

From Catapults to Curiosity – Under the Canopy

An education program in Nagaland - a reflection on the last three years

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Introduction

"So when you see a bird in the tree outside your house you don't want to kill it and eat it?"

I was stunned – no one had ever asked me something like this and I realised that this was it – this was the fundamental difference in what influences our kids. It was 2010 and I was in Nagaland in Phek district conducting the first ever teacher training program for educators on bringing wildlife education into the community to wean kids away from hunting.

Flying into northeastern parts of India one is struck by the serene, breathtaking views of Snow capped mountains, rivers and undulating forested hills with villages nestled in the valleys.

Being one of the 4 biodiversity hotspots found in India it is no wonder that it has some of the most beautiful forests, exquisite animals and a traditional people who are as vibrant and diverse as the forests they live in. But the area is under severe threat from several factors - *Jhum* Cultivation (slash and burn), Deforestation – timber extraction, and one of the biggest threats – Hunting. Hunting for tradition is seen all over the North east - in one village, for example, a tall 20-30 feet bamboo stalk is placed in front of a hunters house with birds and small animals hung as an offering to the gods.

Shields made from bear skin, dhows or sword sheaths made from snow leopard skins, hornbill feathers used in head gear and even the entire wings of birds worn by young boys and men during festivities are very common.

Hunting for meat is widespread and an accepted fact in these parts. Unlike earlier times hunting for wild meat was done to prove ones status in the community or subsistence, today, trends in hunting have changed. With easy access to the gun (especially the airgun which does not require a license) most of the youth become hunters.



A Leopard cat being sold on the road between Kohima and Dhimapur



Squirrels for sale in the market

The sheer numbers of wild meat that reach the markets every morning is staggering. What is important to understand is that only 25% of wild meat reaches the market - most is consumed at home to augment the regular food as the people love the taste of it, not for tradition.

And what the kids see they copy - kids as young as 4 years old wield a catapult and take pot shots at wildlife.

But unfortunately this unchecked hunting is having a drastic affect on wildlife. In some states like in Nagaland species like the Hoolock Gibbon and the tiger have all but disappeared.

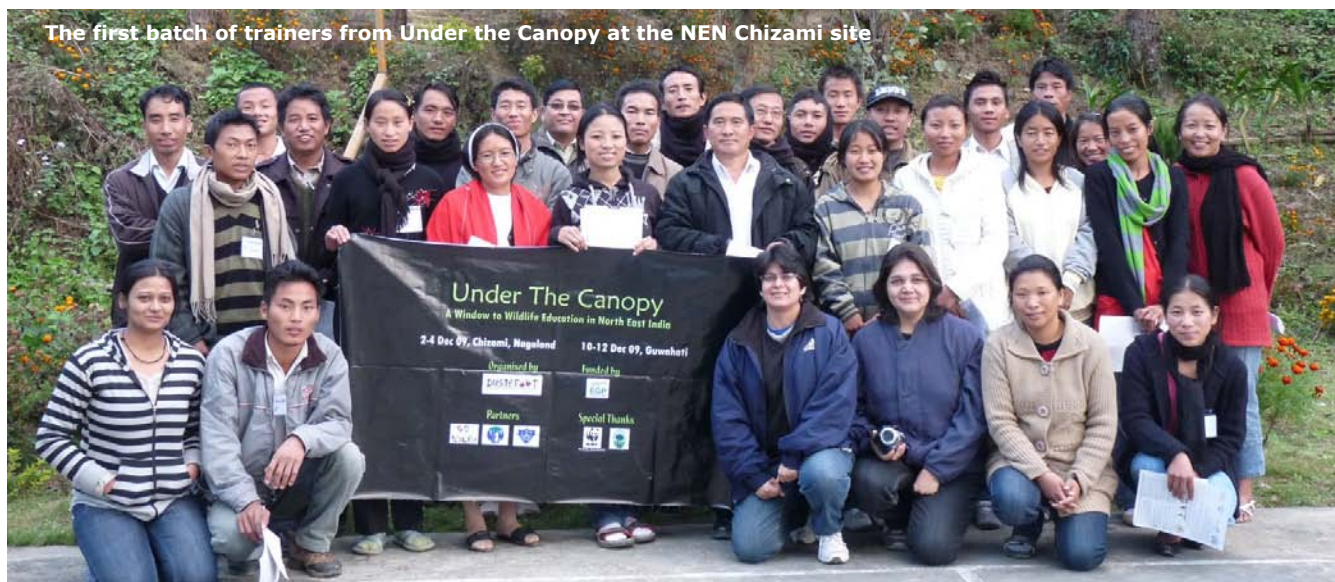
Protecting forests in the northeast is harder than in other states of India as only 35% of the forest land is under state government control, the rest of the forests are controlled by village communities and under private ownership.

