

We worked together after the 2004 tsunami when he came to spend a few weeks in Pondicherry to prepare the maps for his tsunami report. We decided that we had to do a project together there. We came up with a project on the preparation of and marketing virgin coconut oil, that was traditionally used by the Nicobaris. In May 2007, we spent a week in the Nicobars working on a prototype. It took another year to get funding, and then I had problems getting a tribal pass. The reason for this is still not clear. On January 15 this year I called Ravi to tell him that I was returning the funds to the Department of Science and Technology, since I didn't see the tribal pass happening. He told me to fight it out. I am now sitting at the ANET dining

table in Wandoor, where we have spent many great, and many totally forgettable evenings together, waiting for my flight to the Nicobars tomorrow.

My organisation, FERAL, had organised a seminar on coastal management after the tsunami, in August last year. By this time, Ravi had been induced to come onto our Research Advisory Board, and we had decided that he would handle the tough job of chairing the final discussion. How do you run a seminar where half of them are from the Forest Department and the other half researchers, and still stop the fur flying? As it turned out it was one of the best seminars I have ever attended, with a lot of serious science being spoken and taken note of.

How does one end the eulogy of a friend - one of the most challenging, exasperating, fun, provocative and plainly stark raving mad persons I've had the privilege to know? Rewind to the one minute silence in his homage at the BNHS 125th anniversary conference in Bangalore a few weeks ago. The projection booth operator, on seeing everyone stand up, hit the button for the national anthem. Through most of that minute we were treated to the antics of the organisers trying to get him to switch it off. Ravi was laughing the hardest, I'm sure.

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Looking beyond Acknowledgements

Soumya Prasad and Ambika Aiyadurai

Over the past 30 years of scientific enquiries, field biology in India has relied upon a variety of people from various backgrounds, cultures, and regions. A good team of field assistants is a core part of every field biology research project. Not only would it have been impossible to work in these remote regions without the active participation of local field assistants, but it also would have meant losing out on the unique insights into our research subjects that are gained through field assistants on several occasions. Even a brief glance at the mountain of ecological literature would bring home this point through the glowing tributes to field assistants which make up the bulk of acknowledgement sections of theses, reports and papers alike.

Occasionally, some contributions by field assistants are reflected in products of these research projects. The British naturalist, Edgar Layard, named a new flycatcher *Muscicapa muttui*, after his tamil cook, Muttu (Beolens and Watkins 2003). Aparajita Datta, who works on hornbills, and conservation issues in north-eastern India, included her field assistant, Japang Pansa, as a co-author in a paper that reported the discovery of the leaf deer in India (Datta *et al.* 2003). Similarly, Manish Chandi, a researcher based in the Andaman and Nicobar islands, has included his assistants as co-authors in project reports. Yet, like Chandi, many field biologists feel that they want to give back something more to their assistants and to their communities than just salaries and acknowledgements.

This sentiment has been echoed across the board by researchers working with various institutions and communities, in every part of this sub-continent. Most researchers would admit that there is a big gap between what researchers gain from their field assistants and what they are able to give back to them. Still, after over three decades of active field research by Indian nationals within India, we haven't formalised ways in which to acknowledge such contributions.

Two 'Betta Kurumba' tribals from Mudumalai – Bomma and Krishna – have been assisting field biologists for nearly four decades; these two men have probably had the longest careers as field assistants in India. They started off working with the Bombay Natural



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History Society (BNHS) projects in the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary in Tamil Nadu. They have now been with the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) for the last two decades and continue to actively participate in field research at Mudumalai even today, well after both of them have become grandfathers and are in their 50s. They are excellent naturalists, a treasure trove of knowledge on Mudumalai's flora and fauna and experts at implementation of various field research techniques. Bomma's caring nature and sense of humour, and Krishna's excellent field tracking skills have accompanied many field biologists on their quests in these forests. Their work has contributed to over a dozen doctorates and several masters dissertations from this dry forest landscape.

Bomma and Krishna are rare exceptions to the general rule. Most field projects have 3-5 year tenures after which field assistants have to find other means of livelihood. Some get back to farming, others work as labourers, a few find employment with the Forest Department. Very few of them manage to get another opportunity to work with field research projects again. At the end of a field project, concerned researchers attempt to help find jobs for these assistants or help them financially in some manner,

often from their own meagre resources. Projects seldom budget such expenditure and very rarely do research institutions provide provident fund, gratuity or insurance benefits for field assistants. To put it crudely, research projects use local field assistants and then dump them rather unceremoniously. There are indeed few formal institutionalised norms for dealing with this issue. One exemplary attempt to address some of these concerns at an institutional level has been the Nature Conservation Foundation's (NCF) field assistants' fund (see box).

