

# “Friends of the Amur Falcon”

Year Two Report (2014-15)

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## Summary

For the second year running, the Amur Falcon conservation efforts in Pangti and Sungro villages in Wokha district of Nagaland passed off successfully. This year, as in 2013, the migration of the falcons continued in full swing along the Doyang reservoir and there were no killings reported.

The government, the forest department, local NGOs and, not the least, the local communities extended their conservation efforts for the second year to ensure there were no trapping of the birds.

This year, while Nagaland continued to report no killings, there were confirmed reports of hunting from Umrangso, Assam and Tamenglong, Manipur. However, conservation action in both sites are underway.

## Community engagement

In several areas, this year saw the conservation efforts reach new grounds. This season, the local community demonstrated more ownership by creating the Amur Falcon Roosting Areas Union (AFRAU), which setup check posts and carried out patrolling during the season. Earlier, the forest department, along with the local community, built a couple of watchtowers overlooking strategic parts of the reservoir to offer great and uninterrupted views of the falcon congregations.

Two more Ecoclubs were added to the existing base bringing the total to five with a total of 98 students. Significantly, the Village Council of Pangti actively participated in the creation of a second Ecoclub under the Friends of the Amur Falcon conservation education. The Village Council Chairman himself inaugurated the 2nd Enimin Ecoclub in Pangti on February 14, 2015.

Another Ecoclub also began in the neighbouring village of Okhotso with 25 students, in February 2015.

The year also saw the Nagaland Wildlife and Biodiversity Conservation Trust (NWBCT) engage more with the community, through community based ecotourism workshops and refresher courses for the students and leaders of the community. Efforts at initiating more organized homestay experiences to engage with the community were also put in place.

## Ecoclub activities in 2014–15

The Amur Falcon Manual created in 2013 continued to be in use in the Ecoclubs for the second year with the 'Akao' (Green Barbet) Ecoclub in Doyang, the 'Vungi' (Amur Falcon) Ecoclub in Sungro and the 'Enimin' (Amur Falcon) Ecoclubs (2 nos) in Pangti.

In addition to this manual, the educators have also been using the 'Under the Canopy', a manual produced by 'Dusty Foot', that contains content specific to the varied biodiversity of the NE India.

As an addition to this year's curriculum, all Ecoclub children received a welcome gift – a copy of "Amy the Marathon Migrant" – a lovely children's book that proved to be a big hit!



This year, as in the previous year, the high point for students and educators alike was the workshop by a visiting resource person.

During the beginning of the Amur falcon migration season in October, a four day conservation education refresher workshop for educators and students was held from October 9th to 12th 2014 by Sanjay Sondhi, of Titli Trust.

### **Conservation education workshop objectives:**

1. Introduction to Amur Falcon, its ecology, its importance, the threats and the need to conserve it. How they can help.
2. Introduction to natural history and how to observe it. Focus on moths and butterflies. Introduce the educators to other fauna and build curiosity – birds, insects, amphibians and reptiles, etc.
3. Plan activities the Ecoclubs can conduct after the workshops.

The workshop taught the trainers/educators how to conduct nature walks with their students as well as throw light on the biodiversity of the area. Mr. Sondhi also held interactive classes with students of the Ecoclubs using games, quizzes and short films to encourage the students to get curious about their environment.

As an immediate follow up to this workshop, NWBCT member and programme head, Rokohebi Kuotsu, held an internal assessment with the trainers in the last week of November. He is of the opinion that more interaction between educators and experts in their respective fields is necessary to uplift the quality of teaching in the Ecoclubs.

The current strength of the Ecoclubs :

Name of Club	Location	No: of Students	Educator	Year Formed
Akao (Barbet)	Doyang	16	Thungjamo	Sept 2013
Vungi (Falcon)	Sungro	23	Yipeni	Sept 2013
Enimin (Falcon) 1	Pangti	19	Janbemo	Sept 2013
Enimin (Falcon) 2	Pangti	15	Lijon	Feb 2015
Okhotso	Okhotso	25	Lungshibemo	Feb 2015

Ecoclub classes during the months of December 2014 and January 2015 were disrupted with two of the Educators occupied with a flood of church programmes over Christmas and New Year and the onset of school exams.

## Ecotourism

Tourism also saw a boost with the community more organized than 2013 and more families benefiting during the season. The Nagaland chief minister T.R. Zeliang who visited the area on Nov 9th 2014 said that the roosting area of the Amur Falcons had the potential to become one of the best tourist spots not only in Nagaland but also in the country. There have been initiatives to develop ecotourism in these villages to try and create a livelihood for erstwhile hunters. Several community members have created homestays to cater to the trickle of tourists. October and November 2014 also saw the village turn into a tourist destination with several thousand domestic and other travellers arrive in Pangti to see the spectacle of the migration. The NWBCT members in Pangti and Doyang were instrumental in providing logistic arrangements for many of these members that included the Silverback Film crew commissioned by the BBC to document the phenomenon and a National Geographic team.

