



A community in Nagaland strives to sustain wildlife protection amid fresh challenges

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Once teeming with wild animals, densely forested Sendenyu endowed with fertile soil and contrasting microclimatic conditions, fell prey to excessive hunting, logging, and shifting cultivation in the 1980s and 1990s. Much of its natural wealth was destroyed, recalled Thong, who was born and raised there.

In his late 50s now, Thong is the chairperson of a committee looking after a community conserved area (CCA) adjoining Sendenyu, 50 km from Nagaland's capital Kohima. The CCA is named Sendenyu Community Biodiversity and Wildlife Reserve (SCBWR). Its inception lies in the biodiversity loss that galvanised the village elders and its literate members to take dedicated steps to protect its flora and fauna in 2001.

Community members set aside a patch of land (18 square km) for the reserve. A significant feat considering 88 percent of the state's forest is privately/community-owned. Bordering Myanmar, the state falls in the Indo-Myanmar and Himalaya Biodiversity Hotspots.

The origin of the reserve was formalised by the passing of local law, the Sendenyu Village Council Act for Nature Conservation in 2001. The Sendenyu Community Biodiversity and Wildlife Conservation committee was established to enforce conservation measures, including hunting bans. Sendenyu's publicly lauded conservation efforts have led to a resurgence in its wildlife, mainly barking deer, sambar deer, wild boar, hog badgers, macaques, bears, and birds.

Despite its success, which motivated other villages to follow suit, the reserve faces a new suite of challenges. Crop raids by swelling wildlife (sambar deer foraging on paddy and chilli crops) have beleaguered the community, mainly farmers; hunting wildlife that enters neighbouring villages and lacking alternative livelihood options are significant concerns.

Experts batted for addressing sustainability challenges of such areas, especially in the context of human-wildlife conflicts, and framing specific policy that addresses CCAs holistically and mainstreams community involvement in conservation without compromising on community ownership and respecting their way of doing things. The sustainability challenges have prompted the Sendenyu CCA committee to consider the community reserve category of India's protected area network.

CCAs can be defined as "natural and modified ecosystems" with significant biodiversity, ecological and related cultural values, voluntarily conserved by indigenous peoples and local communities through customary laws or other effective means. According to a 2012 report by Sálim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, Nagaland's eastern districts have 765 CCAs, small protected forest patches. The study accounted for areas traditionally conserved or which had the potential to support good biodiversity in the future. A 2015 TERI study that used a different approach puts the CCA numbers for the state at 407. As per the study, 82 percent of the 407 CCAs have entirely or partially banned tree felling and/or hunting and enforce various conservation regulations. These CCAs, covering more than 1,700 square km, also contribute to carbon storage (an estimated 120.77 tonnes per ha) and are essential mitigation and adaptation strategy for climate change.

Sendenyu does not come under India's formal protected area (PA) network that provides for the declaration of 'community reserves,' a new category of PA. India introduced new PAs classes such as

conservation reserves and community reserves (CR) in the Wildlife Protection Act in 2002. Nagaland, with 93 CRs has the country's maximum number of CRs notified under the Act. CRs may be established in private or community-owned land that is not already part of a protected area.

Green heroes and genesis of Sendenyu CCA

Three planks of wood attached to two poles and bird calls breaking the silence of lush green hills, now announce the entry to the Sendenyu CCA to tourists who can opt for short treks inside the area. "Residents of Sendenyu own the land where the reserve is situated, and they used it for collecting firewood and timber. 18 square km for the community, depending on forest resources, is a big area. Initially, they had resisted, but they were eventually persuaded by the Village Council to donate the land for a greater cause," said Thong.

The restoration was possible due to the Sendenyu Youth Organisation and Sendenyu Community Biodiversity and Wildlife Protection Force—voluntary groups that came together to protect the area; the groups spearheaded planting of fruit trees, developing natural waterholes and salt licks, and protecting the area with the help of volunteers. The village community was also encouraged to adopt wet terrace cultivation in place of shifting cultivation or jhum, whose shortening fallow regeneration cycles had led to the depletion of soil nutrient content and green cover.

The Energy and Resources Institute's (TERI) Siddharth Edake and colleagues who have researched CCAs in Nagaland said their "biggest learning" so far is that CCAs are successful only in some areas because of green heroes. "At Sendenyu, you have Mr. G. Thong, who has single-handedly convinced the communities not to cut down the trees and protect the wildlife," said Edake.

Edake and colleagues write in a study that Naga tribes who inhabit Nagaland follow customary laws and procedures. Their traditional rights are protected under Article 371 A of the Constitution of India. These customary laws are plural in nature and differ from tribe to tribe and village to village. He stressed that though the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 (WPA) and the Biological Diversity Act, 2002, have been approved by the legislative assembly of Nagaland, "there is a lack of awareness and implementation. The traditional laws and customs have superseded this (Wildlife Protection) Act."

Joseph Seb of the Wildlife Protection Force says that residents of certain neighbouring villages who are not aware of the conservation actions at Sendenyu end up hunting the deer when they move outside the CCA's boundary. "We don't have fences, and the area shares a boundary with neighbouring villages. We are trying to fence portions, but it is not easy. We need the neighbouring villages to be more aware. One village Seiyhama, for example, has started periodically banning hunting," added Seb.

