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editor's note |



Cover art by Pencil Sauce

Species on the brink of extinction are listed in Acts and Schedules, and directed conservation efforts are directed to protect their populations. What should happen when, as a result of these efforts, their numbers rise and the species recover? Should they now be categorised as 'Not so Endangered'? Catlin Kight examines the case of the iconic Bald Eagle, listed and subsequently delisted in the USA. Janaki Lenin and Sandesh Kadur take us through a powerful visual tour of hunting practices in Northeast India, and in this photofeature they ask if such practices can be banned, or if such a ban is justified?

In this issue, we introduce 'Then and Now', a new section that presents viewpoints from the present and compares this to the past. A group of avid birders visit Vembanad, one of India's largest wetlands, 70 years after Salim Ali documented its avifauna, and compare the present to the past. The change in the landscape and the impact on fauna reflect political and social changes, and Cody Patterson explores the top-down approach to management in Vembanad that has altered the entire ecology of the wetland. Over the next few issues, we will follow these enthusiasts as they revisit Salim Ali's explorations in Kerala, walking his trails, and on the same dates of the year.

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Clouded Leopard *Neofelis nebulosa* in Northeast India

Populations of these endangered carnivores are declining, as the skin, claws and teeth are used in decoration and clothing, and the meat and bones are used as a substitute for tiger meat.



Sandesh Kadur

Hunting in India

Hunting is a traditional way of life in many parts of Northeast India, and even law-makers exercise these customary rights. This photofeature provides a glimpse into these practices and asks if change is possible, or justified?

Text by Janaki Lenin, Photographs by Sandesh Kadur





The tall rainforests of the Western Ghats are small but rich with wildlife. While in the Northeast, one can hike through the extensive forests and see very little. The reason: hunting.

Although wildlife protection came into force in the late 1970s, hunting for subsistence dropped in mainland India only when farmed meat became easily available. Cultural disdain for hunting may have also played a role. In the Northeast, however, it continues to be a way of life.

Hunting provides their main source of meat, recreation, medicine, and ornaments. Even if farmed meat became available, most hunters say they love the spirit of the chase and the gamey flavour of wild meat to give up hunting. When it is so ingrained in their culture, it is a challenge to convince them of the need to desist from taking wildlife.

Home-reared poultry, pigs and mithun are insufficient and expensive as a regular source of meat and are reserved for festive occasions and sale. So the tribes of the Northeast hunt wild ungulates and primates. Despite hunting being a widespread and intense activity, the local diet is largely rice and boiled leaves with spicy chutney. They eat animal protein less frequently than do mainland Indians. When the human population was low, weapons were traditional and the main use of wild meat was sustenance, hunting was sustainable. But that's not the case anymore. In the Northeast, the Forest Department controls a fraction of the forests. The rest is owned by communities. Besides farming and small-scale entrepreneurship, there is no other opportunity for employment in large parts of the region. Modern weapons are now easily available to the growing human population. Hunting has become a pastime as well as a means of earning a living. Animals such as tigers, elephants, musk deer, bears, and otters fetch high prices on the black market. For predators such as tigers, hunting delivers a double-blow: not only are they targeted for their highly-priced body-parts, their prey is also being wiped out. In 1984, Jared Diamond, the author of *Collapse*, listed over-hunting as one of the "evil quartet", or "four horsemen of the ecological apocalypse". Indeed, in many parts of the region, forests look pristine but are empty of large mammals. Although the forests of the Northeast and Southeast Asia are similar, fewer numbers of large animals are found here.

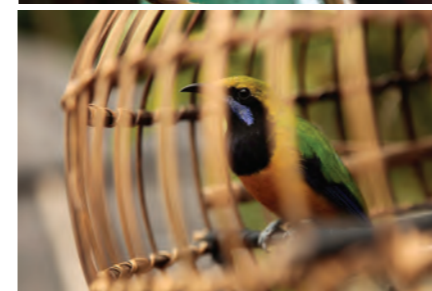
Paradoxically, new species of birds and mammals are still being discovered such as the Arunachal macaque, a leaf deer, and a black barking deer. The very remoteness of the place that preserved the forests is only now revealing its secrets to science. Even as scientists discover these animals, they are in danger of being hunted to extinction.

Left: Skulls of ungulates hang to dry in an old man's hut in a village in Arunachal Pradesh.



Left: Frogs hanging to dry in a village, Arunachal Pradesh

Below (in order of appearance): Close up of frogs hanging to dry. Bird in a cage. Boy holding up a dead bulbul. These scenes from a village in NE India illustrate how common the use of wildlife is.



The primary challenge is to enable the tribes to realize that wild fauna are of greater value alive than dead. For example, following the discovery of *Bugun Liocichla*, a new species of babbler, by a community-based eco-tourism project based at Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary, there was widespread international attention and appreciation. Such affirmative action enables local tribesmen who have grown up seeing anything that flies or walks as food, to appreciate their natural beauty and ecological value.

In Chizami, Nagaland, the North East Network, a NGO previously engaged with public health, women's rights and promoting traditional methods of farming, is now working to reduce the impact of hunting. Two years ago, teachers from seven districts were trained using specifically tailored education programs to inculcate a love and appreciation of nature and wildlife in school kids. This was followed by the establishment of a nature club whose twenty members, aged 10 to 14, have sworn not to hunt or eat wild meat. At an exhibition of their wildlife and nature photographs, the children spontaneously requested their parents to pledge never to hunt, kill or eat wild animals.

However, Chizami is close to the state capital, Kohima, and is well connected to hospitals, schools, and employment opportunities. Since hunting was merely a pastime during the fallow agricultural season, it may have been easier to make people understand.

In Arunachal, where basic facilities are lacking in most parts of the state, at least hunting for recreation and economic opportunity can be reduced by providing employment opportunities, and increased policing of the international trade in animal parts. But this is easier said than done. Some of the extensive forest cover would necessarily have to be traded for setting up industries. Infrastructure projects such as dams are seen by many as a source of revenue. The total forest cover of the country is 19%, of which Arunachal contributes 2%. With forests said to soak up the carbon fumes of our consumptive lifestyles, is this a trade-off worth making? Is the cure worse than the disease?

There's unlikely to be one solution for the entire region. Getting communities to eschew hunting may need to work program by program, location by location. But for many forests, time may be running out. Yet, there is no option but to negotiate and work with tribal communities, as more than half the forest land is owned by them. Instead of being modern-day missionaries, conservationists can at best be the facilitators, providing advice, expertise and new imaginative ideas while inspiring communities to make a commitment to protect their biodiversity.

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