This emphasizes the need for communities to understand and to protect their own forests. In 2009 Dusty Foot Productions began Under the Canopy with the objective to

- . Reconnect kids with nature
- . Channel energies from hunting to curiosity
- . Exposure kids to alternative career options that still linked them to their forests and harnessed their indigenous knowledge and skill.

Our research led us to Chizami Village about 4000m above sea level in the Phek district of Nagaland – with a population of just 3000 people it is the quintessential sleepy village abutting the Myanmar border. 97% of the people are converted Christians. The village has limited electricity, most houses use firewood for cooking. It is a peace loving tribe whose youth are caught in a flux between the modern & tradition.

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The first batch of trainers from Under the Canopy at the NEN Chizami site

North east Network an NGO in Chizami was started by a young woman – Seno who was inspired by a talk given on the importance of women health issues in uplifting a community.

We heard about them and approached them to see if they would be willing to bring in Wildlife Education to help mitigate hunting among youngsters by training trainers. We showed them some of the existing material done by Zoo Outreach Organisation and after the initial meeting they not only grasped the importance of such a program but also had the confidence that they would be able to take it forward.

Wanting the training manual to be area specific we started our research by talking to the local hunters. Two of the NEN personnel Wekowe-u and Tzekote collected local information from these hunters about the animals they had seen as well about local traditions and folklore about animals. They sent me the list but it was in Chakesang language, then using picture books of animals of India and the hunter describing the animal we figured out what was what.

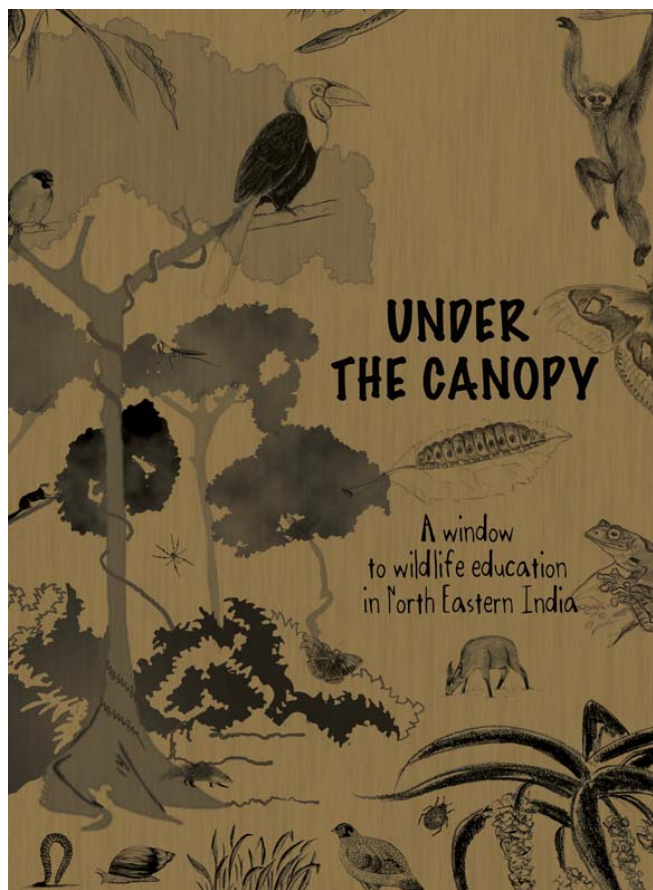
The difference between the elderly hunter & the young hunters was stark – the older man had used traditional ways of hunting & knew each animals natural behaviour and habits - His skill as a hunter was dependent on this indepth knowledge of the animals.

