Short Communication

Communities in frontline in red panda conservation, eastern Nepal

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The national red panda Ailurus fulgens survey of 2016 shows that nearly 70% of the total red panda habitat in Nepal falls outside the protected areas (MoFSC 2016). Conservation interventions targeting this endangered species are minimal across most of its range which are either being managed by Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs), or directly by the District Forest Office and their field units. The primary focus of these institutions is sustainable management and utilization of forest resources rather than wildlife conservation which underpins the need of a robust conservation program to ensure co-existence of red pandas and people. Lessons learnt from Panchthar-Ilam-Taplejung (PIT) corridor in eastern Nepal can be useful in this context where local CFUGs have been implementing community-based conservation programs since 2010.

The PIT corridor plays a vital role linking Kanchenjunga Conservation Area of Nepal with three protected areas of India, viz. Singalila National Park, Barsey Rhododendron Sanctuary, and Kanchenjunga National Park.

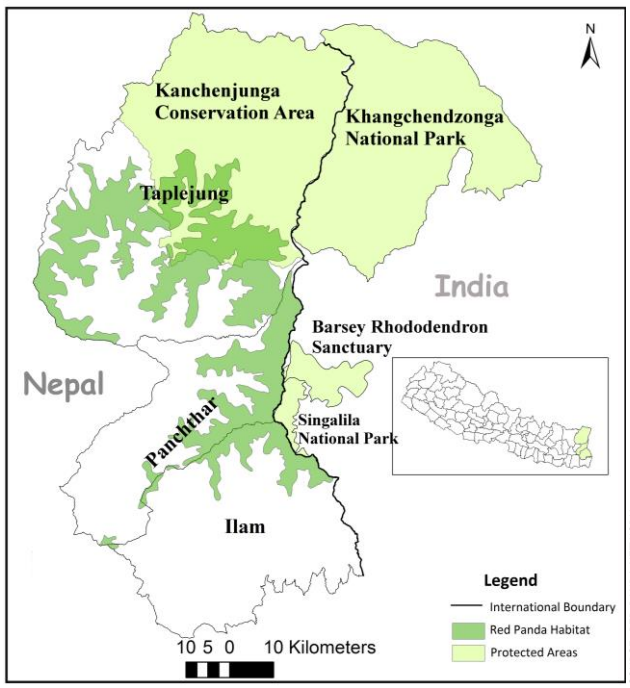

FIG. 1: Map showing red panda habitat in the PIT corridor

This area supports numerous wildlife species and is one of the few places where the charismatic red panda can be found. The corridor is crucial for red panda conservation as it supports circa 25% of Nepal's red panda population (Williams et al. 2011). With an aim to maintain a viable population of red pandas in the PIT corridor, community-based conservation program was introduced by Red Panda Network in 2010. In this conservation model, different aspects of conservation, research, monitoring, education, awareness, capacity building, sustainable livelihoods, and habitat management are included.

PHOTO 1: Red panda in its natural habitat in PIT corridor.

Establishment of baseline population estimates through field surveys of red pandas, and the institutionalization of community based red panda monitoring programs through community engagement have been the key approaches of this conservation model. The program commenced with an assessment of red panda distribution, and threat identification. Based on habitat suitability analysis in 2014, the PIT corridor was found to be harbouring red panda population of 125 to 218 individuals (RPN 2014). Unfortunately, the majority of habitat (76%) in this corridor falls outside the protected area system indicating the need of proactive community participation to ensure the survival of genetically viable population by maintaining ecosystem integrity at the landscape level.

Habitat loss due to degradation and fragmentation, and poaching for their colourful fur, are the main threats to the red panda population. To overcome these challenges, both long-term and short-term strategies were devised. After consultation with local CFUGs, a need-based conservation program was developed and piloted in six community forests covering a total area of 86 km^2 in Taplejung in 2010 (MoFSC 2016).

During consultation with community members, we observed that the people were reluctant about the idea of implementing protected area systems as they felt that this form of recognition might deprive them of their rights to harvest forest resources. After three years of continuous effort spent on consultation and outreach activities, the local people were convinced, and the community-based program was extended in the entire PIT Corridor.

At present, 49 CFUGs from the Panchthar, Ilam, and Taplejung districts are involved in this initiative. Seventy-three local forest users have been trained as citizen scientists who are involved in red panda monitoring and anti-poaching patrols throughout the year. Several red panda conservation committees, mother groups, youth groups, and herder groups have also been formed. Some of these community-based groups are augmenting their conservation efforts independently.

Community outreach programs have been effective in disseminating information on red panda ecology, importance, conservation issues and legal provisions through awareness workshops, posters, information boards, and other activities including FM radio broadcasting and annual commemoration of the International Red Panda Day (third Saturday of September). Red panda focused conservation manual has been endorsed by some local schools as part of their curriculum. Furthermore, the school outreach program has created a network of Jane Goodall Institute's Roots & Shoots groups in 29 schools spread across the PIT corridor. Sensitization and engagement of the children in conservation campaigns through networking and education system is a milestone in red panda conservation as in the long run as these youths represent the future.

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PHOTO 2: RPN's Forest Guardians during a field training.

Sustainable livelihood programs have been effective as a major intervention for reducing pressure on forest resources by diversifying livelihood practices. It includes promotion of red panda based ecotourism, promoting improved cooking stoves, organic farming, and non-timber forest products especially medicinal plants through capacity building, marketing and value addition, which has all been well accepted by local communities. As livestock herding is one of the major drivers of habitat loss and degradation, livestock herding improvement program has been introduced which includes herder's shed improvement, promoting use of tent and fuel-efficient cooking stoves, and rotational grazing.

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PHOTO 3: School children celebrating International Red Panda day 2017 in Panchthar.

Red panda habitat management actions are critical components of this program. It incorporates habitat enrichment through the restoration of degraded water sources, and regulations on livestock grazing and forest resource harvesting emphasizing on bamboo, other diet species, and shelter tree species. Sustainability of this initiative has been ensured through the endorsement of red panda focused conservation measures in the Operation Plans of the relevant CFUGs. Because of these efforts and continuous engagement and dedication of local people, one can spot this cuddly creature within three to four tracking days in the wild. This community-based conservation approach for red panda conservation in eastern Nepal is the first of its kind in the entire red panda range countries. It has ample scope to be replicated in other range areas with nominal conservation provisions, not only limiting to red pandas but also other flagship species.

References

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Biosketch

DAMBER BISTA is the conservation manager at Red Panda Network. He is interested in ecological aspects and human dimension of red panda conservation in Nepalese Himalaya.

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