

Murlin National Park

Murlin National Park with an area of approximately 200 sq. km. is nestled on the hills of Eastern Mizoram, bordering Myanmar. The Park covers two sides of two hills and the intervening valley between the two hills. The area contains some natural climax forest cover, which varies from moist deciduous and evergreen forests in the valley and lower hill slopes and Rhododendron and Oak forests on the upper hills. The area appears to be still untouched by human communities, though most of the surrounding areas are under jhooming since long past. Hills after hills of extensive area has either fresh jhoom cultivation or only secondary cover of mainly bamboo, with some narrow strips of mixed forest, that somehow escaped jhooming during the past. The conservation value of this area in the context of Biodiversity conservation cannot be overemphasized, as no other such similar area exists, as reported in Mizoram.

The whole area is as rich in floral composition, as it is rich in faunal diversity. No proper inventory of the biodiversity is available for the area and a detailed study is essential. However, *Michelia*, *Terminalia*, *Dipterocarpus* and their various associates in the lower areas and Oak and Rhododendron with occasional ^{and bamboo} *Kharsia* pine are dominant tree species. *Cane* occurs in the lower areas. Amongst wild animal life Sambar and barking deer with wild boar, at least 5 species of primates with the only Indian ape are all present here. The great Malayan giant squirrel, *Binturong*, some weasels and forest bazar are reported to be present. Amongst the shrews is also reported from the area. Amongst predators, a few tigers may be resident, but may also be visitors, who may be utilizing this area, as a part of their composite habitat. Some leopards and a variety of lesser cats including the clouded leopard, golden cat and the marbled cat may be present. But the most important part is that a good population of the Himalayan black bear, with some population of sloth bear and the Malayan Sun bear are all present in this area. This obviously speaks of very high dynamism of this area, which possibly falls on the transition zone between two biogeographic realms, Indo malayan and Malayan realms.

The geological formation is of tertiary origin, consisting mostly of shale and slate, which easily weathers in the tropical climate of high rainfall and temperature, that ultimately results in very high biomass productivity. The importance of such an area in relation to Biodiversity conservation is really limitless, specially as most such have already been lost to conservation due to exploitation during the past.

But the area is probably under high degree of threat from poaching of all types of animals, mainly in the form of traditional subsistence hunting, as is still common all over Mizoram. Even commercial poaching has been set in motion by heavy demand of various animal organs across the border in Myanmar. Almost any animal organ, be it feline bones, bear bile, pelts, deer antlers and Rhino horns etc. are reported to be in high demand across the border and gets a high price. This lure of high price is activating poaching of various animals. I have visited some villages in the vicinity of the park and found that almost each household has an open display of the skulls of various animals killed by the house owner. The skulls are hung up on a wooden or bamboo frame above the main door and marks the hunters (not regarded as a poacher!) capability. The good hunters have a place of honour in the society till this day! Almost any animal be it a bird, mammal or rodent is eaten and various animal meat is attributed with medicinal property. Bear bile is by far most in demand. The headman of one village reported that between 200 and 300 bears, mainly Himalayan black bear had been eliminated from the Murlit area during the last three years or so, when the demand really soared. All the biles have been reported to have gone to Myanmar.

The people across the border in Myanmar are also Mizo speaking people, but they are not liked by the Mizo people of Assam side, as often the Mizos from the Myanmar side come into Assam and commit various crimes. These Myanmar people are reported to come into Assam area, heavily armed and indulge in reckless poaching of any animal. This has been reported by the villagers as well as by the Forest people. It appeared that the people and even the Forest staff are somewhat awestruck by the firepower of these intruders in the border areas.

Stopping of this type of unbridled poaching of animals will not be easy to stop. This will involve a high degree of public awareness and change in social outlook. I have talked to some of the village hunters in this regard. They all agree that due to paucity of animals this success rate in hunting has drastically gone down and it is not really worth spending the time and energy, which often draws a blank at the end. They also agreed that preservation of animals

necessary to keep something in reserve for the future generations. Actually the villagers are not even aware about the existance of the Wildlife Act, or why such an act and ban on hunting has now become necessary. A lot of hard work on interpretation and public awareness is immediately necessary. Along with the above strict implimentation of the Wildlife Act is also called for.