Whereas the younger hunters had little or no knowledge about the animals. They mostly use guns and a few traps and caught whatever they saw. The old hunter also said that in the olden days he did not have to go further than a 500 m from the village to find wild meat but today to get any game one had to trek 15-20 km towards the Myanmar border.

Finally after four months the 150 page teacher training manual 'Under the Canopy' was ready. Modelled around the successful Teachers for Tigers manual by the Bronx zoo, WCS for India and the hoolock gibbon teacher training manual made by Zoo Outreach Organization, this manual was specially designed as an interactive guide for teachers to use with their students to impart basic knowledge about wildlife and it's conservation in Nagaland. The manual started with the basics about food chains, and progressed to understanding NE biodiversity, its importance - climate change and its effects, as well as how community conservation efforts could make a difference.

We realised that for this to work we needed a healthy mix of regular school teachers, Sunday school teachers and youth leaders from the villages. 27 participants came from 7 different villages – 3 districts. A great boost to the program was having 2 participants from the first Green Village of North East India Khonoma who 10 years ago managed to convince their elders to ban hunting in forests all around their village.

Since it got dark by 4 pm, and with electricity being a problem. It was a challenge for my team Vedika, Imrana and myself, all coming from urban backgrounds, managing to prepare the workshop material by candle light the night



'Under the Canopy' funded by EGP an educators manual for NE India.

before the workshop with temperatures as low as 2° C with no heating.

Keeping in mind the teachers would finally be dealing with young kids all the concepts in the manual were activity based, game oriented, explorative and enquiry based learning techniques.

Education Material from Zoo Outreach Organization on Amphibians, Bats & Primates was immensely useful while conducting the program. Each participant was given starter packets to use with 25 kids in their area. They were taken through each item in the packet and shown how to use it. Using the booklets provided their knowledge of each species increased and they were given the confidence to impart the information to others.

Nature Conservation Foundation's manual for kids on Arunachal animals 'Secrets of the rainforest, was also given to us to distribute for free. The wild meat trail film was screened and given to all the participants. By the end of the first day we could see the change in several of the participants. To give an example, one of the participants asked me – so when you see a bird you don't wonder how tasty it might be?..... I had to very honestly say no – and that was the key difference in the way we described animals to our kids then the way he might – we would say look at the beautiful bird – look at it pretty feathers – where as when they described a bird to their kids they would say look that it is a tasty bird... this is how we could catch it.

Four months later we did a 2 day refresher to get feed back and assess the success of the manual and to see what we could do next. During the refresher the Dusty Foot Productions team conducted a short course in basic



Trainers initiation to ZOO education packets and understanding amphibians

camera techniques for some select teachers who showed a desire to initiate this in their schools.

The response was overwhelming – most of the teachers and Sunday school workers had already begun wildlife talks at the schools. In two of the villages a part of the community forests were declared protected and hunting in these parts was banned. Several of the participants had stopped eating wild meat – in fact they said that the desire to do so had greatly diminished and had stopped their families too. Our partner NGO North East Network took some of the village elders from Chizami village and the neighbouring Enhlumi to the Kaziranga National Park. After their return both villages declared a section of forest closed for hunting and slapped notices around stating that a fine of Rs 2000/- would be charged if anyone was caught even carrying a gun or hunting equipment in the protected areas.

But the biggest outcome was the initiation and fund raising efforts on the part of the North east network, Dusty Foot Productions and Go Wild for a three year wildlife program for kids in the village. A generous grant from EED/MISEREOR, Germany enabled us to launch the program.

In the first week of December 2010 children between the ages of 9-14 join the first eco-club ever was started at the NEN Centre. As the kids are from three different schools and from different classes and the topics wide and varied, the format used to run the eco-club was set that each academic year is divided into three segments, each beginning with an intensive workshop, run by external experts in the fields of photography, writing, art and wildlife followed by 4-month long sessions run by two local trainers called master trainers.

