

Green Force Brings Back Green Glory



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Chandan Kumar Duarah 30 September 2012 12917 views

The Balipara Reserve Forest, which was once barren and void of trees, now begins to bring back the greens again by dint of a noble effort of some ex-servicemen of Assam. There has been drastic changes spanning four years in Balipara Reserve Forest of Sonitpur district of Assam. In fact, the district happens to be one of the world's most deforested districts. Enter Eco Task Force (ETF) of the Ecological Territorial Army, a part of the Indian Army envisages plantation drive for aforestation in devastated areas including the one at Sonitpur district of Assam in the Balipara Reserve Forest.

The unit has so far planted 2.8 million saplings, covering an area of 2,750 hectares since September 2008 with the help of the State Forest Department and the Rainforest Research Institute of Assam. The unit is presently carrying out plantation under the leadership of Col. Rakesh Singh. His team has seen massive deforestation over the past decade because of rampant wood felling and encroachment at the Balipara Reserve Forest. The 134th unit of the ETF is maintaining a large nursery to cater approximately 10 lakh saplings per year. The unit works in tandem with the State Forest Department and Rainforest Research Institute supporting wildlife conservation efforts as well.

The 125th unit of the ETF in Kokrajhar district in Bhutan border in collaboration with the Department of Forest and 15 Dogra Regiment of the Indian Army carried out a unique attempt at Khalasi near Jharbari on April 29, 2012. One hundred men planted 44,885 saplings within one hour on the bank of Saralbhangra river under Haltugaon Forest Division in Kokrajhar district to enter the Guinness Book of World Records. The 135 ETF has performed the exercise by exceeding the current Guinness record that was set in Northern Ireland by planting 14,463 saplings. It needs mention that the earlier record of planting maximum number of trees in one hour by 100 volunteers was made at the Gransha Park in Northern Ireland in the year 2009. About 30 hectares of land were

projected in the site for the plantation. The success of both units is attributed to the training provided by Rainforest Research Institute in Jorhat district of Assam. Last year both units had attended a week's training in forest management at the institute.

While planning trees the values of the trees were taken into account because of felling and immense loss of forest cover. A number of training sessions had been undertaken by the institute. The institute provides latest updates and technical expertise on different plantations management best suited for the soil and climatic condition of the NorthEast India. The battalions do not plant commercially valuable trees like agar, saal, segoon(teak) and the like because they are likely to be chopped down by smugglers for their value. As the fauna of the place need to be sustained they do not go for monocropping, so that in case of diseases or pests the whole section does not die out. The unit chooses from a variety of plantation as per the suitability of the area. Along with the gamari, saal, shisu, radhasura and krishnachura, they plant kalajamun, leteku and guava for primates and birds. On the banks of the river, the strong earth-binding simolu trees are planted to resist erosion. Presently the 134 unit is engrossed in the cause of Nameri National Park and Tiger Reserve planting in the areas of Rangajan. Revival of Rangajan, adjacent to Nameri National Park will allow movement of wildlife from Nameri to Balipara.

It is to be mentioned that in northeast India more than 7% of forest cover has been annually lost since the past several years. "We are implementing the plantation project with a firm objective to grow three million saplings to restore the depleted forest area and bring back an almost similar eco-system as earlier" says Col Narinder Rawat, the Project Officer of 134th unit. His team plants 900 saplings per hectare. The areas were taken over from the State Forest Department with a thin layer of grass and without any tree cover. Most of the areas denuded of

forest cover was under seasonal cultivation. Maintaining the growing saplings or trees is another problem, as the officials of the unit said.

“All personnel of the 134th Eco Task Force are committed to the revival and restoration of the lost glory of the forests of Assam”, said Col. Sherawat, one of the commanders of the 134th unit based in Gamani village along the Balipara-Bhalukpong road in the district. The men in green say, “Handling trees instead of gun was a shock but then again, defending Mother Earth from degradation is an ever greater service and we are proud to be a part of the process.”

It is to be recalled that formation of the ecological battalion was proposed by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to restore the degraded forest. In fact the territorial army mooted and raised the ecological battalion for the noble cause of plantation. Now there are eight Eco Battalions in the country working in three states. Inspired by the success of ETF in some states, on a proposal initiated by government of Assam with the auspices of Ministry of Environment and Forest ETF units were raised in Assam also.

Both the ETF units in Assam mostly comprise ex-servicemen who are trying to bring back the vanishing greens in the stretches of Assam-Arunachal Pradesh and Assam-Bhutan border. With the sole motive to provide employment opportunities to the youths of various parts of the country it is impertinent that governments of other states should set up Eco Task Forces and like Assam set up a Green Regiment as a state force. States which do not have such programs should initiate and formulate policies to safeguard the environmental ecology and generate degraded forests in their states with the help of the masses, and the various government and non-government agencies concerned.

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