Conservation news

From BP Conservation Programme to Conservation Leadership Programme – what's changed?

The BP Conservation Programme officially launched its new name, the Conservation Leadership Programme, at the Society for Conservation Biology's 21st meeting in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, in early July. The new name clearly reflects what this successful long-running initiative is trying to achieve and marks the end of a considerable period of change. The Programme remains an innovative partnership between BirdLife International, Conservation International, Fauna & Flora International, the Wildlife Conservation Society and BP working to develop the potential of future biodiversity conservation leaders. This is achieved by providing a range of awards, training, advice and sustained support via an active international network of practitioners.

Since 1985 the Programme has nurtured the careers of over 2,500 young conservationists by providing multidisciplinary training and supporting practical experience by assisting over 300 student-led high priority local conservation projects around the world with over USD 3 million. Past winners have started their own NGOs, influenced policy, protected important sites for biodiversity, discovered species new to science, and influenced the environmental awareness of local communities.

The launch of the Conservation Leadership Programme will not mark any move away from this. In fact, the team awards will remain very similar. Firstly, the Future Conservationist Award (up to USD 12,500) is for teams that have been identified to have potential for leadership in conservation. The Follow-up awards (up to USD 25,000) are aimed at exceptional teams who want to address a conservation issue raised by recommendations in a project the Programme has previously supported. Finally, the Leadership Award (up to USD 50,000) enables teams that have been supported in the past to build on previous work with practical long-term outcomes.

Over the years the Programme has evolved and grown to ensure its continued success. However, with the launch of the Conservation Leadership Programme there are some notable changes that focus the Programme geographically and further emphasize the importance of capacity building at different levels for early career conservationists. The Programme (previously global) now focuses on a set of 20 countries (Algeria, Angola, Argentina, Azerbaijan, Bolivia, Brazil, China, Colombia, Egypt, Georgia, India, Indonesia, Libya, Malaysia, Mexico, Pakistan, Russia, Trinidad & Tobago, Turkey and Venezuela) that have significant business interest for BP. This allows Programme staff to focus their attention on specific countries, assessing needs, directing funding more effectively, and developing lasting networks. The Programme now works with partner offices in target countries to fund internships and scholarships for individuals nominated by local partners. It is hoped that this targeted support will identify rising conservation stars, provide them with skills and experience, and also open future career opportunities for them.

The Programme now supports part of the Wildlife Conservation Society administered Research Fellowship Program, funding 10-12 young researchers each year. The Fellowship Program is a small grants programme that supports individual field research projects that have a clear application to the conservation of threatened wildlife and wildlife habitat.

It is hoped that these changes will enable the Programme to continue to build on the successes it has already achieved in developing the future leaders for conservation. This year USD 502,500 was awarded to 26 teams that will be working in 19 countries. Award winners will focus on a broad range of topics critical for conservation, including researching amphibian distributions in Colombia, training park rangers in Azerbaijan, and developing a community forest buffer in India. Full details of this year's award-winning projects can be found at http://www.conservationleadershipprogramme.org/news/awards.asp

The next deadline for applications is the 23 November 2007, and details can be found at http://www.conservationleadershipprogramme.org

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First post-tsunami sighting of the coconut crab in the Nicobar Islands

In India the world's largest terrestrial crustacean, the coconut or robber crab *Birgus latro*, has been previously reported only on South Sentinel Island of the Andaman group of islands and on Car Nicobar, Katchall, Great Nicobar, Menchal and Cobra Islands of the Nicobar group. These Islands were badly affected by the tsunami of 2004 that resulted in loss of life and property along

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with destruction of coastal habitats, and had an impact on the distribution of various plant and animal species. Of these species the coconut crab has been severely affected, as it inhabits a very narrow (<100 m wide) strip of forest adjacent to the sea. It was variously rumoured after the tsunami that the crab had become locally extinct on the Nicobar Islands. However, although some signs of the presence of the coconut crab were reported, no individuals were observed.

During post-tsunami coral reef assessment work in 2005-2006 I carried out surveys in the crab's likely habitat, i.e. coastal forests, crevices, caves, and hollow tree stumps, in the Nicobar group of islands. I observed four individuals, two on Camorta Island and one each on Great Nicobar and Menchal Islands. Of the four, morphometric measurements were taken of one from Camorta Island; it was a female with carapace width and length of 20 and 17 cm, respectively, and weighed 2.06 kg. The sighting in Camorta Island is a possible indication that the crab could be exploring new ranges, as there were no previous records of the species from this island.

Internationally it is recognized that there is insufficient information available on the coconut crab to assess its conservation status, and it is categorized as Data Deficient on the IUCN Red List. This crab is a favourite food item among the Nicobari tribes and, although it is listed under Section 63 Schedule I-A of the Indian Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, Section 65 of the same Act allows aboriginal tribes of Nicobar district to hunt wildlife for subsistence needs. However, the external cultural and economic influences intervening in the islands following the tsunami could lead to indiscriminate hunting practices that are not confined to subsistence requirements.

Although we now know that the species is not locally extinct, it is still potentially threatened There is an urgent need to carry out a detailed study of this species, both to assess its conservation status and because of the once important relationship between tribal livelihoods and the crab population.

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Three new conservation professorships

Cambridge University in the UK has raised funds to support three new conservation professorships. The new Miriam Rothschild Professor in Conservation Biology is William Sutherland, at the Department of Zoology. In his inaugural lecture in May he emphasized the need to approach conservation management as we approach the practice of medicine, based on evidence. Rather than rely on anecdotal information, as commonly occurs now, he advocated the use of defendable conservation practices based on science. To promote proven management practices Professor Sutherland has created http://www.conservationevidence.com (see also *Oryx*, 39, 1-2), a website that provides evidence-based conservation practices and enables conservationists to learn from each other. The new Moran Professor of Conservation and Development at the Department of Geography is Bill Adams. In his inaugural lecture, also in May, he urged leading academics from both the social and natural sciences to work together to find inter-disciplinary solutions to major environmental problems (see also pages 275-276). Professor Adams also stressed the need to focus on the often neglected social causes that lie behind environmental threats. The inaugural lecture for the third conservation professorship, the Prince Philip Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the Department of Zoology, held by Professor Tim Clutton-Brock, was given in April 2007.

New website for the coastal forests of East Africa

The coastal forests of Eastern Africa are a biodiversity hotspot. Until recently, obtaining information on the many forests in the region was difficult as many unpublished reports were not available. A new website has made available numerous unpublished materials within a single site. It also provides detailed summary information on the biological values of many forest sites, the threats these forests face and the responses to those threats. The site has been developed by the Tanzania Forest Conservation Group with funding from the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund and with technical input from WWF. You can find the coastal forests's website at http://cf.tfcg.org/

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