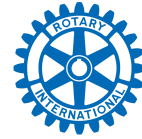




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Transboundary Manas Conservation Area (TraMCA) Bhutan & India

Sonam Wangdi

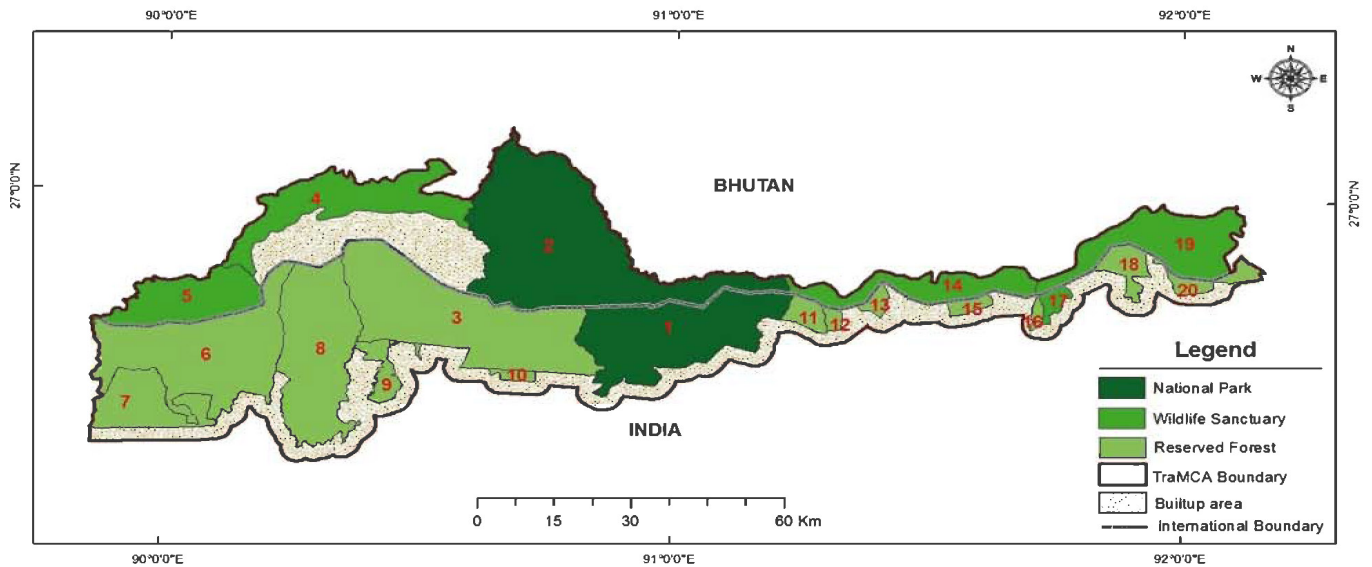
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<http://www.wwf bhutan.org.bt/?208849/A-step-closer-to-securing-TRAMCA>

Bhutan and India

Size: 6,500 sq.km



1. Manas National Park	6. Ripu Reserved Forest	11. Daodhora Reserved Forest	18. Deochunga Reserved Forest
2. Royal Manas National Park (RMNP)	7. Kachugaon Reserved Forest	12. Batabari Reserved Forest	17. Bamadi Wildlife Sanctuary
3. Manas Reserved Forest	8. Chirang Reserved Forest	13. Subankhata Reserved Forest	18. Khalingduar Reserved Forest
4. RMNP-PWS Corridor	9. Bengtol Reserved Forest	14. RMNP-JWS-Corridor	19. Jomolshangkha Wildlife Sanctuary
5. Phibsoo Wildlife Sanctuary (PWS)	10. Kukulong Reserved Forest	15. Daranga Reserved Forest	20. Bhoirakunda Reserved Forest

Aaranyak

Participants in coordinating the ongoing transboundary cooperation:

National Government:

- Royal Government of Bhutan

Protected area administration:

- Royal Manas National Park
- Manas National Park
- Phibsoo Wildlife Sanctuary
- Jomotsangkha Wildlife Sanctuary

International NGOs:

- WWF Bhutan
- WWF India

Local NGOs:

- Aaranyak (India)

Objectives:

The Transboundary Manas Conservation Area (TraMCA) conceptualized in 2011 forms an important priority transboundary landscape under the Living Himalayas Initiative.

