

## WILDLIFE IN THE TRADITIONAL LIFESTYLE OF THE APATANI COMMUNITY OF ZIRO VALLEY, ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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### Abstract

The present paper discusses the place of wildlife in the *Apatani* culture including both use of wildlife in their traditional culture and traditions and the traditional methods for conservation of nature and natural resources including wild flora and fauna. It is apparent that the *Apatanis* use wildlife in their day-to-day life including for nutrition. Further, many of their traditional customs are directed towards conservation of wildlife. It is a pure and simple case of symbiosis.

**Key words:** Apatani, Traditional laws, Wildlife conservation

### INTRODUCTION

Arunachal Pradesh situated in the North Eastern part of India lies in the Eastern Himalayas, one of the global Biodiversity Hotspots (Mittermeier et al., 2004). The state is bestowed with diverse natural resources and different ethnic tribes. Each of these tribes have developed their own skills of using these resources in the form of food, medicines, handicrafts etc. Although the use of plants for food and other means of survival are considered important, forest-dwelling communities have relied on wildlife as a source of protein and income, and wild meat continues to support the subsistence of numerous indigenous communities worldwide (Cowlishaw et al., 2005; Mfunda and Roskaft, 2010). The importance of wildlife and its utilization also constitutes an integral part of human life especially in the tribal culture (Chowdhury et al., 2014).

Most of the ethnic groups inhabiting the state of Arunachal Pradesh have been observing age-old traditional customs. The use of natural resources like for religious and cultural purposes is common. All tribal groups use wildlife products in their socio-cultural practices. Authors like Dam and Hajra (1981),

Borang (1999), Solanki and Chutia (2004) among others have documented certain aspects of the use pattern of wildlife and their products on different occasions. The *Apatanis* have very close association with forests and wildlife. Their life revolves around the natural resources present in the locality. The *Apatanis* have close affinity with the Tale Wildlife Sanctuary which was declared very recently by notification under wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. They consider this sanctuary as their homeland still does not want to forego their customary right enjoyed since time immemorial. Through this study an attempt has been made to understand how closely wildlife plays in the lifestyle of *Apatanis*.

### STUDY AREA

A general study was undertaken in Ziro, Lower Subansiri District, Arunachal Pradesh to document the dependence and utilization of wildlife by the *Apatani* people and their traditions and beliefs towards wildlife conservation. Lower Subansiri district is situated in the Central Western part of Arunachal Pradesh and lies between 26°55'-28°21' N and 92°40'-94°21' E. Ziro is inhabited by the *Apatani* tribes. *Apatanis* are well known for their unique way of paddy cum fish

cultivation, landuse pattern and management of resources. Some of the important festivals performed by the *Apatanis* are Myoko, Murung and Dree. Despite the impregnation of modern facilities and way of living, the *Apatanis* are still dependent on the natural resources during such festivals and the use of wildlife or wild animals are one of the important part in such festivals. They still intact with their traditional ways of living.

### METHODOLOGY

The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 defines wildlife as “any animal, bees, butterflies, crustacea, fish and moths; and aquatic or land vegetation, which forms part of any habitat”. There is a popular misconception that wildlife refers only to mammals and birds or, according to some, only to large mammals. On the contrary, the definition embraces all life forms that are wild. During the study data regarding the use of wild animals were collected by random selection of at least 2-4 houses in every villages of *Apatani* plateau. During the data collection it was kept in mind that the selected houses should have a village elder above 50-60 years in the family. This was done for authenticity of the data collected as well as getting maximum insight into the traditional culture

### RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The *Apatani* tribe with about fifty thousand population are settled mainly in the Ziro Valley of Arunachal Pradesh. As with other tribal communities, their traditions and customs has a good element of the natural resources including wildlife available in their

area. Wildlife is intertwined with the traditional lifestyle in multifaceted manner or usage, for instance for decorative, eatable, medicinal values, etc. There are many wildlife species, which are be used for different purposes like eatable meat providing protein, leafy vegetable besides medicinal values. They use almost all forms of wildlife including the higher animals like mammals, birds and up to insects for different purposes. Glimpses of the use of various wildlife species and their parts in the *Apatani* traditional lifestyle is as enlisted in table 1, 2, 3 and 4.

The *Apatanis* use different methods for catching the required species of wildlife for the required occasion or usage. These include simple primitive devices like bow and arrow to some well designed traps for specific purposes. All these devices are made from locally available resources. Table 5 gives a view of the some traditional Tools and Implements used for catching wildlife by the *Apatanis*.

