

HOW A COMMUNITY-BASED INITIATIVE RESTORED DWINDLING HORNBILL POPULATION IN WESTERN GHATS

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Malabar Pied Hornbill, which is a near-threatened species, has been protected under a community-based initiative in the Vazhachal Forest division. Photo: Special Arrangement

A community-based conservation initiative, involving the Kadar tribal community, has brought the dwindling hornbill population to a viable level in the Vazhachal Forest division of the Western Ghats.

“The Hornbill nest tree monitoring programme, involving the Kadars, an indigenous community, was started in 2005 in the Vazhachal forest division with the technical support of the Western Ghats Hornbill Foundation to address the declining hornbill population and restore their vanishing nesting habitat,” says K.H. Amitha Bachan, founder of the Hornbill Foundation and assistant professor and research guide, Department of Botany, MES Asmabi College, Kodungallur.

The unique low-elevation riparian forest in the Athirappilly-Vazhachal areas is the only location where all the four south Indian species of hornbills – the Great Hornbill (the State bird of Kerala), Malabar Pied Hornbill, Malabar Grey Hornbill and the Indian Grey Hornbill – can be seen.

According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List, the Great Hornbill is a vulnerable category, while the Malabar Pied Hornbill is near-threatened.

According to observations by scientists in 2007, the Malabar Pied Hornbills were restricted to a few low-elevation locations in Kerala, says Dr. Bachan. However, the studies conducted by Dr. Bachan reported four nesting trees of the Malabar Pied Hornbill at Vazhachal. A group of youngsters from the Kadar community was roped in to be part of the mission with the support of the Forest department.

Involvement of the indigenous community and awareness programme against poaching of hornbills helped the Western Ghats Hornbill Foundation to protect and monitor the nesting trees and the species.

There was a gradual increase in the number of successful nests, reestablishment of nests

(which were abandoned due to hunting and disturbances) and formation of new nesting hollows in suitable trees. Slowly, the number of Malabar Pied hornbills in the area increased to 100 with 12 nesting sites, points out Dr. Bachan.

Shortage of suitable nesting trees and poaching were the main threats faced by the hornbills. Hornbill watchers of our community took the mission of protecting the nesting trees, says Geetha Vazhachal, *Oorumooppathy* (chief of the Kadar tribal community).

“The hornbills are extremely sensitive to disturbances. The hollows of high canopy trees serve as their nests. Watchers from the community monitored the trees where they made nests. We created awareness against poaching of hornbills. Now, there are Malabar Pied Hornbill populations in various areas, including Vazhachal, Pokalappara, Peringalkuthu, Vachumaram, Thavalakuzhyppara, Sholayar and Perumbara,” she says.

A paper presented jointly by Devika M., Anilkumar and Dr. Bachan, a team from MES Asmabi College, at the 8th International Hornbill Conference held at Kasetsart University, Bangkok, Thailand, recently identified the niche specificity of the Malabar Pied Hornbill which is restricted to low-elevation forests (0-500 m from mean sea level). These forests are the most converted and threatened habitat since they are close to human habitations. The study stressed the requirement of protection of riparian forest habitats with old trees with natural hollows for nesting and foraging of hornbills.

Another study published by the team identified the low-elevation riparian forests as a ‘critically endangered ecosystem.’ The study says that the Forest department should incorporate site-specific management and eco-restoration plans for the hornbills and riparian forests for stopping future decline of the species and the habitat.

It also recommended to identify the Malabar Pied Hornbill as the “ambassador or flagship species” of the critically endangered low-elevation riparian evergreen forests.

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