Nepalese Conservation

Title **To view the original PDF of this World Birdwatch article,** click here. Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN) is the largest and oldest civil society organisation for ornithologists, birdwatchers and conservationists in Nepal. Its members include students and teachers, professionals and other members of the general public. Habitats in Nepal range from alpine pastures in the mountains to tropical forests and wetlands in the lowlands. This diversity of habitats supports 862 bird species, 31 of them globally threatened. In 2005 BCN published Important Birds Areas in Nepal: key sites for conservation, which identifies 27 Important Bird Areas (IBAs). Fifteen are included in existing protected areas, while 12 are still unprotected. BCN have since identified five more potential IBAs. The threats facing Nepal?s IBAs include forest clearance and degradation, drainage and pollution of wetlands, cultivation and over-grazing of grasslands, hunting and inappropriate development. But IBA conservation in Nepal challenges. The mountainous terrain makes many IBAs accessible only by foot, mule or helicopter. Poverty levels in Nepal are the second highest in Asia; for many people in remote areas, IBAs and the goods and services they provide form the main source of livelihood. Nepal has also come through a turbulent period politically; and local government has for a long time been weak and ineffective. But the failure of local government opened a ?space? in which communities organised themselves to manage resources and deliver services. This culture of self-help and institution building helped create organisations which have become local-level partners with BCN. With limited staff and a small budget, BCN began working with local groups as a sustainable approach to conservation and development at IBAs. In every case, Local Conservation Groups (LCGs) are formed around existing community-based institutions of one kind or another. At Phulchoki, for example, the LCGs are the various Forest User Groups (FUGs) that have the rights and responsibility to conserve, manage and use the forest and its resources. The FUGs have been active at Phulchoki for many years working to restore degraded forest in the lower parts of the IBA. They are natural partners for BCN. As BCN?s Chief Executive, Hum Gurung explains, ?Working with local people through LCGs is extremely important ?their local knowledge is invaluable in addressing resource management and conservation. BCN encourages LCGs to come up with their own ideas as much as possible, so that their initiatives are genuinely introduced and led from the local level.? There are now LCGs at 17 of Nepal?s 27 IBAs; many IBAs have several. For example, at the Mai Valley Forests IBA, there are seven. A stimulus for the LCG network came through funding from the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) to develop a civil society network for conservation in Nepal. Although the project has ended, some networking activities begun with this support have been continued. IBA-based training in monitoring has been provided, and exchange visits and other connections made between LCGs. The main purpose of the network is shared learning. For example, the LCG at Ilam IBA (Shree High Altitude Herbal Production and Conservation Institute) has expertise in medicinal plants, which is relevant to communities at other IBAs such as Kanchenjunga Conservation Area. The LCG at Jagdishpur IBA has experience in production and marketing of handicrafts for Nepal?s tourist market, which is highly relevant to sites such as Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve IBA, where there are

similar raw materials for communities to work with. The networking structure is informal. In some cases the LCGs network directly amongst themselves. The 10 LCGs working on vulture conservation are the most obvious example: all have visited and learnt from the first ?vulture restaurant? at Pithouli, Nawalparasi. Similar networking may take place between LCGs that have met through exchange visits or workshops and training. For others, BCN acts as a ?hub? connecting LCGs. At present this is a very loose network with no strict membership criteria, although organisations must be community-based, local and not-for-profit. Before taking on an LCG partner, BCN does an organisational assessment. In some cases?for example where the LCG is a Forest User Group?members are elected from the wider community. Others may not be. BCN will usually suggest changes that should be made?for example, the election of officers, and inclusion of more women or people from lower castes. LCGs see a number of benefits from being part of the network. These include opportunities to engage with BCN in activities at site level and nationally; the greater status and profile that comes from working with a national organisation; and enhanced fundraising prospects. The relationship with BCN acts as a reference for donors: the funding that some LCGs have received through CEPF and the UK Government?s Livelihoods and Forestry Programme is evidence of this. As a consequence of their association with BCN, LCGs also get more respect and better treatment from officials like the District Forest Officer. Their prospects of further project work increase; this has happened at Koshi Tappu, where the LCG is now a local partner of a UNDP wetlands project. While many people have a good knowledge of plants and trees?reflecting their uses for medicine, food, timber, etc?far fewer know about birds, or see their relevance to themselves and their livelihoods. BCN has had to work hard to motivate LCG members to work for bird conservation. The answer has been to link bird conservation to broader natural resource management issues. At Mai Valley IBA, for example, they have linked bird monitoring to forest patrolling and the maintenance of forest quality, so that monitoring becomes part of existing activities and relates to livelihood benefits. BCN attributes the success of its LCG approach to the way conservation work has been intertwined with income generating activities. **Case Study** 288 bird species have been recorded on Phulchoki Mountain IBA, the highest peak on the rim of the Kathmandu Valley. Rivers and streams originating from Phulchoki supply water to the local town of Godawari and beyond, and to adjacent farmland. Deforestation during the 1980s caused disruption to stream flow. In 1995, Nepal?s government gave a large area of these forests into the safekeeping of nearby villages. These community forests have become successful, and the forest has shown significant regrowth. Conservation by communities has done much to reverse the degradation of services such as water supply. Phulchoki, only 40 minutes from the centre of Kathmandu, is a popular destination for Nepalis escaping the city at weekends. BCN has been working with six Forest User Groups at Phulchoki, which vary in size from 57 to 338 members, and manage areas of forest ranging from 34.75 to 283 ha. Each FUG agrees a five-year management plan with the District Forest Office, stipulating permitted levels of harvest and other management arrangements. FUG members are paid to patrol the forest using funds from membership fees and other revenue-generating activities. The forest is used by local people for a range of forest products, including fuelwood and timber, fodder for livestock, medicinal herbs and flowers, some of which are sold. In Kathmandu, water shortages are common in summer, so the FUGs also sell water, which is collected by tanker and delivered to the capital. With support from the Whitley Fund, BCN helped five FUGs to improve facilities for picnickers, and to introduce a more organised system for charging. At Godavari Kunda, for example, the community previously received Rs 5000 from picnickers; they now receive about Rs 65,000. These funds contribute to forest patrolling and FUG management costs, but are also used for projects in the village, including improvements to roads, and bursaries for school children from the poorest households.