### ***Conservation of Wildlife in Apatani Culture***

1. The traditional Laws and Taboos of tribal communities reflect much needed effort in Wildlife Conservation (Jimoh et al., 2012). The *Apatanis* not only use wildlife in their day-to-day traditional customs and rituals. On the other hand their custom and traditions also does a lot for the conservation of nature and natural resources including wildlife. Glimpses of the *Apatani* customs and traditions that are concerned about wildlife conservation can be seen as enlisted in table 6.

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Table 1: Use of Mammals and/or their parts

SN	Animals	Vernacular name	Parts used	Uses and Methods	Remarks
1.	Tiger ( <i>Panthera tigris</i> )	<i>Paat</i>	Teeth	Used for decoration of DAO cover and skin for display	–
2.	Leopard ( <i>Panther pardus</i> )	<i>Hogya</i>	Teeth, skin	Used as decorative and display	Also used in some traditional chanting to get rid of spirits
3.	Bear ( <i>Melursus ursine</i> )	<i>Siting</i>	Skin	Used in <i>Dao</i> cover and belt and as shield used tribal war. Bear gall bladder ( <i>Aper</i> ) used for medicinal purposes in treatment of wound, fever, etc.	–
4.	Monkey ( <i>Assamese macaque</i> )	<i>Sibbi</i>	Tail, skin	Decorative purposes, ritual	Sacrificed in <i>Myoko</i> festival ( <i>Biddin Lanii</i> ) is mandatory for those villages celebrating <i>Myoko</i> in the initial process
5.	Capped langur ( <i>Trachypithecus pileatus</i> )	<i>Sibbi Bissar</i>	Tail, skin	Decorative purposes like cover for DAO holder	–
6.	Deer ( <i>Muntiacus muntjac</i> )	<i>Siddin</i>	Horns, Skin	Decorative, skin for meat	–
7.	Wild Boar ( <i>Sus scrofa</i> )	<i>Sirey</i>	Tooth, skin	Decorative, skin for <i>Dao</i> cover	–
8.	Wildcat ( <i>Felis silvestris</i> )	<i>Sisso</i>	Skin	Decorative purposes	–
9.	Squirrel ( <i>Dremomys lokriah</i> )	<i>Takhii</i>	whole body	Offered to the Groom as part of tradition during marriage rituals	–
10.	Wolf ( <i>Canis aureus</i> )	<i>Sipiya</i>	Whole body	taken as meat	–
11.	Jungle Rat	<i>Buko/ Tarko</i>	–	Taken during Subu/ Murung festival ( <i>Dibyo Nani</i> ), completion of taboo period after ceremonial sacrifices	–
12.	Chinese Pangolin ( <i>Manis pentadactyla</i> )	<i>Sippii</i>	–	Kept in burial alter meant for servants of dead person	–
13.	<i>Hystrix indica</i>	<i>Khiibu/ Sikhii pakhu</i>	–	Use for decoration in head gear, traditional cap, medicinal value	–
14.	<i>Tree Fern</i>	<i>Tashe</i>	Stem	Use in <i>Lecha</i> for ritual purposes	–

Table 2: Use of birds and/or their parts

SN	Animals	Local name	Parts used	Uses and Methods	Reasons
1.	<i>Bucerous bicornis</i> (Hornbill)	<i>Pesu</i>	Beak, feather	Use in traditional headgear cap and feathers are used in <i>Mure Pley</i> for ceremonial purpose by priest	—
2.	<i>Anthracoceros albirostris</i> (Oriental Pied Hornbill)	<i>Piigya</i>	Beak, feather	Use in traditional headgear cap and feathers are used in <i>Mure Pley</i> for ceremonial purpose by priest	—
3.	<i>Haliaeetus leucoryphus</i> (Eagle)	<i>Khonkhung</i>	Feather	Used by priest as <i>Muru Pley</i> and <i>Litha</i> , lower portion of legs tied in headgear	—
4.	<i>Migalaima virens</i>	<i>Pengu</i>	—	Taboo finishing ( <i>Dibyo Nanii</i> ) and given to <i>Buliang</i> , Apatani council during <i>Subu/Murung</i> ceremony and served along with meal as <i>Ala Rita Nanii</i>	It is done as a sign of respect and affection to the <i>Bulyang</i> elders
5.	<i>Passer domesticus</i> (Sparrow)	<i>Pari Piita</i>	—	Birds that eat ripe paddy	—
6.	<i>Ducula badia</i> (Mountain imperial pigeon)	<i>Morey paku</i>	—	Eatable	—

