

Report on Educational Visit to Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary

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The economics students of NLU Assam (3rd Sem, 5th Sem & 7th Sem) visited Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary where they were able to gather valuable insights into its biodiversity, challenges, and conservation efforts. The information gathered stems from interviews with forest officials, locals, workers, and tourists. The sanctuary is home to a diverse range of fauna and flora serves as a vital habitat for the Indian one-horned rhinoceros.

Aim of the Visit

- To analyze how eco-tourism initiatives contribute to local economic growth and community involvement while ensuring sustainable biodiversity conservation.
- To study the sanctuary's conservation practices, including measures for protecting the Indian rhinoceros and mitigating challenges like poaching and floods.

Key Findings

1. Wildlife Population

The sanctuary houses **107 rhinoceroses**, along with water buffaloes, barking deers, leopards (notably in the Burha-Mayong region), and various bird species like Serpent Eagles, Spot-billed Ducks, Ferruginous Ducks, Owls, and Egrets. Elephants are also part of the ecosystem.

2. Conservation Measures

Surveys to monitor wildlife populations are conducted every **5–6 years** manually. The next survey is scheduled for **January 2025**.

Anti-poaching efforts include tent camps and routine patrols. Poaching remains a significant threat, with rhino horns fetching around ₹3 crore per kg on the black market.

Flood management is addressed through the establishment of highlands for animal refuge.

3. Tourism and Employment

Employment opportunities include roles in the **Eco Development Committee (EDC)**, tourism, and picnic spot management.

Tourism is negatively impacted by poor road conditions, frequent floods, and heavy rainfall leading to the cancellation of safaris.

The sanctuary has **20 jeeps** and **14 elephants** for safaris. Elephants are also used for night patrols, enhancing security against poaching and monitoring wildlife activity. The wildlife sanctuary has no wild elephants except those domesticated by the forest department.

Eco-tourism initiatives follow the **Wildlife Protection Act, 1972**, ensuring regulated safaris and equitable revenue distribution.

The tourism year begins during the winter and sanctuary witnessed a total of **20,000 tourist** during the last year while, for the present year the sanctuary has already witnessed an influx of **7000 tourist** accounting for both Indian Nationals and foreign tourists.

4. **Patrolling and Staffing**

A team of **20 Forest officials** works as guides during the day and conducts **patrolling at night** to ensure the safety of wildlife and prevent poaching activities.

5. **Human-Wildlife Conflict**

During winter, food scarcity drives rhinos and water buffaloes into local vegetable gardens, creating conflicts with farmers.

6. **Community Involvement**

The **Assam Project on Forest and Biodiversity Conservation (APFBC)** is a significant initiative aimed at sustainable management of forests and biodiversity, particularly focusing on areas like Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary.

Under this scheme **Economic Development Committee** are formed which plays a crucial role in promoting economic development through biodiversity conservation and livelihood enhancement. According to the Ouguri EDC micro-plan, these committees facilitate sustainable forest management and empower communities through activities like:

- Promoting livelihoods based on forest products.
- Enhancing market access for local goods. Under this scheme various shops are opened around the entrance of Pobitora where the people from surrounding local communities are able to sell their finished products.
- Conducting skill-development programs.

Fringe villages around Pobitora rely heavily on forest resources, underscoring the importance of participatory conservation strategies.

7. **Challenges**

Annual floods, lack of grass during winters, and **poor infrastructure** pose significant challenges to conservation and tourism.

Since there are no natural predators like big cats in this sanctuary region, the local population of the fringe villages send out their cattle to graze in the sanctuary, which causes a scarcity of fodder for the inhabitant rhinos and water buffaloes of the sanctuary.

Legal Framework for Tourism

- **Conservation Laws:** Governed under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, ensuring species and habitat protection. Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary, protected under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, balances biodiversity conservation with community development. It supports endangered species like rhinos, offers eco-tourism (including water safaris), and engages 27 fringe villages through livelihood initiatives, anti-poaching efforts, and compensation schemes, fostering sustainable coexistence and economic growth for the region.
- **Conflict Mitigation:** Policies include compensation mechanisms for crop damage and prevention strategies for human-wildlife conflicts.
- **Eco-Tourism Guidelines:** Safari operations are scheduled to minimize environmental impact and maximize community benefits, with designated time slots for elephant rides and Jeep safaris.
- **Tourist Rights and Protections:** Safety regulations and consumer protection laws ensure secure and ethical tourism practices. Further, tourists engaging in safaris are provided with guards to ensure their protection.

From an economic perspective, legal tourism generates significant revenue. Proceeds from safaris, entry fees, and other activities contribute to community welfare through **Eco Development Committees (EDCs)**. A portion of tourism revenue supports local employment, skill development, and infrastructure projects, fostering economic growth while promoting conservation efforts. This synergy between tourism and economic benefits underscores the importance of sustainable practices in protected areas.

Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary is a critical biodiversity hotspot that balances conservation and community development. Addressing infrastructural shortcomings, strengthening anti-poaching measures, and fostering sustainable tourism could further enhance its ecological and economic significance.

