinion. He further suggested that a joint mechanism of conservation could only be fruitful with cross country visits, exchange of ideas and by making necessary changes at policy level.



Mr. Bhupen Biswakarma, Range Forest Officer from Panighata, Darjeeling district, India expressed similar viewpoints like that of the last meeting. He also thanked NCS for taking the initiative here. In his view the poverty stricken farmers have hardly any scope to protect their lands, hence giving lectures on conservation, wildlife, biodiversity and gene pools are all useless terminologies to them. His feeling was to bring a change in crop pattern, because elephants move to this region mainly for food. There is a need to undertake agricultural, soil and market survey prior to adapting any change in crop pattern. It may take time but that will definitely bring good result. At the end he apprehended that a situation like this, when elephant population has increased in Northern West Bengal and sufficient food and space are not available – it will be really difficult to sustain the present population of elephants this way.

Mr. Haribhadra Acharya, Management Officer, Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, Nepal sent his gratitude to the young folks in Bahundangi who realized the issue of Nature conservation. He spoke about his understanding on the issue of growing conflict in this location. Eradication of Malaria got emphasis here whereas this issue was slowly gaining heights. This particular region used to be associated with elephants for long, but now with gradual diversion of forest land into crop fields and human settlements opened the floodgate of conflicts. He further explained that his department doesn't have the power to directly intervene here because for that it has to be included under PA network. He expressed that elephants are unaware of boundaries, laws and regulations created by man. Hence it is important for us to develop the mechanism to address the issue. His suggestions were:

1. Developing an ownership procedure for the communities
2. Higher level of political consensus is needed
3. Bureaucratic hurdles need to be removed
4. There should be a proper action plan and time frame to address the issue under the prospective Indo-Nepal trans-boundary conservation Plan.

He also suggested that this problem could be an opportunity where locals could participate, like the effort from NCS focusing the issue of elephants through establishment of a resort and other related activities. He explained his experiences in the Terai Arc Landscape (TAL) meeting at Dudhwa Reserve in India.



In her first remark on this programme, **Ms. Sabita Malla**, Research Officer, TAL from WWF-Nepal office stated that earlier she found serious misunderstanding between the countries on this particular trans-boundary crisis. But the situation has improved

much. However she believes that there is no single solution to this issue, because elephants are intelligent and they get used to whatever method was applied to prevent their depredation. Present application of GPS and GSM technologies are proving successful in her viewpoint and institutions like Wildlife Institute of India could be approached for use of early warning system in this locality. Her emphasis was more on developing strategies to directly act in the field and proactive involvement of locals, because this is the high time to take action.

There was a presentation on “Intensity of Conflict: effects and measures taken in Bahundangi VDC” by **Gobind Neupane** of Nature Conservation Society, Bahundangi, Nepal. NCS volunteers introduced an injured farmer from Bahundangi who survived an elephant attack recently.



In the second half there was a working session for the participants where there was an open interaction among all the stakeholders present on certain basic issues

- 1) Main constraints in mitigating this conflict at all levels
- 2) Possible mitigatory measures that could be effective
- 3) Positive achievements, if any
- 4) Necessary cooperation (Govt. & non govt. level.)

The concluding session ended with vote of thanks from WWF and NCS. It is significant that attendance was high on a day when a general strike was called in Nepal.



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