

Gogabeel is Bihar's first community reserve

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[Gogabeel, Bihar's first community reserve, is located in the state's Katihar district. Photo: Mohd Imran Khan](#)

Gogabeel, an ox-bow lake in Bihar's Katihar district, has been declared as the state's first 'Community Reserve'.

The water body was notified as a 57 hectare Community Reserve and a 30 hectare 'Conservation Reserve' on August 2, 2019 by Deepak Kumar, principal secretary, department of environment, forest and climate change, Bihar.

Gogabeel is formed from the flow of the rivers Mahananda and Kankhar in the north and the Ganga in the south and east. It is the fifteenth Protected Area (PA) in Bihar.

Long Journey

The notification marked the end of a long journey for conservation experts who had been trying to convince both, local residents as well as the authorities to declare the important birding site as a PA.

"Gogabeel was initially notified as a 'Closed Area' by the state government in the year 1990 for five years," Arvind Mishra, state coordinator of the Indian Bird Conservation Network (IBCN), a network of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), BirdLife International, UK and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), UK, told *Down To Earth*.

Mishra, also a member of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Species Survival Commission, has been a visitor to the area since the early 1990s.

"This status was extended in 1995, up to 2000. After the amendment of the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972, in 2002, the provision of 'Closed Area' was omitted and this site disappeared from the list of the Bihar government's PAs, having no legal status," he added.

In 2004, Gogabeel, including the neighbouring Baghar Beel and Baldia Chaur, were given the status of an IBA (Important Bird Area of India) by the IBCN.

In 2017, on the recommendation of Arvind Mishra, IBCN again declared Gogabeel as an IBA. Mishra also recommended the site as having the potential to be declared as a Ramsar Site of India.

All through these years, members of different local non-profits such as Goga Vikas Samiti, Janlakshya (Katihar), Mandar Nature Club and Arnav from Bhagalpur worked hard to convince local people to have the area declared as a Community Reserve.

"It was not at all easy to convince them that the rights and management of this Community Reserve would remain with the local community," Raj Aman Singh, treasurer of Janlakshya, said.

The non-profits took various measures. For instance, Janlakshya adopted a local tribal village 'Marwa', organising different camps and programmes for the residents to sensitise them about ensuring the protection of Gogabeel and its biodiversity.

"The local villagers were generous enough to have agreed for developing the Community Reserve on their land," Ram Kripal Kumar of Goga Vikas Samiti, another non-profit, said.

The whole community around Gogabeel supported every move to declare it as a reserve for birds and biodiversity. "They wish this area be developed as a prime destination for the bird watchers in the country," TN Tarak, eminent environmentalist and Janlakshya member, said.

On November 2, 2018, the State Board for Wildlife passed the proposal for notifying Gogabeel and Baghar Beel as 'Community Reserve' and 'Conservation Reserve'.

Bird Paradise

"Gogabeel is a permanent waterbody, although it shrinks to some extent in the summer but never dries completely," said Mishra.

In summers, the waterbody measures 88 hectares, but supports a unique assemblage of bird species, both in count and diversity.

More than 90 bird species have been recorded from this site, of which, about 30 are migratory.

Among the threatened species, the Lesser Adjutant Stork is listed as 'Vulnerable' by the IUCN while the Black Necked Stork, White Ibis and White-eyed Pochard are 'Near Threatened'.

Other species reported from this site include Black Ibis, Ashy Swallow Shrike, Jungle Babbler, Bank Myna, Red Munia, Northern Lapwing and Spotbill Duck.

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