

THE SUCCESSFUL 'PROTECT HORNBILLS' PROJECT BY THE NYISHI TRIBE OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH TURNS 10

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

An elderly Nyishi man wearing the elaborate headgear called 'podum'. A woven cane cap traditionally adorned with the beak and casque of the great hornbill, today artificial beaks made of fibreglass are commonly used. | Photo Credit: KALYAN VARMA

On a November morning last year, I went along with Budhiram Tai to a site where he monitors a wreathed hornbill nest tree during the breeding season. As we approached the tree, something that looked like an old metal signboard on a branch caught my eye. "Budhiramji, what are these signs for and who put them here?" I asked the elderly man. He proudly walked up to the tree and told me that he had pinned these signboards some six years ago to protect the surrounding habitat of the hornbill nest tree. In a mix of Hindi and English, the message on the tags read: "This is the area of hornbills, cutting trees is prohibited here". I noticed similar signboards on many trees nearby. These messages were signed off with *Poo*, the Nyishi name for the wreathed hornbill.

Budhiram Tai, a *gaon burra* (village headman) of Seijosa, in East Kameng District of Arunachal Pradesh, is one of 11 nest protectors in the Hornbill Nest Adoption Program (HNAP), a community-based hornbill conservation programme that is celebrating its tenth year of success in 2022. HNAP operates in the forests outside Arunachal Pradesh's Pakke Tiger Reserve.

Hornbills are indicators of the health of a forest, they are seed dispersers and rightly called the 'farmers of the forest'; but they are globally threatened by habitat loss, fragmentation and hunting. Pakke Tiger Reserve and its environs harbour four species: the great hornbill, rufous-necked hornbill, wreathed hornbill and the oriental pied hornbill. Three of these, including the wreathed hornbill, are classified as 'vulnerable' species.

These birds have large home ranges and so use both the Pakke Tiger Reserve and the adjoining reserve forest to feed, nest and roost. In fact, flocks of wreathed hornbills, sometimes over 100 individuals, fly to the reserve forest to roost at night. While these hornbills and their nest trees are well protected inside the tiger reserve, they are vulnerable in the adjoining Papum Reserve Forest. The reserve forest is home to several villages and settlements of the Nyishi tribe. Earlier, most Nyishi followed animistic beliefs. The men wear elaborate headgear called 'podum', which is a woven cane cap adorned with the upper beak and casque of the great hornbill and also the tail feathers of other birds such as the racket-tailed drongo or a raptor.

Much like other parts of the Northeast, hunting was once a way of life here. And hornbills were among many wildlife species that were hunted. The great hornbill, in particular, was hunted for its beak that was used in the traditional headgear. But now many people have switched to using artificial beaks made of fibreglass.

Hornbills are particularly vulnerable during the breeding season when the female hornbill seals herself inside a tree cavity during a long incubation and fledging period that lasts almost four months. While hunting hornbills during the breeding season has been taboo here, there have been instances of violations in the past, mostly by outsiders. The trees that hornbills nest in are also at the risk of being cut down.

The legal authority of the reserve forest is the forest department, but, the villages on the forest fringes also claim rights over the land. To protect hornbills, it became critical to involve multiple local institutions and provide benefits to local communities to conserve hornbills and their habitat.

HNAP was officially launched in 2012 by the Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) in partnership with the Ghora-Aabhe Society (a council of village headmen in the Nyishi tribe) and the Arunachal Pradesh Forest Department. Aparajita Datta of NCF has studied hornbills and their habitat in Pakke Tiger Reserve since 1995. Taking inspiration from Pilai Poonswad's initiative in Thailand (that protects several species of hornbills in partnership with local villagers, while nests were adopted by Thai citizens or foreigners), Datta proposed the idea of the HNAP; the project is based on the idea that the local community protects the habitat and the nests, while other citizens and institutions adopt nests to support the running costs of the programme. Thus, the hornbill chicks have three sets of parents: the biological parents, the local Nyishi nest protectors, and adoptive hornbill parents who support the programme financially.

This long-running community-based conservation programme, possibly among few such models in the country, has provided a source of livelihood to over 21 nest protectors so far. Many of these nest protectors were once hunters and so know the birds, their natural history and the forest well.

They now use their skills to find new nests and monitor them through the breeding season, until the chicks fledge. Their critical observations of the breeding activities contribute to long-term data on nesting. The biggest achievement however has been the successful fledging of 173 hornbill chicks of three hornbill species — great hornbill, wreathed hornbill and oriental pied hornbill — and protection of 35 hornbill nests in the reserve forest in 10 years.

Last year, in the middle of the hornbill breeding season, NCF received frantic calls from Prem Tok, the youngest nest protector. Prem, who once knew the forest as a hunter, took up the role of a protector with gusto, following in the footsteps of his ailing father. Once, he noticed that some men had come to cut trees near two active hornbill nest trees; he knew he had very little time to save these trees.

With the help of Tajik, the local coordinator of the HNAP, he talked with the villagers and persuaded them to call back the men who were sent to cut those trees. Prem was glad to find a chick in both the adjoining nest trees a few months later; the trees saved from the axe stand tall today.

There have been several other success stories. For instance, one of the great hornbill nests had remained inactive ever since a fire broke out in 2012. In 2016, as part of a rainforest restoration programme, the team planted native species around the nest tree. In 2020, the team was thrilled to know that the nest was occupied by a wreathed hornbill pair after a gap of eight years.

The nest protectors walk the forests with the same ease as one would in their own backyards. With a notebook and pen in hand, they jot down observations on hornbill movement and sightings of other birds or mammals that they chance upon. Tajik skilfully uses the GPS to record the coordinates for future references.

Tajik, who started off as an assistant and is now the field coordinator of the HNAP, has been quick to learn the use of technology for this work. Every week he calls for a meeting with the nest protectors. They bring their diaries full of detailed observations, and Tajik meticulously enters them into an online portal. These weekly meetings are full of experience-sharing and discussions between the nest protectors.

For an outsider, their loud voices might sound like they are in the midst of a heated argument. But what they are expressing are their concerns, and advice to younger members from the older nest protectors. The biggest challenge for them is to reduce human disturbances in this important hornbill habitat, but often those they are negotiating with belong to the same community or family.

The lack of job opportunities, rise in the cost of living and the access to quick money are key drivers for those who fell timber. It needs a lot of courage to talk people out of this activity. This meeting space brings them together every week for a cause.

Their contribution towards conserving these globally threatened species has been recognised and the HNAP has been awarded the Sanctuary Asia Award 2014 and the India Biodiversity Award 2016. Over 260 hornbill parents and 15 international zoos have supported and helped sustain the programme over 10 years.

The HNAP has invested in creating community support to expand protection of hornbills beyond protected areas. It has roped in additional local forums such as the Pakke Paga Hornbill Festival committee and the Vivekananda Kendra Vidyalaya Alumni Association Pakke Kessang District Unit as partners, so that they too can take ownership.

Budhiram, Prem and Tajik along with all the other nest protectors continue to teach me practical lessons in conservation. They wear many feathers in their cap, quite literally, but among them is a fibreglass beak that has replaced the original beak of the great hornbill, a species that they have vowed to protect and have grown to love as their own.

The writer is with the Nature Conservation Foundation.

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