

## FOREST NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

### GENESIS OF KAZIRANGA NATIONAL PARK STAFF WELFARE SOCIETY, (KNPSWS) – A BRIEF ACCOUNT

#### Introduction

Kaziranga is synonymous with successful conservation effort. It has passed through many trials and tribulations from early decades of the 20th century and evolved, developed into one of the finest and most important conservation areas in this part of the globe. The area was under conservation effort for protection of rhinoceros and still management focus primarily revolves around the rhino, the state symbol of Assam. This approach of treating rhinoceros as flagship species has been proved largely successful as population of rhinoceros and other sympatric wild animal species is steadily increasing and has reached a point when wildlife experts have suggested studying the carrying capacity. Undoubtedly, the heroes of this story of successful conservation are frontline staff and their leaders. These heroes mostly remain nameless and faceless to general public.

The working conditions of the foresters in difficult and dangerous terrain of Kaziranga are one of the toughest in comparison to other forest and wildlife area. All time preparedness is a hallmark of Kaziranga in the face of unabated attempt of poaching.

Lack of quality family and social life is another feature of staff and officers of Kaziranga. One is supposed to be lucky, if

he is able to spend a few days with the family once in a month. The poorly paid staff lives in isolation in remotely located camps and vulnerable to many odds like constant threat from organized armed poachers, smugglers, wild animals, people hostile to PAs and natural calamity like floods etc. This level of continuous high alertness is seldom noticed in other services, except perhaps the Armed Forces of the country.

I have seen, felt and understood during the tenure of prime period of my life, first working as Divisional Forest officer and latter as Director, the importance of the frontline staff and their ways and means. The history of the Park would have been altogether different had these guards, unsung heroes, not dedicated their lives for the cause of protection of Kaziranga National Park.

Late Boloram Dutta, Fgd, Pradip Pradan, GW, Motiram Borah, Fgd, Naren Soikia, Fgd, Liladhar Gogoi, BM, Konbhoy Nath, Fgd, Deben Sasa, Gw, Sarhi Kolita, HG, Bideya Lahkar, HG, Khgan Neog, HG, Tileswar Saikia, HG, Dharmeswar Kolita, HG, Abdul Hamid, HG, Kalu Barla, Damodar Roy, Sileswar Hussain to name some, who sacrificed their life for KNP can never be forgotten and will remain immortal forever.

I remember discussing many times, the plight of the frontline staff and the

possible ways of mitigating with my junior and senior officers in and outside our Department.

### **Immediate impetus**

The heavy monsoon and floods in 1998 were one of the worst experienced by Kaziranga in recent history. Prolonged three different waves of flood had done considerable damage to infrastructure. During the floods, all the staff and officers were stressed beyond their capacity to manage the flood related activity – rescue marooned wild animals, round the clock duty on the National Highway to facilitate safe movement of wild animals to higher ground of Karbi Along, to prevent miscreants from taking advantage of the situation and poaching deer for meat.

Post-flood management was not less of a challenge. Infrastructure had to be rebuilt to avoid any escalation of poaching incidents. Roads, patrolling paths, bridges, camps were equally important for tourism management as tourism season was fast approaching. Acquiring finance, supervision and execution of huge quantity of works within a very short period was part of the challenge. Fortunately, as said earlier, we had a very good dedicated team of officers and staff and with the help of local people and other stake holders including local governments; we could meet the deadline well in advance.

A few months later (in the year 1998), World Wildlife Fund (WWF)-Tiger Conservation Programme (TCP) had announced an award of Rs. 2,00,000 to Kaziranga as “*Special award for team work in handling exigencies*” during and after the tiring period of flood. I had personally received the award with a well worded

citation. That was one of the proud and satisfying moments of my life spent in wilderness of Kaziranga National Park.

### **Kaziranga National Park Staff Welfare Society (KNPSWS)**

I was clear in my mind what to do about the award money and readily proposed to form a society for wellbeing of staff. After threadbare discussion among all the officers and staffs of the Park it was decided to launch a society, That is how this society named “Kaziranga National Park Staff Welfare Society”(KNPSWS) was born on 10th March 1999 in my (Director, KNP) office with the money received as award and monthly contribution from the officers and staff. As the name implies, “the society is of, by and for the staff.”

Later, I received another Rs. 2,00,000 as the Director, Kaziranga National Park as the Park was conferred with the “*Millennium award for Best Managed Tiger Park*” in the year 1999 from WWF India, This amount was also deposited with the KNPSWS and formed the base stone for the society. The KNPSWS became able to help the staff at times of emergency. Later, the society began to help the villagers living in fringe of the park too.

Broadly the objective of the Society is to provide benefits to the staff working in Kaziranga National Park, including casual workers. It aims to provide assistance for medical aid, legal aid, grant in cash or kind or both to the members as per degree of risk to which they are exposed, already harmed or liable to be harmed. Also to provide basic logistics such as drinking water facilities, uniform, ration etc.

The Society was launched with 15

members constituting the Executive committee inducting members from rank and file. The Director of KNP heads as the chairman and the DFO, Eastern Assam Wildlife Division as the Member-Secretary. Ex-directors are included as advisors.

The KNPSWS is committed to the cause of conservation of flora and fauna of KNP, assisting park authority in providing better working conditions. The Society is still in a nascent stage and needs generous help from all nature lovers and friends of rhino, the only linkage with our ancient culture. Many NGOs, public individuals and well-wishers, have contributed towards KNPSWS. Our salutation and reverence to them.

Often people, individuals and well-wishers, confuse KNPSWS with "Kaziranga Wildlife Society" which is a different NGO than the "Kaziranga National Park Staff Welfare Society" which is "the society of, by and for the staff". As such I wish to dispel the notion from the minds of the people, well-wishers who intend and wish to make contribution towards KNPSWS for the welfare of our 'unsung heroes'. I also wish that the Society

bring out regular publications so as to know all the well-wishers who had extended their generous help by making contribution in kind or cash or both, achievement of the society, on going programme and also to our appeal.

I remember very clearly that late Konbhoy Nath, Forest Guard who was suffering from blood cancer was the first to be helped out of this society's exchequer. He was sent to Vellore for advanced treatment, although he could not be saved from the jaws of the dreaded disease. The wife of Late Deben Sasa, Game Watcher who lost his life while crossing the Difoloo river during rainy season while on duty, was another who received some support in cash from the Society. These are a few to name amongst host of staff members who have gained support from the society.

I fondly remember the formative time of the society and feel happy that I could at least plough the soil and sow the seed, which is now growing day by day. I am sure this sapling will become a giant tree – giving fruit and shade to the staff year after year.

– B.S. Bonal  
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