

Synergising Wildlife Research, Tribal Livelihoods & Biodiversity Conservation

Ramana Athreya

Arunachal Pradesh India's premier wilderness

- Two-thirds of India's biodiversity
- Largest expanse of forest in India
- Globally important biodiversity hotspot
- 2nd richest bird diversity, behind South America
- The least studied of global hotspots

Eaglenest wildlife sanctuary ... Noah's Ark of western Arunachal

Conserving Eaglenest secures the long-term survival of an entire suite of biodiversity

- Area of 218 sq km hosts all the biodiversity of the surrounding 3500 sq km region.
- Pristine habitats, unbroken from 100 m to 3250 m elevation
- 2500 macrofaunal species documented in Eaglenest so far; probably hosts 10 times that number
- Eaglenest is home to some of the most elusive and iconic mammals and birds in India: clouded leopard, red panda, golden cat, marbled cat, beautiful nuthatch, rufous-necked hornbill, etc



Ramana Athreya discovered and described a bird species new to science, the **Bugun Liocichla**, in the Bugun forest in 2006 – a first in India after 1947.

It is found nowhere else in the world.

This spectacular bird has become the symbol of the Buguns' aspirations and their conservation efforts



Ramana has received several prestigious awards including WWF Conservation Award (India, 2007), Whitley Award (UK, 2011: "commitment to involve tribes in conservation") and Sanctuary Wildlife Service Award (India, 2022: "vital bridge between academic and field work in Arunachal").



The Prime Minister of India released the postage stamp at a United Nations conference on Biodiversity in 2012

The Pilot: Eaglenest Biodiversity Project (2003-2019)

Research under the Project helped the Bugun tribe set up a high-value bird tourism venture.

- the venture continues to this day - entirely managed by the Buguns, for the Buguns
- financially self-sufficient
- employs 25 persons from the Bugun village
- contributes Rs. 50 lakhs annually to the local economy

Apart from local livelihoods through ecotourism the project has also resulted in

- Skilling local youth for alternative livelihoods to reduce exploitation of forests
- Nature education and outreach to the local communities, including schools
- a successful example and study case for forest officials from across the country



Bugun community reserve protection team: a hitherto marginal-ised community is increasingly empowered as guardians of the global heritage in their backyard

Since 2017, the Buguns have donated 32 sq km of their community forest to a legally protected Community Reserve for biodiversity conservation. They received the India Biodiversity Award "Conservation of Wild Species" (2018) for the exemplary community-led conservation programme.



Way forward

The pilot initiative established that Biodiversity Research can create an attractive ecotourism narrative and a high-value tourism product: research can increase revenue by up to 100% without additional infrastructure.

Collaboration among Tribal communities, Forest Dept, and Scientists led to (i) sustainable and ecofriendly tribal livelihoods, with equity along multiple social dimensions (gender, educational level) and (ii) improved long-term security of the ecosystem due to community involvement.

The proposed scaling up of the venture will

- make it more robust against COVID-like shocks,
- greatly increase the number of local beneficiaries and
- provide surplus revenue to fund conservation activities including nature education, protection of the community reserve, and skilling activities which further reduce community dependence on harvesting forest resources.

The capacity building programme will enable the community to manage all the above activities on their own beyond the project duration.

