

Manas animal keeper gets Wildlife Service Award



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Subhamoy Bhattacharjee 6 December 2013 Updated 6 Dec 9370 views

Maheshwar Basumatary aka Ontai, an animal keeper with the International Fund for Animal Welfare - Wildlife Trust of India (IFAW-WTI)'s Greater Manas Conservation Project has been honoured with this year's prestigious Sanctuary Asia Wildlife Service Award for his contributions to conservation in Bodoland. (The award will be given to him this evening at an event in Mumbai.)

Born in the autonomous district of Bodoland in Assam, Ontai grew up amidst political unrest that afflicted the district till early 2000s. He got married at an early age of 19 without any job in hand. Soon after, unfortunately he lost his way and fell in company with the wrong crowd helping the poachers as trackers.

“Those were difficult times. I was married young, and I had two young children,” he recalled. “My life fell apart when my wife left me after she got to know of what I was doing.”

With his life in shambles he realized the gravity of the situation and decided to turn this misfortune to his advantage and changed the course of his life. He surrendered before the Bodoland Territorial Council in 2005, and began assisting the authorities in reviving Manas.

He assisted the Forest Department and worked with the Bodoland Forest Protection Force (a community-based organisation) in Manas, before joining IFAW-WTI in 2009 to assist in the pioneering rehabilitation of a pair of orphaned clouded leopard cubs as part of the Greater Manas Conservation Project. He was also featured in the Nat Geo documentary on the project, titled ‘Return of the Clouded Leopards’.

“Ontai represents the future of conservation in India. He is not merely a son of the soil, but is a defender of the wild. I congratulate him, his family and IFAW-WTI for incubating such a strong pillar of support for the wildlife of the Greater Manas Landscape,” Bittu Sahgal, Editor, Sanctuary Asia.

“It is an honour for us to have amidst us individuals like Ontai,” said Vivek Menon, Executive Director, WTI and Regional Director – South Asia, IFAW. “Ontai and many of our animal keepers come from a background of difficulties and yet, have taken to fiercely protect the natural heritage in their areas. Their zeal has not only helped us achieve a number of milestones, but has also given us the strength to keep striving for what we stand for – to secure the natural heritage of India.”

Fondly known as Ontai, meaning ‘rock’ in Bodo, owing to his calm and resolute nature, Maheshwar is currently helping hand-rear orphan rhino calves as part of IFAW-WTI’s rehabilitation programme in Manas National Park.

“He was brought to us by our veterinarian Dr Panjit Basumatary, and we could not be more grateful. Dealing with wildlife is a difficult job, and Ontai has been an invaluable asset to us in more ways than one. A multi-faceted individual, he is also an excellent photographer,” revealed Dr Bhaskar Choudhury, Regional Head Northeast India – IFAW-WTI.

During the past eight years that Ontai has assisted in wildlife conservation, he has helped nab a number of poachers, seize illegal products, helped out with surveys of wildlife, among many others.

“Ontai will be a great inspiration and also an educator for his community now to help secure their heritage and earn a livelihood through this,” added Dr Choudhury.

That, Ontai has been an inspiration, is exemplified by his son of 18 years. Following on Ontai’s footsteps, the latter is also currently working to help revive Manas. “I feel this has been my greatest reward,” says a proud father, and now a national icon.

“I thank the Sanctuary Asia team for this honour. I feel extremely fortunate to receive this award, because I know there are many others like me who have turned to help wildlife. I also thank IFAW-WTI, especially the Greater Manas conservation team, for their immense support and encouragement. I also thank the Bodoland authorities, the Bodoland Forest Protection Force for accepting me during those years of difficulty. Most of all, I would like to thank late Rajen Islary, the founder president of BFPP, who explained to me the importance of conservation,” added Ontai.

Subhamoy Bhattacharjee

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