

Nagaland: concerns and challenges

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Haralu, B. 2010. Nagaland concerns and challenges. *Indian Birds* 6 (2): 56–57.

Hunting

To claim that hunting and trapping of birds and mammals in Nagaland does not exist would be wrong. In our short visits we found enough proof of both; we met several hunters, and saw ample evidence of both guns, and slingshots being used. A trip to the local food markets reveals that wild birds and animals are openly sold. We found several species of rare birds, including forest and game-birds, being sold, strung together in small bunches. Kaleej Pheasants *Lophura leucomelanos*, laughingthrushes (Timaliidae), Fairy Bluebirds *Irena puella*, and assorted bulbuls (Pycnonotidae) were all seen and photographed by us. Mammals included leopard cat *Prionailurus bengalensis*, the highly endangered brush-tailed porcupines *Atherurus*

Rare mammals are openly sold for food



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Birds killed for the pot

macrourus, orange-bellied Himalayan- *Dremomys lokriah* and Irrawady- *Callosciurus pygerythrus* squirrels, large Indian- *Viverra zibetha*, and masked palm- *Paguma larvata* civets. Wildlife enforcement seemed to be non-existent, and most people were unaware that hunting is totally prohibited by the laws of the land.

One source in fact claimed that in relative terms, the hunting numbers were low and that hunting did not constitute a serious threat to the wildlife of the region. His argument being that the forests were fecund enough to replenish all that was hunted. Furthermore, it is now claimed that traditional hunting skills have declined, and the cost of ammunition has gone up considerably. We, however, felt that experiments like the Khonoma initiative might prove a better substitute, as they provide the villagers with an alternative source of income. The powerful church could also be used to spread the anti-hunting message.

Jhum

"Agrarian Nagaland Imports Food Grains" screams a recent issue of one of Nagaland's newspapers — the contradicting headlines for a report covering the distribution of tractors, and power tillers, under the Chief Minister's Corpus Fund to some progressive farmers, also quoted Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio, who we would like to imagine, anxiously, saying that the state "imports 72% of its food grains although 80% of its population (1.5 million, Census 2001) is engaged in agriculture."

The report triggered off images and scenes of hill-upon-hill stripped of green forest cover only to be replaced with the dirty rust and black ash of burnt earth that we saw during our second birding trip in March to the central and northern areas of Nagaland, in Wokha, Zunheboto, and Mokokchung districts.



Ramki Sreenivasan

***Jhum* – the bane of Nagaland**

The stark images struck a raw chord as we had just completed a birding trip in January, to the Angami and Zeliang areas, where we did not encounter such vast and contiguous areas under "*jhum*" – the slash and burn practice of agriculture. Not surprisingly an eerie silence was our constant companion as we travelled the length and breadth of the state manoeuvring through areas where there was no wilderness, only bald hillsides, where once stood forests. Ever so rarely we would catch the fleeting sight of some birds even in these desperate environments, but never of any wild creatures. This experience, coupled with rampant hunting of wildlife and birds in most parts of the state, only communicated the feeling that something is terribly out of balance. In the *jhum* system of cultivation, large tracts of cultivable land are literally slashed down and then burnt, annually, to convert biomass to ash, and increase soil fertility. This system might support low population densities, but an exponential growth of the populace has shortened the *jhum* cycle to unsustainable levels.

This form of cultivation has been honed over thousands of years and was once well suited to the needs of subsistence farmers with multiple cropping of up to 60 foods in one field. After a couple of years the fields are left fallow, and the farmer shifts to another field. Once believed to be the most suitable system of cultivation, studies have revealed that when *jhum* cycles fall below 10 years sometimes even five years, as opposed to the earlier cycle of 15–20 years, there is not enough time for nutrients to build up, and yields are reduced, and land degradation foregone conclusion. As a result, farmers are compelled to cut down more and more primary forest to repeat the pernicious cycle, to meet their food needs. Add to that the continuing business of timber extraction, in the absence of viable livelihoods, and the dismal picture emerges of forests, and forest produce, battered under a continuous assault.

Even as experts debate its pros-and-cons, the practice of *jhum* has lately been facing some challenges. Those who live off the land are already adapting to the changes in the environment

influenced by both, external, and internal factors. With increasing numbers of rural folk migrating to semi-urban areas, seeking jobs and education, there are fewer hands for the hard work on *jhum* fields, rendering it less attractive, and lucrative. Moreover, in districts such as Phek, several villages have ceased to practice *jhum*. They have instead begun to grow non-traditional crops such as cabbages, potatoes, chillies, and other vegetables.

But according to Mr Kevichusa IAS (Retd), Former Commissioner & Secretary, Government of Nagaland, it would be unwise to outrightly condemn *jhum* cultivation, which supports the rich and varied bio-diversity of the state. However he cautions that it is equally important for the state government to uplift the income of rural farmers, and introduce the farming community to cultivate non-traditional, high value, low volume, and long shelf-life produce such as spices: chillies, turmeric, ginger, black pepper, etc.

In a state where 93% of all natural resources are individual- or community- owned there is need for biodiversity conservation in Nagaland for a healthy balance between extraction for daily livelihoods, and long-term nurturing for future generations. Communities and village councils need to be encouraged to protect primary forest areas from both, *jhumming*, and timber operations. Another urgent need is for the state to build a gene bank for plasma of the rich agro-biodiversity that was/is maintained in the traditional *jhum* cultivation before it is wiped out. A comprehensive and holistic approach to the age-old practice of *jhum* can only ensure self-sufficiency in food for the people as well as the continuation of a rich biodiversity of plants, birds, and animals.



We stumbled upon this beautiful Bella rat snake *Maculophis bella*, formerly referred to as *Elaphe leonardi* close to Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary, which turned out to be new species for India. This small snake (80–90 cm) appears to be a montane species as it can be found on higher elevations like 1,500–2,000m. This species is known from northern Myanmar and western Yunnan province, China.

— Shashank Dalvi