

Freshwater species at risk in Eastern Himalaya development surge



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Kazimuddin Ahmed 13 January 2011 7630 views

Development of water resources in the Eastern Himalaya region is expanding at a rapid rate and there is a serious lack of information to guide conservation and development planning. This is putting freshwater ecosystems and the species within them at risk, along with the livelihoods and economies of local communities which they support.

In a recent study for The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™ carried out by IUCN and Zoo Outreach Organisation (ZOO), scientists found that 31.3% of the 1,073 freshwater species of fishes, molluscs, dragonflies and damselflies currently known in the Eastern Himalaya region are assessed as Data Deficient, emphasizing the need for extensive new research.

“Due to the rapid development of the region, it is essential that politicians, legislators and other stakeholders have access to information on the status of freshwater species and habitats so that they can incorporate this into their decision-making and planning processes,” says David Allen, Programme Officer, IUCN Species Programme. “Though legislation to protect species and habitats exists across the region, implementation and enforcement is often not effective.”

Of those species for which information is available, 7.2% are classed as threatened and a further 5.4% are considered to be Near Threatened. The lower parts of the Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers have been heavily impacted by pollution, the clearing and degradation of forests (leading to sedimentation and changes in flow regimes) and the development of dams. The impacts upon some species are significant, for example populations of the fish Putitor Mahseer, *Tor putitora*, found in the Ganga and other river basins, have declined across its range, and are predicted to further decline by up to 80% within the next 100 years.

There are extensive plans for water resource and transport infrastructure development within the region which are likely to impact upon ecosystems and species. For example, the Highfin Glassy Perchlet, *Parambassis lala*, which can be found in the Ayeyarwaddy in Myanmar and adjacent rivers in northeastern India, is currently classified as Near Threatened as a result of habitat loss and over-exploitation. However, a continued lack of information which could guide conservation planning and the planning of proposed developments places the Highfin Glassy Perchlet along with many other species at risk of becoming threatened.

“The importance of freshwater species and habitats is often largely under-estimated in the region, by local people as well as by decision makers, and they are often over-exploited for immediate needs,” says Dr. Sanjay Molur, Executive Director, Zoo Outreach Organisation.

“Communities with a stake in the long-term future of freshwater species and habitats across the region must be fully engaged in the development and conservation planning processes to ensure the future sustainability of their livelihoods and the services provided by the natural environment.”

The study highlights that, in order to significantly increase the level of information that is available to inform conservation planning, there is an urgent need for additional training in taxonomy and research methods for regional experts and increased funding to carry out species assessments.

Several areas were identified as priorities for conservation action within the Eastern Himalaya. These areas include parts of eastern Nepal, India (including Sikkim, Assam and Manipur), and Myanmar. Recommended conservation actions for these and other areas include improving water quality in the region through controlling and reducing the discharge of untreated sewage, industrial pollutants, and agrochemicals; reviewing the impact of existing dams and barrages on the environment; reducing the rate of forest degradation and increasing forest restoration projects; enforcing legislation to halt the over-exploitation and destructive harvesting of fish (including the use of small mesh-size nets, dynamiting, poisoning and electric fishing); and monitoring and regulating the large-scale collection of molluscs.

The on-going community-based sustainable management project in the Tangar hoar wetlands is a great example of conservation success. Wetland resources were threatened by over-exploitation. IUCN Bangladesh has worked since 2002 to establish an innovative co-management system that allows the sustainable use of natural resources. The initiative has increased the capacity of local communities to effectively manage the wetland, and created alternative income generation options to reduce dependency on natural resources.

Kazimuddin Ahmed

Oxford, UK

BY KAZIMUDDIN AHMED

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