Table 3. Use of Amphibians and Reptiles

SN	Animals	Local name	Parts used	Uses and Methods	Reasons
1.	Snake	<i>Tabu</i>	Skin	Decorative purposes	Repelling evil spirits
2.	Lizard	<i>Goyi Tabu</i>	—	Eatable	—
3.	Frogs and Tadpoles	<i>Tatii, Bulyu</i>	—	Eatable	—
4.	Krait snake	<i>Byota Tabu</i>	—	Local medicine	For cure against dysentery and to monitor fever

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Table 4. Some of the lower groups of animals used by Apatani

Fish	Wasp	Bee	Dragon fly	Grasshopper	Aquatic fauna
Trout ( <i>Ngiyi Ngilyang</i> ) use for taboo completion in ritual like Murung, Myoko festival, etc ( <i>Diibyo Nanii</i> ) Collected from natural streams	Tagya	i). Tangu ii). Nyonio iii). Tayu iv). Tari v). Byara	i). <i>Itu Punying</i> ii). <i>Apa Kemang</i> iii). <i>Piro Gonchi</i> iv). <i>Sibi Gonchi</i> v). <i>Yapu Gonchi</i> vi). <i>Lanchan Gonchi</i> vii). <i>Byago Takho</i> viii). <i>Jijin Taying</i> ix). <i>Doi Gonchi</i> x). <i>Yaju Pakho</i> Nymph of dragon fly: <i>Tasing</i> and <i>Simbo</i> for <i>Aji Manii Nanii</i> , meal in paddy field to be served to wage workers and meal given at birth of child ( <i>Apin Babi Nanii</i> ) in the olden time	Kurmu/ Koha ,	Water beetle ( <i>Yasii Anyii/ Chunyii</i> ), Crab ( <i>Tachi</i> ), Frog( <i>Tatii</i> )

Table 5. Traditional tools and implements used for catching wildlife

SN	Name of Tools/Implements	Uses
1.	<i>Giirii</i>	Catching small birds/rat/squirrels made from bamboo and cane
2.	<i>Iide</i>	To catch rat/squirrel made from flat stone
3.	<i>Dare</i>	Like <i>Iide</i> but made of wooden on which big boulder are put so that weight fall on animal
4.	<i>Gimaya</i> (trap)	Made of <i>Yabin</i> a type of bamboo for catching big animals
5.	Bow and Arrow	For shooting any type of animals/birds and for big animals poisons are used
6.	<i>Javeline</i> (Adan)	Spearing the animals
7.	<i>Giyo</i> (Knot)	Using cane rope ( <i>Yaso/Taru</i> ) for catching animals nowadays mostly nylon ropes or G.I. wire
8.	<i>Kubu Monii/ Uriinii</i>	To catch rat from hole
9.	<i>Kiru Monii</i>	drive animal to particular place for shooting in respect of big animal like deer
10.	<i>Pit</i> ( <i>Daye</i> )	Small pit are made by putting <i>Salyo Kormo</i> , <i>Magnolia champaca</i> seeds to attract birds and catch them
11.	<i>Takhun/Tajer</i>	For catching fish from stream/river

Table 6: Apatani traditional beliefs/practices for wildlife conservation

SN	Traditional beliefs	Totems and taboos associated
1.	There is a wide range of animistic conception associated with vegetation, wild animals, grooves and ritual ceremonies	They believe in super natural power like <i>RANTII</i> sacred grooves where trees are not felled/dare to touch in consequence invite wrath of super natural god and goddess
2.	ROPII ceremony incurring lot of expenditure that is unnecessary economic wastage make people to avoid killing such big cats	Certain animals like tigers, leopard believed to be ancestral brother of present human being. Further, if such ceremony is not performed the killer will invite wrath of ghost of tiger, etc.
3.	<i>Ficus</i> trees ( <i>Saro Sanii</i> ) are not felled	Belief that may invite evil spirits
4.	Deer is not killed	As it belongs to evil spirits that contribute to conservation
5.	Hunting and fishing activities are also restricted during <i>Myoko</i> festival	The <i>Apatani</i> do <i>Myoko Eyadu</i> (rites) in forests areas are conducted so that the forests areas is abundance with wild animals and abundance growth of cane, bamboo and <i>Kavalama urens</i> ( <i>Niji Yanii</i> ) used for preparing <i>Apum</i> (local beer). <i>Castanopsis</i> spp. are conserved and planted nearby bamboo garden, as the leaves are used for ceremonial purposes and also to avoid collection from long distance. Only mature or dying tree are removed. In this way, certain plant species are conserved
6.	<i>Apatani</i> forests are abode with spirits ( <i>Doji Uyi</i> )	It is believed that if one person enter another person's forest will invite wrath of apirits ( <i>Doji Uyi</i> ) which may result in complicated diseases, missing ( <i>Yapung Boniing</i> ), death, etc. It is believed that some animals like snake, bees, jungle fowl, etc. enter in the homestead of the individual may result in famine, loss of entire family, etc.
7.	<i>Sari/Tamo/</i> plants are avoided from felling	As it causes irritation, itching and with eruption of blister, etc.