There is a village of 47 households, as reported, situated in the valley. The villagers, as usual practice Jhooming in the area, which has resulted into conversion of a sizeable part of the protected area into secondary bamboo forest. Besides, an extensive contiguous area which holds excellent forest cover in the East-and North-east of the park, has been claimed as community forest, presumably to be used for jhooming in future. The state govt. is considering shifting of this village and has already selected some area near the sub divisional township for relocation of the villagers, which has been done in consultation with the villagers themselves.

I consider shifting of this village is of top most priority to consolidate wildlife interest in the Park. This will not only eliminate the problem of jhooming in the park in future, but will also make it possible to extend the area of the park by more than 200 sq. k.M. towards the east and North-east, which still holds excellent natural ecosystems. The villagers have agreed to go for adopt terrace cultivation instead of shifting cultivation in their proposed area of relocation, which will involve basic preparation of the hilly and undulating land earmarked for them. The deal should be settled as early as possible. If and when this plan is successfully implemented, it may pave the way to finding a solution to jhooming in other similar areas. Though some attempts have been made and a lot of funds spent to permanently settle the jhoom cultivators, yet the result so far appears to be not at all encouraging. Further may see the way.

Respected Kamal Nathji,

I wish to bring a matter of utmost importance to your notice to-day, which shall have very serious implications for wildlife conservation in the country. Yes, I am referring to "Eco-development" planning which is now at the final stage of its preparation through U.N.D.P. assistance and which if approved may be placed for G.E.F. funding. You may be aware that it was I who had initiated and written this plan, passed with the Planning Commission and finally got it approved as a new scheme. Besides, during my field postings as a wildlife manager, I had long been convinced that until and unless the wildlife manager is able to provide some means of support ^{to the poor villagers} for their true welfare (improving quality of life) and at the same time reduce their dependence on the natural resources

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pelts, deer antlers and Rhino horns etc. are reported to be in high demand across the border and gets a high price. This lure of high price is activating poaching of various animals. I have visited some villages in the vicinity of the park and found that almost each household has an open display of the skulls of various animals killed by the house owner. The skulls are hung up on a wooden or bamboo frame above the main door and marks the hunters (not regarded as poacher!) capability. The good hunters have a place of honour in the society till this day! Almost any animal be it a bird, mammal or rhodent is eaten and various animal meat is attributed with medicinal property. Bear bile is by far most in demand. The headman of one village reported that between 200 and 300 bears mainly Himalayan black bear had been eliminated from the Murlen area during the last three years or so, when the demand really soared. All the birds have been reported to have gone to Myanmar.

The people across the border in Myanmar are also Mizo speaking people but they are not liked by the Mizo people of Assam side as often the Mizos from the Myanmar side come into Assam and commit various crimes. These Myanmar people are reported to come into Assam area heavily armed and indulge in reckless poaching of any animal. This has been reported by the villagers as well as by the forest people. It appeared that the people and even the forest staff are some what awestruck by the fire power of these intruders in the border areas.

Stopping of this type of unabated poaching of animals will not be easy to stop. This will involve a high degree of public awareness and change in social outlook. I have talked to some of the village hunters in this regard. They all agree that due to paucity of animals this success rate in hunting has drastically gone down and it is not really worth spending the time and energy which often draws a blank at the end. They also agreed that preservation of animals is now necessary to keep something in reserve for the future generations. Actually, the villagers are not even aware about the existance of the Wildlife Act or why such an act and ban on hunting has now become necessary. A lot of hard work of interpretation and public awareness is immediately necessary. Along with the the above, strict implementation of the Wildlife Act is also called for.

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S. DEB ROY