"The areas of the CCAs are very small; on average, the area of the CCAs is less than 500 hectares, which is very, very less if you talk of wildlife conservation because when the animal moves outside the boundary, the residents of those villages feel they have the right to hunt it. So that is happening on a large scale," explained Eddake.

Communities said deer raid paddy fields and also eat the chili plants' leaves. Ongoing conservation measures such as a ban on hunting mean the farmers can't hunt and sell deer meat. "So now we have a problem because that extra source of income (from selling meat) is no longer an option for the farmers," said Joseph Seb of the Force.

"In a year, farmers can spend around Rs. 25,000 on jhum and wet terrace cultivation. But they lose the yield due to the wild animals' crop raids. We try to compensate them by providing one or two bags of rice, but that is not enough," explained Philip, secretary of the village development board.

“It is especially difficult for widows when they have to face crop damage. When we took up the matter of compensation from wildlife raiding crops with the state government, we came to know that compensation is provided only for elephant-associated damages to crops,” observed Thong.

Philip said though the forest department promotes their work and supports them in the supply of saplings, assistance is needed to set up infrastructure inside the CCA so that researchers can carry out field surveys or tourists can also avail of rest house facilities. Over the years, researchers have uncovered new amphibian species from the area, underscoring the importance of conserving such hotspots.

“We also need scientists and NGOs to come to the CCA and help us with the wildlife census and other activities to help document different facets of the conservation impacts. Scientific documentation of impacts will also help us convince people of the importance of sustaining the CCA,” said Thong.

Echoing the community’s concerns, Edake adds that 72 percent of the area under CCAs in Nagaland belongs to individuals who have donated land for different objectives. “Certain communities feel that these CCAs are breeding grounds. That’s one motive or perception that we found during our research; if they breed, and when the animals come out, the community will be able to hunt them.”

During the novel coronavirus pandemic-associated lockdown, the Nagaland Community Conserved Areas Forum condemned the spurt in hunting activities, drawing attention to the WPA and its provisions to safeguard wildlife. The Forum acknowledged that “hunting has always been a part of the Naga society as an act of survival to gather food from the forest since time immemorial” but the “intentions of greed was never encouraged”, according to a news report.

In Nagaland, there are records of community conservation areas (CCAs) being declared in the early 1800s, especially in response to forest degradation and wildlife loss, researchers have said. Nagaland’s State Action Plan on Climate Change (SAPCC) lists the 20 square km Khonoma Nature Conservation and Tragopan Sanctuary (1998), and several others, in its success stories of community-managed areas. The Nagaland SAPCC bats for tapping into carbon sequestration funding mechanisms like REDD + to directly transfer resources paying for the conservation and forest quality improvement linked efforts of communities/individuals.”Every resident of Sendenyu is directly a stakeholder of the reserve. Every decision for conservation acts/rules is taken by the Sendenyu people’s general public meeting. So there is a sense of ownership for every individual among the community,” asserted Thong.

Sustaining community conservation areas to address biodiversity goals

CCAs face numerous challenges in their creation, effectiveness, and sustainability and require sustained conservation efforts. Up-scaling of activities initiated by the communities will involve the “formalisation and mainstreaming of a network of CCAs in the state, which are at par with India’s PA network in conjunction with the Nagaland government and forest department.”

“Mainstreaming CCAs will also require technical, financial, and institutional support to encourage and sustain the practice of CCA formation and sustainable management. As populations grow, land prices rise, and people move away from their villages, more private and clan owners of CCA land may want to manage their forests for timber, rather than for conservation,” cautioned Edake.



Rajkumar M., Divisional Forest Officer, Kohima noted that community reserves (notified by the government) are better protected and funded on a sustainable basis. "CCAs are notified by village councils/communities. CRs are notified by the government after communities voluntarily come forward and agree to it. So legally CRs are protected areas and are funded by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change," Rajkumar M., Divisional Forest Officer, Kohima district, told Mongabay-India.

Thong acknowledged the emerging challenges in Sendenyu's sustainability adding that they are now considering going for the community reserve notification.

Neema Pathak Broome of non-profit organisation Kalpavriksh that has documented CCAs in India, said that recognising community-driven initiatives is imperative to addressing biodiversity goals. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) recently announced that none of the 20 Aichi Biodiversity Targets it set in 2010 were reached in their entirety. The most recent draft of the U.N.'s Convention on Biological Diversity as one of its 20 post-2020 strategies includes the protection of 30 percent of the planet by 2030.

"Why the Aichi targets are not being achieved is because of the conservation model practiced everywhere (excluding community rights). If we continue to have these exclusionary models of conservation there is no way we will be able to protect biodiversity or ecological security in the long run," Broome told Mongabay-India.

She said the community's rights over their land and their way of managing resources must be respected. "We need to recognise these continuing community initiatives, and help create an environment for such initiatives to come up in other areas as well, and support them where they have been disrupted; that's a more sustainable way of doing biodiversity conservation. In the Philippines, they have come up with a law in CCA. We need a law like that which respects the local people's way of doing things and doesn't impose institutional guidelines on top of what they are already doing; it is more facilitative than regulatory," added Broome.

Source: <https://india.mongabay.com/2020/10/a-community-in-nagaland-strives-to-sustain-wildlife-protection-amid-fresh-challenges/>