TraMCA with an area of over 6500 sq.km is one of the three transboundary landscapes across the Eastern Himalayas that connect Bhutan with North East India. The other two are Terai Arc Landscape connecting India and Nepal and Kanchenjunga Conservation Landscape covering Bhutan, India and Nepal.

TraMCA is a region of high biodiversity that extends along south-eastern Bhutan and northeastern India. The landscape harbors two of the four eco-regions in the Eastern Himalayas -under the WWF Global 200 ecoregions - which are Terai-Duar Savannas and Grasslands, and the Eastern Himalayan broadleaf and conifer forest. The Indian Manas Tiger Reserve and Bhutan's Royal Manas National Park form the core of this transboundary space that is home to flagship species like tigers, elephants and rhinos. The area is also home to more than 1,500 other species of mammals, birds and vascular plants.

Values and importance:

TraMCA is a region of high biodiversity and the landscape forms a vital mosaic of conservation spaces across the Eastern Himalayas. The Indian Manas Tiger Reserve and Bhutan's Royal Manas National Park form the core of this transboundary space that is home to flagship species like tigers, elephants, rhinos, pygmy hog, Bengal Florican, hispid hare and more than 1500 other species of mammals, birds and vascular plants.

This space is also equally rich with diverse cultures and traditions of indigenous communities that live both on Bhutan and Indian side of this transboundary landscapes.

This landscape provides valuable ecosystem services to both people and wildlife; the Manas River that originates from Bhutan is a lifeline for this landscape.

Aspects of transboundary cooperation: The TraMCA constitutes an integral component of one of the global priority tiger conservation landscapes (TCL#37: Northern Forest Complex-Namdapha-Royal Manas) for securing tiger metapopulation for long term tiger conservation. One of the major achievement through institutionalization of TraMCA has

been the joint monitoring of tiger population initiated since 2010 between Bhutan's Royal Manas National Park and Indian Manas National Park. Two joint monitoring has resulted in the identification of 21 tigers within an area of 560 sq.km, 11 tigers from Royal Manas National Park and 14 tigers from Manas National Park of which 4 tigers were found to be common in this landscape. Likewise, from the end of 2016, joint monitoring of Asian Elephants, another important species in this transboundary landscape will be initiated to meet the bigger goal of conserving the landscape with its biodiversity.

Stage in the process: TraMCA was conceptualized in 2011 with the support of WWF, but even before this concept of landscape level conservation initiative, the two park, viz. Royal Manas National Park and Manas National Park used to convene annual coordination meetings for transboundary cooperation. TraMCA functions with a written Letter of Agreement between the Department of Forests and park Services of the Royal Government of Bhutan and the Bodoland Territorial Council. With this LoA drawn, the area of cooperation has extended to bigger areas on both sides of Bhutan and India. From Royal Manas National Park, it extended to Phibsoo Wildlife Sanctuary, Jomotsangkha Wildlife Sanctuary and Sarpang Forest Division. On the Indian side, it extends to Ripu Chirang Reserved Forest in the west to Manas National Park in central Assam to Khalingduar Reserved Forests in Eastern Assam. Currently TraMCA functions under a jointly developed and agreed action plan objectives.

Official Protected Area Designation: TraMCA covers Royal Manas National Park, Phibsoo Wildlife Sanctuary, Jomotsangkha Wildlife Sanctuary, Sarpang Forest Division and Samdrup Jongkhar Forest Division on Bhutan side. Each of this protected areas are interconnected by the biological corridors. On the Indian side, it covers Manas National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Ripu Chirang Reserved Forests and Khalingduar Reserved Forests that extends from Western to Eastern Assam State of India.

The Catalyst: Two of the four eco-regions of Eastern Himalayas under the WWF Global 200 Ecoregions are found in TraMCA. This includes the Terai-Duar Savannas and Grasslands and the Eastern Himalayan broadleaf and conifer forests. Due to the militant agitation in Assam demanding a separate state for Bodoland, there was severe negative impact in the field of conservation. It was during this period of agitation, the one horned Indian Rhinos were completely wiped out from Manas National Park. This impact of poaching was felt even on the Royal Manas National Park. This situation demanded a joint effort of both countries which made way to the annual transboundary cooperation meetings between the park authorities of two Manas that later gave birth to this concept of TraMCA.

