

Hornbill Festival 2020
at Baramura (HathaiKotor), Tripura

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Sylvan surrounding and unexplored beauty of Tripura offers a place, where tourists can escape for relaxing with nature. Six species of primates, elephants, Binturong, Indian Bison, elusive Clouded Leopard, spectacle Langur, and varieties of birds that include Hornbills and Vultures, provide enough to the nature lovers visiting the state. It also has a lot to offer to the scientists, who can explore mystique world of flora and fauna in the state.

Hon'ble Chief Minister, Tripura in a recent conference at Pragna Bhavan in January 2020, gave a boost to the conservation of nature and wildlife by calling upon local communities to take advantage of natural beauty, forests and wildlife, also "Van Dhan" of the state, through eco-tourism. To promote wildlife conservation, various activities have been taken up by Tripura Forest Department. A Hornbill Conservation area in Baramura Eco-park is one such initiative to encourage birders, nature enthusiasts, and photographers to record hornbill presence, behaviour, and conservation-related issues. Conservation of Hornbill is a symbolic overarching depiction of conservation initiatives for wildlife in the state. The location of Baramura eco-park and the presence of Oriental Pied Hornbills in the area, has encouraged celebration of Hornbill festival on 8th-9th February 2020. The festival will focus on conservation of Hornbill besides showcasing the Biodiversity in the State. The program will include technical sessions on conservation of biodiversity in the state, Access and Benefit sharing fair, Folk dance/skit/drama on nature conservation besides academic discussions. In the North-east, Hornbill festival is held in Nagaland (at Kisama village near Kohima) and

Arunachal Pradesh (at Pakke Page), where local communities display its traditions and rich culture besides protecting the Hornbills.

Further, Trishna Wildlife Sanctuary and Bison National Park located in South Tripura District, about 100 km from Agartala has diversity in floral and faunal species. The sanctuary is famous for Indian Bison, locally known as “Gaba” and several primates. A Bison Conservation Park at Patichari in South Tripura District is proposed to offer a second place to its population. Similarly, Clouded Leopard National Park covering 508 Hectare area is situated in the core area of Sepahijala Wildlife Sanctuary, which is also popular for Spectacled Langur. Captive Breeding Program of the Clouded Leopard in the state has also been undertaken to enhance its population for release in the wild. In addition, Vultures have ecological, social and cultural significance that include scavenging on animal carcasses thereby helping keep the environment clean. Looking to their rapid population decline, the state has developed Vulture Conservation area at Kalyanpur in Khowai.

‘Hornbills are unique birds, having the horn-like projection called a ‘casque’ on top of their beak. They are larger than other forest birds and are flashy with their over-sized beaks, bright skin around their eyes and long eyelashes. Most have a brilliantly coloured pouch of loose skin at their throat in which they carry fruits, their favourite food. The family is omnivorous, feeding on fruit and small animals.

The Hornbill family includes about 55 living species, out of which India is a home to 9 species of hornbills, of which 2 are endemic. The nine species are Great Hornbill, Malabar Pied Hornbill, Indian Grey Hornbill, Malabar Grey Hornbill, Oriental Pied Hornbill, Rufous Necked Hornbill, Wreathed Hornbill, Austen’s Brown Hornbill and Narcondam Hornbill. The north-eastern region has the highest diversity having 5 hornbill species. Among them, Oriental Pied Hornbill has a wide range of distribution throughout north-east India. This species is found in different parts of the state, especially Baramura Hills, where Hornbill festival is being organised. Its natural habitat is subtropical or tropical moist lowland forests. The oriental pied hornbill's diet includes fruit, insects, shellfish, small reptiles and sometimes small mammals and birds including their eggs. Like other hornbill species oriental pied hornbill is also monogamous and they typically commence breeding in February. This coincides with the onset of rain depending on geographical location, and peak abundance of fruits. The local communities in Baramura, Khamtingbari, Narayanbari are conserving the birds.

The decline in oriental pied hornbill population has been reported mainly due to felling of old trees, which decreases the availability of suitable nesting and fruiting trees. The Hornbills are subject to some hunting pressure (casques are sold as souvenirs and their body fat used in traditional medicines) and are popular as pets in some areas. Conservation efforts such as captive breeding and reintroduction are currently in practice. Breeding in captivity has so far shown a high success rate at Sepahijala Zoological Park under the technical supervision of an experienced staff. The same approach may be undertaken in wild by providing artificial nest boxes (hollow tree logs having specific design), as an alternative breeding site in order to support their breeding requirements in the wild.

Hornbill festival will promote ecotourism in a big way besides creating awareness towards Hornbill birds, promoting local culture and strengthening local communities. This festival will enlarge scope of livelihood support to local communities through enhanced opportunities in the eco-tourism. The opportunities in hospitality sector especially nature interpretation and nature guide, boarding & lodging, transport facility etc. can create win-win situation for both eco-tourist, who gets a life time experience of staying with nature in the state, and the local communities, who gets livelihood opportunities. However, caution is to be exercised in terms of carrying capacity of the natural areas, so that these areas are sustainable mutually with living of local communities.