Earlier in summer 2014, to introduce the concept of community-managed ecotourism, 'Help Tourism' a leading organization that helps set up community-based tourism across the Northeast held a two day meeting with members of the village council and potential homestay

owners. Raj Basu and Asit Biswas of Help Tourism, in their visit on May 23-25th, 2014, repeatedly emphasized that the community must form an Ecotourism Management Committee, which unfortunately the village has failed to create till date.

The need for the community to harness the potential of tourism was also identified by the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) who in September 2014, held a two day workshop on 'Ecotourism Management'. It was attended by the Village Council members and other leaders in the community. Despite the absence of the community based Ecotourism Committee several interested individuals were assisted with inputs to manage home stays with assistance in planning the menu and budgeting lodging and food arrangements. The input enabled the Khel D community to accommodate batches of young travellers from Kohima in their community 'Morung' or dormitory.

Pangti village recorded as many as 2000+ visitors of which 150 stayed overnight in the homestays that have sprung up. The longest 'stay' was by the filmmaker crews. This not only encouraged the homestay owners but NWBCT also bargained that each of the teams donate one Western toilet to the households as barter against logistic arrangements. The two film crews gladly obliged. There are now three home stays in Pangti with western toilets, in the homes of Nzan Tsoponi, T.B Jami and Mhonjan Humtsoi.

## Hunting update

The Umrangso killings were reported last year by NWBCT and local NGOs have been working with the communities to stop the killings. The Manipur incidents were not known till this year. In both places, efforts are underway with local NGOs, forest department and the army trying to control the hunting. NWBCT is extending support to these local groups.

Like in the case of Nagaland, it is likely that these killings have been going on for years with hunters capitalising on these mass stopovers

during migration. Since traditional hunting and bushmeat consumption is rampant in these areas, nobody would have assumed a few dead falcons in markets as indicative of a “mass slaughter”. Given the heightened awareness of Amur Falcons in the last couple of years, the local media is taking lead now and reporting these incidents. But it shows that the problem is serious as it is widespread across the Northeast.

Under the 'Friends of the Amur Falcon' a similar campaign could be introduced in the areas by partnering with groups working in these areas.

This season, NWBCT reached out to People for Animals (PFA), Manipur with posters and other material such as “Amy the Marathon Migrant” children’s book. It was heartening to learn that the PFA Manipur, conducted a sensitisation seminar along with the Forest Department for the local populace. They also effectively used ‘theatre’, a popular medium in the state to convey the message of conservation.

Lack of awareness and the availability of gun powder from across neighbouring Myanmar pose as two big hurdles to be addressed to champion for conservation.

An enormous effort is required at all roosting sites in the Northeast to stop the killings once and for all. It needs a lot of will and coordination between NGOs, local governments and the communities engaged in hunting. NWBCT hopes to extend its engagement proactively with groups in neighbouring states in the coming season.

## Other activities

In February 2015, with funds received during the visit of the then Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio in 2013, an overnight tour was organized for 70 Ecoclub students, educators and two village headmen to Kaziranga National Park in Assam. The trip provided the children with a one-in-a-lifetime opportunity to view a forest in a radically different manner ... as a living organ with a rich plethora of birds, animals and trees existing with

little human threats. One high point of the visit was the time spent with the elephants and their mahouts. The children saw the elephants fed, bathe and were treated to an elephant ride. They touched the animal, its trunk and even sang the 'Amur Falcon' song to them!

For a community facing severe conflict with elephants and also known to kill the animal for its meat, this interlude will hopefully be the beginning in ending this strife and for the younger generation to explore sustainable means for elephants (125 elephants in Baghty valley and adjoining areas) and villagers to coexist.

On March 8, 2015 the trainers of the five Ecoclubs with a few of the students participated in the Big Bird Day.

### **Programmes in the Pipeline**

1. Hold a refresher course in June with external resource people.
2. A community request to clear the Doyang reservoir of debris carried by rivers and streams with assistance from the district administration and the paramilitary force in the area.
3. Hold a Farmers Day to educate the students on the biodiversity of their fields on June 5th.

### **Overall assessment and priorities**

As another year ends with satisfactory results, there is still a lot to be desired in the coming years. A constant engagement with the community (children, hunters, elders and the Church) reminding them about the importance of conserving the falcons, a solid curriculum to strengthen the "training the trainer" programme, better streamlining of ecotourism initiatives and, not the least, a continuous dialogue and partnership with the forest department and the Government of Nagaland will ensure that Amur Falcons forever fly free over the waters of the Doyang Reservoir.

## Lessons learnt in the last two years

The impact of the campaign that ran on Conservation India in Oct 2012 on the slaughter of the falcons was intense and immediate.

