

## Tree-fellers turn forest guardians in Bangladesh

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Ahad Miah has come a long way from his tree felling days. He is now one of the custodians of the Lauachhara protected forest, working shoulder to shoulder with government appointed forest guards. "Now we can sleep in peace. The police and forest guards are not after us," says the team leader of a forest patrol. He has turned the corner because of Nishorgo Support Project of the Bangladesh government and usaid, the international aid programme of the us government.

He is from Dolubari Muslimpara, a settlement in the vicinity of Lauachhara, 500 hectares of evergreen and semi-evergreen forest 10 km off Srimangal in Sylhet, Bangladesh.



Photo by: Mustafizul Rahman

Two years ago, illegal tree felling was the main occupation of villagers like Ahad Mia. Their poverty worked against the rich biodiversity of Lauachhara. Nishorgo has provided the the poor villagers a unique chance to earn a living off forest conservation, rather than its destruction.

The results are there to see.

Within three years of the project, Lauachhara has seen a remarkable improvement. Monirul Khan, wildlife zoologist at the Jahangirnagar University in Dhaka, carried out a census of birds in 2005 and another in 2006. "We found that the number of those birds has increased by 20 per cent this year. It proves that the health of the ground forest and the mid-level forest has improved," he says. The census found an increase in the number of some indicator birds species, like the red jungle fowl and the puffed throated babbler.

These signals are considered good for the hoolock gibbon, which is in the World Conservation Union's list of the world's most critical 25 mammals in 2006-2008. Of the total of about 700 such gibbons in the world, Bangladesh has 300, according to biodiversity expert Anwarul Islam. Myanmar, China and India have the remaining. Petra Ostergerg, a researcher from Finland who has worked on the hoolock gibbon, conducted a census in September 2006. She found 59 gibbons in 16 families in Lauachhara and adjoining forests.

Zoologists consider the hoolock the 'umbrella' species of Lauachhara. They say if it can be saved, the forest will be saved also. Tour guides say they have sighted a new hoolock family in the neighbouring forest of Chautali. "Barking deer numbers have also increased," says Shymal Devbarma, a tour guide at the Lauachhara. "I can estimate their increased number by their barks and their dung," he added.

The regeneration of forest and wildlife is attributed to reduced felling of trees, which is also indicated in the timber market. The price of teak wood has increased by 260 per cent over the past two years, a forest officer points out. Illegal felling has come down because the villagers police the forest.

Three patrol teams, each with 20 people, guard the forest at night. "We can prevent more than 80 per cent of illegal tree felling as we know the operating style of illegal traders," says Miah, leader of the Dolubari Muslimpara patrol. Several members of the patrol had illegal felling cases against them, which have been withdrawn. "Now we can live with dignity. Nobody calls us thieves," said Aziz, 56, who was in the illegal

felling trade for 30 years. Patrol team members have received threats over telephone for catching illegal traders, but nobody has left the patrol.

Nishorgo pays each patrol member Tk 2,250 per month. But how long can the project employ the people? "We will not pay them the salary for long. We will eventually make them earn from alternative sources through training," says Mehrin M. Mahbub, communication specialist of the project. She gives the example of Mohammed Abdul Hai of Dolubari Muslimpara, who's earned Tk 40,000 from his nursery in the past one year. The project has provided income opportunities to 404 people so far.

Nishorgo has created a co-management council, comprising influential people of the locality and representatives of the forest department. "Our plan is to register the committee under the Society Act, or as an ngo. Then it can make its own project and get funds to save the forest when the project isn't around," says Ram A. Sharma, forestry specialist associated with Nishorgo. The project will end in May, 2008.

"We have engaged the locals in managing and protecting the Lauachhara forest. But the pressure [of illegal tree felling] has shifted to the adjoining forests," says Nishorgo project chief Philip J. DeCosse. "We have to expand our work there."



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