

Saving Rara for the future

Title Bird Conservation Nepal (BCN; BirdLife Partner), the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, and staff from the BirdLife Secretariat (Cambridge, UK) recently conducted field surveys at Rara National Park (10,600 ha) in the west of Nepal to assess and value the benefits (ecosystem services) that the Park and surrounding Buffer Zone provide to people. Rara is one of Nepal's 27 Important Bird Areas (IBAs). The park is important for the Cheer Pheasant, a globally threatened and restricted-range species and the lake is a valuable staging post for migrating wetland birds, said Durga Poudel, Chief Warden, who welcomed the team and helped to organise the local logistics and plan the field work. It also supports Red Panda, Himalayan Musk Deer, Asiatic Black Bear and Clouded Leopard. The fieldwork, which is part of the Darwin Initiative project understanding, assessing and monitoring ecosystem services for better biodiversity conservation, involved estimating the amount of carbon that is locked up in the trees in the Park and Buffer Zone. A sample of over 800 trees was measured. In 5-10 years time it will be possible to re-measure the trees to see how much they have grown, and therefore how much extra carbon is being stored in the Park, said Bagendra Rayamajhi, Deputy Warden, whose knowledge of the Park and its forests was vital in implementing the work. Community meetings and household interviews were also conducted to quantify and value the harvested wild goods, crops and water services provided to local people. The aim was to understand how the Park and its Buffer Zone are being used by local stakeholders and what people see as the main threats to the future of the park, its biodiversity and its natural resources, said Dr David Thomas, Head of Communities and Livelihoods, at BirdLife International.



Rara National Park is important for migrating waterbirds

Globally, natural resources are being lost due to over-harvesting and changes in land-use. At Rara (which falls within Mugu and Jumla Districts the poorest in Nepal) there is a high dependence on natural resources, for example, pine needles are collected from the forest floor and used to improve the fertility and condition of the soil on people's farms and impacts

of illegal timber extraction can be seen in the buffer zone forest where timber is in high demand. Conservation of the park will not be possible without investment in improving people's livelihoods in the surrounding Buffer Zone. The warden has worked hard to recover compensation owed to many households who lost land when the park was established and he has also promoted income-generating activities such as production of sea buckthorn juice. There is also great potential for sustainable tourism. However, there is an urgent need to improve the management of Buffer Zone forests to enable communities to continue to benefit from this resource into perpetuity. BCN is hoping that the work at Rara will raise the profile of biodiversity-rich sites in Nepal such as IBAs and encourage a dialogue with politicians and decision-makers. "We believe that our work will provide new insights that will guide decisions in the management of important habitats, and demonstrate the importance of considering biodiversity conservation relevant to a number of government policies dealing with protected areas, water, tourism, climate change and poverty reduction", said Dr Hum Gurung, CEO of BCN. The UK Government's Darwin Initiative has invested £87,850,789 in 756 projects in 155 countries since 1992.