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Apatani shield made  
of bear skin

Tiger teeth

Bear skin

Monkey and bear

[Different animal parts used for decoration of scabbard]



Lecha made of tree fern

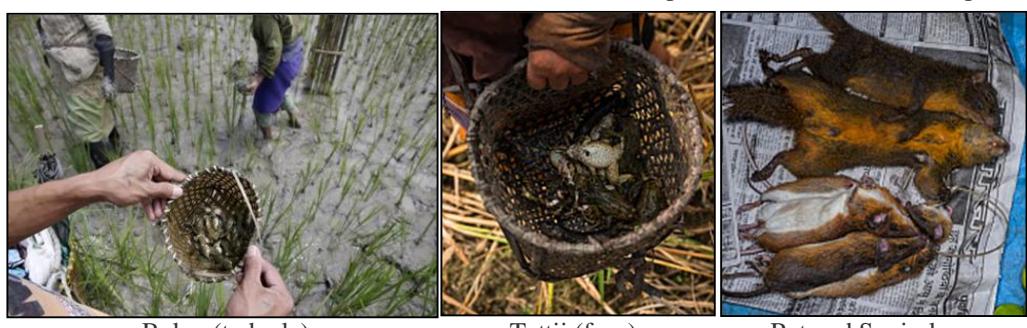
Apatani priest during Myoko  
festival



Miding Agar

Takhung trap made of bamboo  
in funnel shape

Bird trapped in  
Giirii trap



Bulyu (tadpole)

Tattii (frog)

Rat and Squirel

Photo plate: Wildlife and Apatani culture

2. From the present study, it has been observed that the socio-cultural and religious life of the *Apatanis* is associated with natural bio-resources for traditional rituals and ceremonies. Such resources are also used for supplementary food.
3. It is evident from the present study that 13 species of mammals, 6 species of birds, 3 species of reptiles, 1 species of fishes, 1 species of crustaceae, 18 species of insects, 1 species of fern are used for various purposes which is an indication of intimate dependence and relationship with bio-resources around them.
4. They display wildlife trophies where as possession, display and exhibition of trophies derived from wildlife is considered as status sign of superiority and valour.
5. Traditionally, with instruments/ implements, the hunting of wildlife is limited by its efficacy as compared to modern firepower like gun. In *Myoko* festival, the villages that celebrate festival killed only one monkey for sacrifice in *Nago* alter in village platform. The limitation of bow and arrow restrict excess killing that one way help in conservation of wildlife for future. But with increase firepower some individual do take game hunting for meat or trophy, which need to be restricted.

### CONCLUSION

The study shows the importance of the wildlife and natural resources for both terrestrial and freshwater biodiversity. It demonstrates the dependence of indigenous communities on wild meat including for medicinal and cultural purposes. However, it is also critical that the livelihood rights and culture of indigenous communities are

integrated by allowing for controlled consumption of common and non-threatened species. How the forest and wildlife laws interfere with the APATANIs with the enactment of Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, Forest Conservation Act, 1980 and other Forest Act/ Rules, more so with the establishment of Tale Wildlife Sanctuary recently has put lot of hindrance on the *Apatanis*. The people even though are firm believer of conservations of wildlife that you see for yourself in this beautiful place. Where forest and forestry may be bamboo plantation technique or maintaining of pine plantations that can take a lesson to Forest department. The technique of forestry can be replicated elsewhere in other states/areas.

Every inch of forests area is protected and owned individually whereas Govt. has notified the area as wildlife sanctuary without proper knowledge of local people. That reason some of local people file case in Guwahati High Court where case is still pending. With declaration of wildlife sanctuary and enactment of wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, due to protection given to them many wild species like wolf have started killing semi domesticated *Mithun* from their grazing ground. Further, there is no viable scheme for proper compensation. The compensation amount paid by the Govt. is hardly able to meet the unending agony to which dependent of the deceased *Mithun* are subjected to.

Finally, the management practices should be median approach by putting restriction for game hunting in the meantime giving permission for religious hunting for ceremonial purposes like *Bidin Lanii* in *Myoko* festival. Some alternative development activities should be initiated so that *Apatani* will avoid hunting wherein they can work in

development activities for their sustenance. Eco-tourism should be promoted to involve local unemployed youth for guide and reception works.

It must be understood that the present figures do not represent the actual figures of the ethno-biological wealth of the valley. Further integrated survey will be a rewarding

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