

—A flight down memory lane— Narcondam Island and its hornbills

Lavkumar Khachar

Khachar, L. 2010. A flight down memory lane: Narcondam Island and its hornbills. *Indian Birds* 5 (5): 159.
Lavkumar Khachar, 14 Jayant Society, Rajkot 360004, Gujarat, India. Email: lavkumarkhachar@gmail.com

India's environmental problems are many and highly complex. Yet, unhappily, those of us who should know better have been verging on criminal casualness in our approach to conservation issues, often lending tacit support to groups that have their own, often highly political, agendas. The time is over ripe to put our house in order before we, individually and collectively, espouse causes and take on issue-based activism. It is absolutely essential that we prioritize our concerns.

In my opinion, the isolated Narcondam Island, with its endemic Narcondam Hornbill *Aceros narcondami*, merits overwhelming conservation priority. There should be no two opinions on the absolute need to secure this island recognition as one of India's wilderness treasures.

To safeguard its territorial integrity from over ambitious neighbours, the Government of India stationed a police contingent on the island in 1969. To provision the men with "fresh" milk and meat, two pairs of goats were sent in 1976! By 2000, their captive population was about 150 and over 200 had gone feral, grazing to devastation the hitherto undisturbed forest under-story and completely preventing vegetative regeneration. There are reports that areas around the settlement have been cleared for growing vegetables and trees are felled regularly for fuel! The process that has denuded much of the Indian subcontinent of its forest cover has begun here. Figuratively speaking, the kindling that has been set aflame will soon become a blaze and engulf the primeval forest that should be every Indian's pride. That the Indian Government, in this age of environmental enlightenment, has initiated this rather short sighted and thoughtless action simply amazes me. That there has been no outrage expressed by the otherwise very vociferous environmental groups, baffles me and, speaks volumes for the general apathy among us: yes, I include myself among the apathetic.

In 1979 I had sarcastically written in the *Indian Mountaineer*, the Journal of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, that if the "Sanctuary" surrounding Nanda Devi in the Gharwal (Uttarakhand) Himalayas could not be prevented from vandalism, then India should forget all its commitments to conserving her National Parks, many of which have human activity and user rights for centuries. Those times, however, were different; we had a Prime Minister in Indira Gandhi, who in her imperious manner, simply ordered the mountain area closed.

Today, I throw a similar gauntlet to the Government of India, to declare this island a National Treasure and evolve imaginative strategies for its protection. India's territorial claim over Narcondam Is., I repeat, does not need a posse of policemen with their goats, it can be as effectively asserted by setting up a multidisciplinary research station commanded by a Naval officer. Efficiently regulated ecotourism would help finance research.

The unique island vegetation, specially the large old fig trees, is under continual devastation by recurring cyclones that are so characteristic of the Bay of Bengal, but they were able to hold their own thanks to the vigorous regeneration in clearings created with each large tree that fell. The introduction of goats has adversely



Narcondam Hornbill

Niranjan Sant

affected this regeneration and with each successive cyclone, the aging trees with their cavities will get depleted, without being replaced. It is the availability of tree cavities that determine the optimal breeding population of the hornbills and it is not difficult to visualize a time when they will be unable to breed in sufficient numbers. Without any delay, all goats must be removed and those gone feral, shot by a group of Army sharpshooters detailed on exercise!

The multidisciplinary research station should be provisioned with canned food, as is the Indian Antarctic one. Not only should the plant and animal life of the island be strictly preserved, the reefs encircling it should also be protected from all exploitation, barring ecotourism—with conducted and controlled dives among the reefs and nature trails up and around the supposedly extinct volcano; coveted, high value tourist experiences.

However, the volcano on Barren Island is active and frankly, too close for comfort. The recent series of tectonic tremors along the Indonesian island arc, of which the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are extensions, suggests that the endemic Narcondam Hornbills may sooner than later face calamity, especially due to breeding habitat eradication. Lt. Gen. Baljit Singh's note to the Government of India, suggesting the introduction of these hornbills to other uninhabited island/s, deserves our emphatic "Yeah!" provided rigorous science is implemented. I would go a step further and urge that captive breeding nuclei be established in a couple of reputed Indian zoos as well as in prestigious foreign ones so that, should the Narcondam volcano erupt, there would be birds to repopulate the island once it settles down.

Dedication: I would like to dedicate my piece to the memory of late Ravi Sankaran, whose quiet growth as a formidable field scientist, I had the privilege to watch. He spent many wonderful, and relaxed days with me at Hingol Gadh, whenever he visited Saurashtra to check on the Lesser Florican.