

3. DIBRU-SAIKOWA NATIONAL PARK & MAGURI BEEL

An example of a national park almost entirely within the river, Dibru-Saikhowa is very rich in biodiversity, but human settlements within the boundaries present intractable obstacles to the effective management and conservation of a rich grassland habitat and a potential rhino reintroduction site. It boasts of large mammals like elephants and wild buffalo, feral horses and over 493 species of birds.



Photo: A flock of migratory bar-headed geese at the Maguri Beel



Ranjan Das, Professor of Geography and Ornithologist, Motapung-Maguri Wetlands

Dibru-Saikhowa National park has about 483 species of birds. The Motapung-Maguri Beels adjacent, but outside the park, have 293 species. Recently a white-bellied heron was sighted here. These wetlands are fed annually by the backflow of the Brahmaputra during the rainy season and gets rejuvenated. The level of water is important for the wetlands. There are 11 villages dependent on these wetlands with their people engaged in fishing. Here is a classic example of community conservation. Earlier this wetland was a killing field for birds. Now some unemployed youth are engaged with bird tourism and with few exceptions, most people have become concerned about bird conservation. Most of the wetlands inside Dibru-Saikhowa National Park have silted over. The birds therefore come here, where the wetland still exists.

The wildlife of the Brahmaputra valley is adapted to the fluvial system. There are 22 important tributaries on the North Bank and 11 on the south bank. The river and its tributaries together impact the wildlife, whether birds, mammals or aquatic species. The flood rejuvenates the ecosystem. Now, however, due to encroachment and construction of river banks/dykes the flow of water into and out of the wetlands is negatively impacted. In Arunachal Pradesh, it is proposed to build 165 dams to produce 50,000 MW of electricity. But there will be tremendous downstream impacts on the wildlife, changing the entire ecosystem and conflict will increase. It will impact our agriculture systems as well, so the future looks bleak.

We need development, considering the socio-economic point of view. But development does not mean we destroy habitats – our grasslands, wetlands, rivers and forests. We need a holistic plan, because not just the wildlife but the life of the people depends on this fluvial system whether agriculture, fisheries etc. Planners, politicians and people must be conscientious about conservation. There are some options – mini and micro dams, we have alternative sources of power. This way we can make the entire ecosystem suitable for wildlife.



Puru Gupta, IAS

Deputy Commissioner, Tinsukia

Dibru-Saikhowa is an important natural resource of the state and its flora and fauna are an integral part of Tinsukia district. It is a national park now, but there is a large number of families who are dependent on the resources of the forest, and many families are also staying inside the forests. There is an effort to rehabilitate these people, and they themselves are keen on getting out of the Park and an ever-increasing demand from them to this end. I believe it should be done in a mission-mode in a planned way. It is a large island inside the Brahmaputra, so there are problems of erosion and flooding for people and animals living inside. It is yet to gain the kind of attention which it deserves. There is a lot to be done in terms of conservation. We need to find long-lasting solutions. I feel the big question we need to ask ourselves is whether we are doing enough in terms of conservation. Is it really proportional to the damage that is accruing to the wildlife? If the answer is no, we really need to do something about it and do it fast. We need to first of all bring about sensitisation at a very large scale. Unless and until this feeling of oneness and interdependence with the forest and wildlife happens, and people realise that they can co-exist, and they also realise that there is no alternative other than co-existence, then the perishing of forests and wildlife will also sound the death knell for mankind.

A large number of people are dependent for their livelihood on the Brahmaputra and the forests. People get firewood from the forest and depend on wood and timber. They fish in water surrounding the forests. Now there is a greater awareness with regard to conservation. Side by side, if tourism also can be promoted in an eco-friendly manner, that will also go a long way in promoting conservation efforts. A large number of tourists have started coming in, and a large number of tour operators also started operating

here. A large amount of fund infusion is required to sustain eco-tourism, to bring about awareness. We need experts to come and tell people how to go about expanding their little businesses and how to do the things they are doing in a better way without bringing about lasting damage to the forest and wildlife. I think this will promote conservation efforts in the long run. There are lot of technical issues involved, and while the local people are a repository of traditional knowledge, but in the current times there is a need to mould their traditional knowledge into a technical frame of looking at things. Once this is done, it will bring about a more responsible attitude, an attitudinal change among people and foster conservation efforts.