The workshops have been based on the seasons and the animals prevalent at that time, for example during the monsoons sessions revolve around amphibians, moths, spiders and fungi. The children after much deliberation decided to call themselves the 'Hoolock Gibbon Eco-Club' as this lovely animal used to roam their forests freely once, according to the old hunter who had last sighted them near the village 15 years ago. In the first year the children and two trainers Tshetsholo Naro and Kewekhrozo Thopi were given a wide range of exposure in the field of basic wildlife of India and basic camera techniques by the Dusty Foot Team (Rita Banerji, Shilpi Sharma, Maya Khosla, Sanjay Barnela) and the Go Wild/Titli Trust Team (Payal Molur and Sanjay Sondhi) four aspects were covered:



Teacher training using drama from the manual Under the Canopy



The first batch of eco-club members learning how to biomap the area around them

- a) Learning about wildlife and plants of Chizami Community Forests and the North East of India in a systematic manner.
 - b) Learning how to handle and use field equipment such as a compass, Binoculars, GPS etc
 - c) Learning how to create awareness programmes through posters, campaigns, theatre and music.
 - d) Learning how to use still cameras
- Over the year the kids were taught about amphibians, birds, butterflies, moths and reptiles.

In December 2011 the second batch of 20 children joined the club and the senior batch moved on to specializations. Children of this village and neighbouring villages specialized in a subject area and were a part of three units: Research, Awareness and visual documentation.

A three-month research project was covering an area of 2.186 sq. km in the Chizami forest (Kesorapa). The students were divided into four teams and each team had to study a different aspect of the forest, such as waters bodies, herbal plants, trees, amphibians and birds.

Awareness: Two newsletters, a book on butterflies of Chizami and a book of Haiku poems and wildlife photographs done by the kids have been printed. In publication are several posters that will be used to create an awareness.

Research: The kids have also been documenting and creating a database of plant and animal life around the village. So far over 95 of birds have been identified and most photographed. Over 160 butterflies have been identified and even a new range extension for The Indian Tortoiseshell (*Aglaia cashmirensis aesis*) was published in the international Journal of Threatened Taxa <<http://www.threatenedtaxa.org/>>

ZooPrintJournal/2012/April/o301926iv122534-2535.pdf>.

Video and Camera: to augment the booklets and the research as well as they held a photo exhibition to create awareness in the village especially during Wildlife Week and World Environment Day. They also for the first time had a debate by the youth 'for and against' hunting in the village. They had a special session on Spiders by Manju Siliwal from ZOO, Coimbatore and two of the senior batch children accompanied her as guides to document the presence of tarantulas in the forests around the village.

Field Trips: 10 kids represented the club and along with the two trainers participated in the Vatavaran Festival at Delhi and performed the opening song for the program.

YEAR 3- to Begin Dec 2012

A project that will affect change. While the first group will keep graduating every year, there will be new members who will be initiated in the same manner. This will only

depend on the progress of the first group and continued funding – we are also hoping that the eco-clubs become self sufficient. The senior members now will be the guides and mentors for the younger groups. Eco Tourism and Training to be Eco Guides would begin. Create awareness education packets using the tried and tested ones developed by ZOO as examples to motivate the youngsters in the village to give up hunting and save wildlife. The Children are given SMART objectives that will help them plan and execute a one year community participation project that will make a concrete change. They use all the skills learnt over the previous years in video documentation, research, awareness campaigns and other techniques to achieve the targets. The senior most batch has already decided to take up a year long project on various aspects of hunting and mitigation in the village.

The program is into its third year now and has children from neighbouring villages attending as well. However to sustain the club needs further funding for the years to come. There has been a lot of interest to take this model to other areas around the North East of India as well. There has already been a sea change in the attitude of the children and through them their families and village elders towards the touchy topic of hunting wild meat.

None of this would have been possible without the dedication of the North East Network Chizami staff and the motivation of the master trainers and experts from Dusty Foot Productions, Go Wild and Titli Trust. A special thanks to Zoo Outreach Organization for providing education packets and other material whenever asked for. For more information or to contribute please do contact us.



The second batch tying a friendship band/rakhi and promising to protect bats and all other creatures