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LANGUAGES

## ENVIRONMENT-INDIA: Bird Watching to Save Habitats

By Keya Acharya



**BANGALORE, Feb 6 (IPS) - A global banking and investment firm has taken an unusual route to corporate environmental responsibility: through the promotion of bird-watching.**

The Hongkong and Shanghai Bank (HSBC), which has been running its 'India Bird Races' for the last three years, now reports that the programme has spread to nine Indian cities.

The initiative -- founded on the concept of the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society's annual bird race, though the Indian version is not held for fundraising and wildlife conservation -- came from Mumbai-based wildlife scientist Sunjoy Monga, who took the bird race idea to HSBC and got the bank enthused.

The first 'race' in 2005 in Mumbai drew close to 100 people, from total novices to experienced birders, who sighted 277 bird species in a 12-hour dusk to dawn period -- almost a quarter of all the varieties of birds on the entire Indian subcontinent.

By 2006, the number of bird-enthusiasts had doubled. The bird watchers also added a further seven species to the numbers sighted and identified.

In Bangalore, last month, nearly 150 bird-enthusiasts, grouped into fours with one experienced birder as 'captain' in each group, identified 250 species of birds in a 50 km radius around this highly congested city.

Monga and Bangalore-based 'birder' Prof. S. Subramanya of the University of Agricultural Sciences say the bird-races have come at an opportune time when most cities in India, especially Bangalore which is beleaguered by rapid real-estate development, face rapid loss of natural habitats.

"Important sites are being lost in this urban holocaust," says Monga. "We are now gathering valuable data and can thereafter find out which species are able to cope."

"The bird races are not about competition, it's about having fun", says Subramanya, who hopes the team effort will help in building a body of support for advocacy and conservation of natural habitats in Bangalore and elsewhere.

Rules, nevertheless, are strict. A logbook with detailed observations of sighting and location has to be filled in, all group members have to both stay together and identify each bird noted.

A panel of expert ornithologists collect all logbooks at dusk and check all statistics offered. The most realistic logbook, based on likely sightings at relevant places is then adjudged.

The interest amongst 'birders' is impressive. Ten-year-old Shreesh Mohalik, an experienced birdwatcher who holds his own amongst senior birders says he saw many 'new' birds.

"Even the team that came in the first place did not see or identify the white-naped woodpecker!" he said with glee.

"Newcomers tend to look for exotic species first, whereas an experienced birder will start with identifying the commonest, so when we look at logbooks that have only exotics we know that they need to be counter-checked," says ornithologist and chief judge M.B. Krishna in Bangalore.

All logistical and related support is happily done gratis by ardent birdwatching volunteers. "It is now basically a platform to get both enthusiasts and data collection together", says Monga.

Krishna believes the programme will help alleviate the lack of a continuous monitoring programme for bird species in India, and thereby help gauge the availability of a trained volunteer force.

"We need far more numbers in our scientific workforce in the country," says Krishna, "This amateur workforce may not be scientifically perfect, but it's a start."

"What's also exciting is a website ([www.indiabirdraces.com](http://www.indiabirdraces.com)) that tracks readings and recordings every year. This will become a rich source of information for a bird census", says Malini Thadani, head of communications and corporate sustainability at HSBC in Mumbai.

Thadani says HSBC, which began its India operations in 1853, has been interested in environmental and educational community initiatives as a matter of policy long before corporate social responsibility became a buzzword.

The company had set up a carbon task force in 2005 to oversee a five percent reduction of emissions in its worldwide internal operations by 2007. Thadani says they have reached their target and sold these credits through global tenders.

(END/2008)



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