Most field assistants are inclined towards natural history and their research

subjects after having spent the prime of their life in field research, and often find it difficult to pursue other professions. We must realize that we are losing a case for conservation here when trained people - who could be valuable resources for the local Forest Department or other conservation and research projects - end up as farm or industrial labourers. Several research teams across the country have come to this very conclusion independently and have engaged their field assistants in innovative, mutually beneficial arrangements where the local assistants have become the centre point of conservation attempts in these landscapes. For example, Akhi Nathany from the *Lisu* tribe of Arunachal Pradesh is the co-ordinator of the NCF field base at Namdapha National Park. Akhi who used to hunt extensively in the past, got hooked to natural history while working with field biologists who came to Namdapha. Today, Akhi uses his immense knowledge about the forest and its inhabitants to educate his fellow villagers about the need for wildlife conservation.

This issue of *Current Conservation* carries several examples of novel initiatives that involve field assistants in promoting conservation, while also providing them a livelihood. In many of these cases, field assistants were trained for other

Field assistants' fund

In the late 1990s, as an active collaborative research project at Kalakad-Mundanturai Tiger Reserve was coming to an end, one of the field assistants, Poovan, fell sick with a terminal illness. The researchers on this project, some of whom were part of the NCF, actively sought funds to help their ailing assistant since they could not bear all the expenses themselves. Unfortunately, in spite of their efforts, Poovan succumbed to his illness. After providing financial relief to his family, there was still some money left in the fund that they had raised. They decided to set this money aside to help other researchers and their assistants who face similar situations. Many individuals in the research and conservation community have now contributed to this fund which operates as an emergency fund that is open not only for NCF's field assistants but also for field assistant working in any research and conservation project in India. The fund provides financial assistance for medical treatment and other emergencies. For example, a field assistant who lost a considerable part of his property when his house caught fire was provided with financial help to overcome this tragedy. The only requirement for getting this fund is a letter to NCF from either from field assistant or the researcher with the contact addresses and phone numbers (more details are available at www.ncf-india.org).

additional skills that were required for carrying out awareness or sensitisation campaigns (Dorje, Turtle Boys, Irulas), conservation education at local schools (Dorje), and additional language skills useful for eco-tourism (Mangu). However, given the diversity of people and their landscapes, it is hard to draw generalisations, and there are many lessons to be learnt by taking a closer look at some of the attempts to engage with local communities outlined here.

Information about field assistants, their field and language skills, and contact details already exists within the informal wildlife grapevine. It is high time that this information is organised and made available to a larger network of people and institutions involved in Indian wildlife conservation and research. We hope the articles in this issue prompt institutions

and people involved in field research in this country to pursue this actively and generate a database on field assistants that can be accessed by researchers across the country. We also need to pressurise our institutions towards working out a unified policy at an institutional level with respect to providing insurance, provident fund or gratuity to local staff. Awards that recognise the contributions of field assistants along the lines of the Sanctuary awards for wildlife biologists and conservationists also need to be created. We also urge people to initiate group discussions on this topic in research seminars to invoke wider participation and networking on these issues.

The indigenous knowledge and skills of local field assistants need to be recognised, and it is time we started looking beyond acknowledgements.

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The Making of a Mowgli

Raman Kumar & Ghazala Shahabuddin

It had been nearly half an hour since we started looking for the nesting bird that we had been waiting to spot all day. We weren't hopeful, and it was getting dark. But Mangu Singh Shekhawat confidently continued to scan the thick forest on the hill across the nallah. Suddenly he froze. We followed his gaze and, sure enough – there it was! Obscured by a drooping vine, thirty feet up on a rocky ledge, and glaring at us with its penetrating yellow eyes was our bird – the cryptic Brown Fish Owl – sitting in its nest. Mangu gave a triumphant grin that seemed to say, “I told you so!”

When we first arrived in Sariska for our study on birds in March 2003, we

had expected to employ a local person from the Gurjar community as our field assistant. Instead, we ended up working with this energetic, mischievous young ‘outsider’ hailing from a far-off village, who earned a living as a nature guide to tourists at Sariska. On our very first day in Sariska, an aggressive rhesus monkey got into our vehicle and grabbed one of our bags. Mangu swung into action, chased the rhesus and deftly prised it out of the surprised monkey's hands! It was then that we sensed he indeed was a different kind of person.

But how did Mangu end up in Sariska? “Back in our village I helped my father and brother till our small piece of land.

Cultivation was failing because of the long drought and I started looking for a job. Then I came across this advertisement in the newspaper calling for trainee nature guides and thought I'd try my luck in Sariska,” Mangu recollects. “I was new and had absolutely no knowledge about the forest or animals. It took me more than a year to gather confidence. Later, with experience I started to enjoy it.” He smiles shyly and adds, “Now they call me ‘Mowgli’ Mangu.” Today, he's just about the only trained guide remaining in Sariska. Out of the twenty-two who undertook the training, many have left their jobs. Some continued being nature guides, but went away to other parks like Ranthambhore and Keoladeo. The rest took up better-paid jobs at privately-owned resorts.

During our early days in Sariska, Mangu showed us around the Reserve, familiarising us with the terrain. His field skills and excellent relations with both