



NEWS RELEASE

Village-based conservation initiatives in Natmataung National Park buffer zones.

The Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA) (1) and BirdLife International (2), in collaboration with the staff of Natmataung National Park in Chin State, Myanmar, are helping village-based groups with development projects in return for villagers supporting conservation efforts in the adjacent national park. A recent visit by BANCA's Chairman U Uga and Jonathan C. Eames from BirdLife has revealed a promising start that warrants further international support.

BANCA and BirdLife are working at two villages, Okpo and Hilaung in the buffer zone of Natmataung National Park. These villages were carefully selected by U Uga and U Shein Gay Ngai, Warden of Natmataung National Park, in part because of their high levels of poverty. [and the level of hunting by villagers in the national park -POSSIBLY DANGEROUS TO GIVE THE MESSAGE OF 'HUNT A LOT AND YOU'LL GET DEVELOPMENT HELP?'] . Last year, meetings between local villagers and district authorities helped identify the development priorities in each village. National Park staff explained to the villagers their obligations as stakeholders in maintaining the integrity of the national park, which includes Mount Victoria, the highest peak in Chin State. As a result of these meetings, the villages elected representatives to form Site Support Groups (SSGs) to take the lead in promoting village development initiatives and implementing anti-poaching patrols around the national park.

Site Support Groups comprise concerned stakeholders who organize themselves to protect sites of international conservation importance, termed Important Bird Areas (IBAs) by BirdLife International. The BirdLife International Partnership of non-government organisations promotes this approach worldwide to help safeguard sites which may not receive formal protection as national parks, nature reserves or wildlife sanctuaries.

To-date the two SSGs in Myanmar, with BANCA and BirdLife support and funded through the British Government's Darwin Initiative, have established nurseries for coffee and avocado seedlings, introduced a higher yielding seed potato variety from Shan State, and built or repaired freshwater storage tanks in both villages. In return for this help, the SSGs have formed anti-poaching patrols which intercept hunters around the national park and confiscate traps.

"One of the issues for villagers has been food security," said BANCA's Chairman U Uga, "At the villagers' request we began by providing rice to households facing food shortages, but we discontinued this after we discovered the villagers' preference for improved potato varieties. Villagers are now asking for our help to introduce other cash crops."

"I was amazed at the level of take-up by the villagers, especially at Hilaung village. Here the anti-poaching patrols asked for staff from the national park to back them up and for us to provide uniforms, which I interpret to be a measure of pride in what they are doing, and an expression of their commitment" commented Jonathan C. Eames.

Flushed with success, BANCA and BirdLife would like to scale-up activities at Okpo and Hilaung villages and introduce the model to other villages in the buffer-zone. This will form part of their Darwin-funded project in 2005. They are also keen to hear from donors who may wish to support the project.

For further information, please contact Jonathan C. Eames at BirdLife International in Indochina, Hanoi, Vietnam, Tel: +84 4 7223864; Eames.birdlife@netnam.vn. Jonathan Eames will be available for telephone interviews during Vietnam office hours (GMT + 7 hrs)

NOTES FOR EDITORS

1) The Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA) is a newly formed non-governmental organisation that received its government charter in 2004. It works to conserve biodiversity in Myanmar and promote an interest in conservation amongst the people of Myanmar.

2) BirdLife International is a global alliance of conservation organisations working in more than 100 countries who, together, are the leading authority on the status of birds, their habitats and the issues and problems affecting bird life.