

Wildlife Crime Prevention training at Manas



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Subhamoy Bhattacharjee 18 November 2013 9954 views

Under the IFAW: WTI Wildlife Crime Prevention Training programme, a total of 100 frontline forest staff of Manas National Park, Manas Reserve Forest, Kachugaon Reserve Forest and Ripu Reserve Forest in Greater Manas are targeted to be trained and equipped in partnership with the Assam Forest Department and Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC). The first batch of 32 trainees among the four batches from all the three ranges of Manas National Park is undergoing training from Sunday.

Greater Manas is a critical wildlife habitat along the Indo-Bhutan border in Bodoland, Assam, supporting a wide range of flora and fauna including the endangered Asian elephant, Royal Bengal tiger, greater one-horned rhinoceros, golden langur and Bengal florican. A concept, adopted by the Bodoland Territorial Council authorities, the landscape extends over 1500 sq km covering Manas National Park, Manas Reserve Forest and Ripu Reserved Forest. Two participants from Barnadi Wildlife Sanctuary on the easternmost buffer of Manas Tiger Reserve also attended the training.

The training that will go on for a month will see the frontline staff, in batches of 25, brush upon their understanding protection of biodiversity of Greater Manas, threats faced and its conservation. They will learn about identification of animals based on secondary evidence such as pugmarks and horns, about wildlife laws, commercial poaching and trade, important local endemic species in illegal wildlife trade, methods of hunting and the relevant sections of dealing with wildlife crime as per the state's laws (Assam FR 1891) and the Indian (Wildlife) Protection Act of 1972, and a diverse other issues.

Khampa Borgoyary, Deputy Chief of BTC, remarked, "Training, morale boosting and equipping front line staff is very important in conservation. Conducting trainings like these in three crucial areas of Greater Manas is a good initiative to control wildlife crime and impose law and order in the region."

Sonali Ghosh, the Deputy Director – Manas Tiger Reserve, commented on the training, "It is a great initiative taken by IFAW-WTI to train the front line staffs of Forest. It should be done in broader aspects touching the boundaries from western side to eastern landscape of Manas. The local NGOs and CBOs should be included in the learning process as they also stand shoulder to shoulder with Frontline staffs in guarding nature."

Anindya Sawargowari, Field Director, Manas Tiger Reserve (MTR), D D Boro, ACF along with other senior officials attended the inaugural day session. All together 32 participants from all three ranges of Manas National Park have attended the inaugural training session started from Sunday.

Bhupen Talukdar, who is presently serving as Divisional Forest Officer with the Assam State Forest Department is the mentor of the ongoing wildlife crime prevention training conducted by IFAW-WTI at Manas. He has been involved in anti-poaching enforcement for over three decades in Assam. Ritesh Bhattacharjee, who recently retired from his position as Conservator of Forest, Assam State Forest Department and Director of the Assam Forest School, will also be a part of the workshop.

"Forest guards are the backbone of India's wildlife and habitat protection system. They are the guardians of its natural heritage and at the frontline of the fight against poachers and timber smugglers who are sometimes far better armed and equipped. It is thus important that this force remains trained and highly motivated to tackle diverse threats it is being faced with. IFAW-WTI's training modules aim to supplement the government's efforts in strengthening staff morale and sharpening their skills," said Vivek Menon, Executive Director of WTI.

Restoration of wildlife and biodiversity of Manas after the decade long ethnic unrest since early 90s till 2000 was a huge challenge for the government and NGOs. IFAW-WTI was one of the few NGOs who responded to the challenge in partnership with community and local government. IFAW-WTI started the rhino reintroduction programme with rehabilitation of rescued rhino calf 'Mainao' in 2006, after which another 20 rhinos were reintroduced under IRV2020.

Dr Bhaskar Choudhury, Regional Head (Assam) for IFAW-WTI explained more about the training saying, “The recent poaching of five (5) of the reintroduced rhinos during the past two years have highlighted to strengthen the anti-poaching measures in Manas National Park. The anti-poaching and crime prevention training of frontline forest staff has become an urgent need. This training is therefore critical to equip the forest staff to face the challenge of such poaching and other threats emerging at this moment.”

In a bid to equip and strengthen the frontline forest staff of the country, IFAW-WTI has been conducting Wildlife Crime Prevention Training Programmes, under the Van Rakshak Project (VRP) since 2001. VRP follows a multi-pronged strategy with four thrust areas, abbreviated as TEAM: Training, Equipping, Awareness and Morale Boosting, to broadly facilitate capacity building and strengthen spirits of personnel in tough field circumstances.

As part of its morale boosting initiative, VRP runs the only one of its kind umbrella insurance scheme for forest staff all over India. This unique supplemental Accident Insurance Scheme covers over 20000 frontline field staff and their families in case of permanent disability or death while on duty and provides an insurance cover of up to Rs 100,000, which has assisted over 75 families till date and has provide *ex-gratia* support to 32 families.

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BY SUBHAMOY BHATTACHARJEE

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