

## Meghalaya villages get together to restore wildlife corridor

Restoring the vibrant hills is significant for the forest-based livelihoods of the communities that live there | Photo Credit: [Himdipta Kakati](#)

Two bushy caterpillars, stark white, face off on a dark tree. They are arranged in an odd symmetry, ocelli to ocelli, close enough to kiss. I squint up at them: I don't know what they'll do next but I don't want to miss it.

The man next to me, 22-year-old Bakking S. Marak of Daribokgre, a village in Meghalaya's Garo Hills, whispers excitedly: "*Huro*". In a flash, the white squiggles are gone — the caterpillars that have scampered up into the canopy, it turns out, are the knitted eyebrows of an endangered male western hoolock gibbon, one of just three ape species on the Indian subcontinent.

I am in the Daribokgre Village Reserve Forest (VRF), on *a'king* land — 190.5 hectares of community-owned land set aside by the village as a conservation area under the jurisdiction of the Garo Hills Autonomous District Council (GHADC), which comprises members of the Garo tribal community.

The VRF nestles up against Nokrek National Park. And from Nokrek Peak, the highest point in these hills, you can see the verdant vertebrae of the Garo Hills. On the horizon, somewhere to the east, lies the other ecological crown jewel of this landscape, Balpakram National Park. The landscape connecting Nokrek with Balpakram once formed the backbone of biodiversity in the Garo Hills, allowing for the unhindered movement of some of the country's rarest wildlife.

But today this green spine is fragmented. While mining threatens wildlife habitats in some areas, the major problem across the Garo Hills is jhumming or shifting cultivation. The environmental impact of jhumming owes more to the diminishing duration of the fallow period over the years than to the slash and burn activity itself. The reduced fallow cycles in this landscape, triggered by population growth, means that the regeneration of secondary forest is constantly interrupted by crop plantation.

The scars are stark. On vast swathes of the hills, the forest — if it can be called that anymore — struggles to reassert itself. There are tree stumps everywhere. For a species like the western hoolock, the loss of canopy connectivity means isolation from food or water sources, and the choice between certain starvation in the trees and probable predation on the ground. For the thousand-odd elephants here, disruption of migratory corridors means forced movement through human-use areas and the possibility of conflict with humans.

But the fractured habitats of the 'Garo green spine' are receiving some much needed attention. Sixteen VRFs including Daribokgre, covering 2,647 hectares, have been instituted by the local people, the GHADC, Wildlife Trust of India (WTI), the U.K.-based World Land Trust (WLT) and the Meghalaya Forest Department. On these lands, owned and managed by the community, forests are allowed to be forests and their resources are judiciously used, and never for jhum.

Restoring the backbone linking Nokrek and Balpakram not only creates uninterrupted habitat for Garo's incredibly rich biodiversity — 85 species of mammals, 206 species of birds, 62 species of reptiles, 14 species of amphibians and over 124 fish species — it is also vital for the forest-based communities that inhabit the region. "Our people have an existential bond with the forest", says Rangku Sangma, Chief Forest Officer of the GHADC.

"We have always been conservation-oriented because our lives and livelihoods are affected when

forests are depleted. But we also have a heritage of jhum cultivation, which has become a challenge in terms of forest management as the population has increased.” He adds though that people have begun to move away from jhum. “The reduced fallow has meant reduced returns. Now there is a growing interest in alternative livelihoods.”

The Meghalaya Forest Department meanwhile is trying to reduce local dependence on forest resources through apiculture and horticulture, says Nazia RD Marak, the Divisional Forest Officer (Wildlife). WTI and WLT are engaged in outreach activities including skills development in settled cultivation. And the government and local NGOs are promoting eco-tourism in the region.

When I return from the trek to Nokrek Peak I am introduced to Lainesh T. Sangma, Daribokgre’s *nokma* (village chief and Bakking’s mother-in-law). She talks of the settled cultivation plot in the village, and how it is doing well even though a rubber pipe for irrigation was recently broken by an elephant. She talks of the community’s relationship with the forest, the old animistic beliefs, and how perhaps those beliefs may be lost down the generations. When I ask her how the VRF benefits her community she pauses. “This is our land. We get clean air, water security, a beautiful landscape, and the animals are protected. What other benefit could we want?”

*The author is consulting editor, Wildlife Trust of India.*

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