

Conservation in Nepal - A Success Story

John & Fiona Earle

Nepal is a small mountainous country. From south-east to north-west it is about 250 miles long. From south to north it is about 125 miles. In this distance, the country rises in stages from near sea level in the south to the high Himalayas in the north. This is the highest mountain chain in the Northern hemisphere with Mount Everest the highest of all at the height of 29002 feet. (And still rising!) There are a great many different habitats for birds with about 800 different breeding species in the country representing roughly 10% of the world total.

Pipar

Pipar is a small area in the Annapurna region of Nepal that is a microcosm of the whole. Though only small, the height ranges from 1000m to over 8000m. The main part used for farming lies below 2,500m. Above that there is rhododendron accompanied by pines, oak and bamboo, with a rich shrub layer that is grazed by domestic animals. Between 3,300m and 4000m the habitat is dominated by rhododendron and birch that fades out into Alpine meadows at the tree line at some 4000m.

The area is the breeding ground for five of the six species of Himalayan pheasant, and the only known place where so many species breed close together. It is also home to the wood snipe and the white-rumped vulture that are threatened species world wide.

The Pipar area was discovered in 1997 by Jhalak Thapa, a Nepali. In 1978, Keith Howman (Fiona's cousin) and his wife Jean trekked into the area and confirmed the number of pheasant species. Keith and Jean were founder trustees of the World Pheasant Association (W.P.A.) which was a small group of people who sought to promote the breeding grounds of wild pheasants on a world wide basis.

The findings of a survey in Pipar, conducted by Anthony Lelliot were presented at the first

International Pheasant Survey in Kathmandu in 1979. Thereafter, the conservation of Pipar was in the hands of very few people.

Col. Jimmy Roberts

Jimmy Roberts was to become very influential in conservation in the Pipar area though his early life was in the Army. Born in India in 1916 and educated at Sandhurst, he was commissioned in 1936 and returned to India. At the outbreak of war, he joined 153 Parachute Regiment. He served with great distinction in Burma and was awarded the Military Cross. He was a great mountain climber and when only 22 he took part in an expedition to the 11th highest mountain in the world, Gasherbrum. When Nepal was opened for climbing he made the first ascent of Annapurna 4.

Jimmy Roberts retired from the Army in 1962 and set up Mountain Travel, the first trekking company in Nepal. Jimmy set up his house and collection of pheasants in Pokhara. In 1979, Mountain Travel organised a Scientists' Trek to Pipar after the first W.P.A. conference. After this he devoted more time and thought to the Pipar project. In 1984, he suggested that W.P.A. might provide support to Danfe school as this was the nearest to the Pipar area and the villagers might protect the area from outside hunters. The plan was to make regular payments to the village, through the W.P.A. to provide extra teaching facilities at the school. Government funding of schools is minimal. It does not include desks or benches in classrooms nor does it cover the salary of trainee teachers.

With time, the idea of extra funding spread to other schools in the Seti river area, below Danfe. Nawang Rinzing Sherpa, a Nepali, who had been helping Jimmy Roberts with the pheasants, would take payment for the teachers once a month. When he died in 1997, the Jimmy Roberts Memorial Fund was set up with the specific purpose of helping to fund the schools. A little goes a long way

in Nepal. In 2005, £4000 was enough to help five schools.

In the later 1990's, we were trekking in Nepal and Keith asked us to pay a visit to the schools. We hired some porters, and together with Prakash, our Nepali guide we trekked up about five hours from Pokhara and camped at a village called Dibrung. Nawang came with us to introduce us to the schools. Next day we had a lovely two hour walk up the valley to Danfe. There the Head said he had no loo at the school and no tap for children to wash their hands. This mattered because we knew that 40,000 Nepali children below the age of five died each year from diarrhoeal diseases.

By giving talks, we raised some funds towards their needs. This is a fundamental point. The W.P.A. only provides money. The locals provide the labour and a Nepalese organisation called the Pahar Trust provides the know-how. Since the locals do the work, they have a sense of responsibility for the project.

The next time we were in the area, we were having an early morning cup of tea outside the tent when the Head of High Himali School came to see us and said that no one had been to see his school. "Where is it?" we asked. "Up there" he replied, pointing up the mountain side. "It will take you two hours to get up." The school was in a very dry, very poor part of the area. We thought part of the school needed re-building. We reported this to W.P.A. who sent up a representative who agreed. The Headman (a lovely man who really enjoyed dancing) persuaded the villagers to carry 40 loads of sand and cement each up from the valley floor. Eighteen months later, we revisited the area and the job was done.

On our last night, we had a party. The villagers all turned out, and sang a song of welcome. Then we all danced to tom-toms, and one mother was sharp with her son because he got the rhythms wrong, and she could not dance to it. Finally there was a song of farewell and they all went home. We had a lady porter with us on this trip,

and the next day she remarked that she had never previously been to the village but had never met such love and affection. Where could anything like that come about in the U.K.? We have memories of the sounds of children playing together in the paddy fields near the tent. There were about thirty of them, of all ages. They were running races, laughing, playing hopscotch. As the light began to fade and the stars came out they began to drift away up to their homes. Then the valley was quiet except for the barking of jackals and the village dogs.

From here we can see the poverty in third world countries, and indeed it does exist. From there, we can see the freedom of many of their children, and the existence of a community. We can contrast this with the uncertainty and apprehension that has come into the lives of many of our children.

Up in Pipar, surveys have been carried out. These have shown that pheasant numbers remain stable and that the forest remains largely unspoilt. This is a great contrast to many parts of Nepal where forest areas have been destroyed for firewood. In 2007, funds were available to hold a workshop on the subject of wildlife for local village heads, teachers and pupils. Conservation is not a static concept. All the time those involved in conservation must seek a realistic balance between preserving an environment for wild life and enabling villagers to use the area to meet their economic needs.

We thank all those who come to our produce stall after church. The stall takes about £1,000 p.a. By general agreement, one third goes to the schools in the Pipar area.

One third goes to a rural hospital. (We used to fund Amp Pipal Hospital, where Nick and Ros Henwood worked. However it has changed composition, so we have transferred the funding to Okhuldanga Hospital that is in a very poor area in Eastern Nepal.)

The final third goes to All Saints Church.