History: Species and ecosystem do not follow political boundaries which is a globally accepted conservation fact. Effective management of transboundary habitats and protection of species therein require integrated habitats and approach that caters for better ecosystem integrity and stability. It was with this conservation fact and needs that gave birth to this concept in 2011 for a larger transboundary space that connects protected areas, biological corridors and adjoining reserved forests of south-eastern Bhutan with that of north-eastern Bhutan with that of north-eastern India. It was the political willingness of both government and the efforts made by local park and forest authorities that enabled this

initiative to become one of the great transboundary conservation models in the south east Asia.

Barriers, challenges, obstacles, or constraints: TraMCA, while it can be a landscape level conservation model, it also faces growing threats and pressures linked to increase in population and development activities. The porous border between Bhutan and India also makes the area highly susceptible to the poaching of wildlife and forest resources. The impacts of climate change, which are already visible in the form of erratic weather patterns, occurrence of natural disasters like flood and landslides and drying up of water sources would further impact this initiative.

The threats/issues identified are:

1. Habitat loss, fragmentation and degradation
2. Loss and decline of wildlife populations
3. Human wildlife conflicts
4. Mechanisms to convert political willingness into actions

Key objectives developed for addressing these issues are:

1. By 2020 halt all wildlife habitat loss and degradation in TraMCA
2. By 2020 wild populations of priority species are stable and growing across TraMCA
3. By 2018, have effective management systems in place to reduce human wildlife conflicts
4. By 2017, Local and State Governments buy in the TraMCA vision and formally endorse the TraMCA action plan and MoU.

The Governance and Management Structures

- **Cooperative relationship:** TraMCA cooperation functions under a formal letter of agreement signed by Department of Forests and Park Services and the Chief of Bodoland Territorial Council of Assam State.
- **Legal basis for cooperation:**
- **Governance structure:** The official representation of TraMCA from both sides are that of government staff of park and forest authorities of Royal Government of Bhutan and India. Additionally conservation NGOs such as Aaranyak and WWF India and Bhutan also play a key role in the structure.
- **Cooperative management arrangement:** The current cooperative management arrangement functions with an agreed Action Plan under which joint monitoring of species viz. Tiger has been carried out through camera trapping survey.

Results: This unique landscape represents significant habitat diversity ranging from tropical grassland and wetlands, tropical semi evergreen forests, sub tropical broad-leaved forests with an altitudinal range of 97-2700masl. This landscape to home to two endemic and globally threatened species, viz. Golden langur and Pygmy Hog. The landscape further

represents some of the last remaining habitats of Tiger, Clouded Leopard, Asian elephants, greater one-horned rhinoceros, Bengal florican and many other significant species. During the 1980-early 2000 due to the Bodoland agitation in the Indian state of Assam, there was a significant negative impact to some of the already endangered species like tigers, elephants and rhinos as a result of illegal wildlife trade. But with the creation of Bodoland Territorial Areas Districts in 2003, this landscape slowly started to rebound to its former glory. Listed as “Heritage in Danger” during that time the Manas National Park is now removed from this tag and in 2011 the UNESCO World Heritage Center in Paris (WHC-11/35.COM/8E.2011) acknowledged the significance of Manas Landscape as a single Transboundary entity.

Lessons Learned: In the face of increasing wildlife trade, habitat loss and human wildlife conflict, continuity of joint conservation efforts is of paramount importance as informed conservation interventions based on sound ecological knowledge shall help enhance management capabilities and gauge the efficacy of conservation actions. Further, wildlife enforcement and species protection will only be successful if efforts are made jointly to stop illegal killing at the site and if this is not successful, curbing of illegal wildlife trade will only be possible if information is shared instantly across borders through such transboundary initiatives.

I have also learnt through the experiences of park authorities of Royal Manas National Park and Manas National Park that key to success of such transboundary initiatives is the willingness and friendly cooperation at personal level of field implementers.

For More Information

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