Was there any other way to have addressed the issue? At that moment and time, the answer would be No.

The storm in the media on the issue came in 2010 in the form of a ban prohibiting the hunting and sale of the Amur Falcons issued by the Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Wokha district. But clearly this order had not been implemented and not pursued in the following years as hunting continued unabated.

It is in this backdrop that the Amur Falcon Conservation Education Awareness initiative was conceptualized.

## Achievements since 2012

- Reintroducing the importance of conservation to the community

When the Amur Falcon Conservation Education programme began in 2013 it was a new concept for the villagers. Parents and community leaders in Pangti, Sungro and Doyang had never known of any conservation interventions in the past.

The 'free' education component as well as stipend for the educators helped lay the tracks for the Eco Clubs.

- Establishing Credibility

The Amur Falcon manuals also went a long way in communicating to the community that the Eco Clubs were not going to be a fly by night operation that their children would gain by attending the Eco Clubs.

In the past two years the acceptance of the establishment of the Eco Clubs can be considered a significant achievement. This is manifest in the

nod of approval for two more Eco Clubs in the area, namely in Okhotso and a second one in Pangti.

The presence of the Eco Clubs provided a platform for the dissemination of known facts of the Amur Falcon while also engaging the community to share their knowledge and observation of the birds.

- Alternate Livelihood

With the Amur Falcon conservation efforts many visitors have begun arriving to the site to view this spectacle. Several households have also come forward to provide a room or two for home stay experiences during the migration season. Before the Amur Falcon story the area had 'nil' tourism spite of the picturesque Doyang reservoir. No doubt a lot more needs to be done in infrastructure and capacity building but 'tourism' around the migration and the conservation story has immense potential.

### **What did not work as expected; how would these be addressed in the future**

We expected that the conservation of one species in this case the Amur Falcons would raise questions within the community about the hunting of other wildlife such as other birds, deer, wild cats, as well as elephants.

This has clearly not happened. Hunting of other species continues unabated throughout the year. For this 'change in attitude' a lot more intervention needs to be done to highlight the biodiversity of the area (in a participatory manner with the community) and to articulate that hunting is illegal and the violator stands to get punished.

The need for traditional knowledge to be married to scientific methods / technologies is imperative to support the community's spiritual approach to conservation.

The Educators for the Eco Clubs also require a lot more exposure and training. We have tried to build up these capacities with various workshops but it is still a long way to go.

Right now we are largely relying on the Educators to teach from the material provided in the Amur Falcon and Under the Canopy training manuals. They also have other reference materials on Birds of India, and materials from Titli Trust on Butterflies of NE India. We could do better with a library of sorts both video and magazines on ecology!

One hope was the community would see the potential of tourism and this would become a rallying point for all stakeholders in the Amur Falcon migration phenomenon.

This has not happened. The differences within the community and a huge trust deficit in the village council members itself is proving to be an impediment in addressing the set up of an effective Eco Tourism Management Committee which any party wanting to intervene in the area of tourism could co ordinate their efforts with.

There are several factors quite out of control of a nascent initiative like ours made all the more complicated by the intervention of other NGOs and the Forest Department that have contributed to conservation getting equated with compensation.

An MOU with the village Council and the Forest Department by a large NGO promising 'development' if the villagers stop the massacre of the Amur Falcons is a grim reality that has contributed to this equation making the education task more challenging since there is no compensation involved. What we can do is to build up the capacity of the community. For this we will need to look at key areas which could sustain livelihoods.

Some suggestions below:

1. One argument since the ban on the hunt and sale of the Amur Falcons is that many families are now unable to support all their children to attend school. Can a scholarship for at least 25 needy children be granted? The school tuition fees are approximately Rs 200 to Rs 300 per month. This works out to  $Rs\ 300 \times 12 \times 25 = Rs\ 90,000$  annually. Can this support be extended till the selected child completes their High School i.e class X?
2. Fishing is a major occupation of the population here after the creation of the reservoir in the early 2000s. Connecting the community to a successful fishing community elsewhere in the country could help this 'non-traditional' fishing community manage their resources in a smarter way. This could also help the fishermen to better organize themselves and also access better nets and 'technology' to improve their livelihood.

### **Extending the programme to other areas**

While it is too early to extend the programme to other areas where hunting is prevalent in its entirety it is important to get local groups and government involved in creating awareness and enforcing the law given that hunting is illegal.

Developing the capacity of educators to the desired competency is an important task while setting up Eco Clubs in new areas not to mention a favourable traction with the local community. We could perhaps frame out a programme in the near future for the village council members and local groups from districts of Assam (Halflong), Longleng and Mon (Nagaland) and Tamenglong (Manipur) to visit the Amur Falcon area in Doyang to witness and understand the functioning of the Eco Clubs as a precursor before directly setting foot in the new villages.