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**EMERGENCY ACTION FOR THE  
CONSERVATION OF THE SPOON-BILLED SANDPIPER IN MYANMAR**

**BIODIVERSITY AND NATURE CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION  
(BANCA, BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL PARTNER ORGANIZATION IN MYANMAR)**

**(IN SUPPORT OF THE UNEP/CMS SPOON-BILLED SANDPIPER ACTION PLAN)**

# **EMERGENCY ACTION FOR THE CONSERVATION OF THE SPOON-BILLED SANDPIPER IN MYANMAR**

**Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA, BirdLife International partner organization in Myanmar)**

**(In support of the UNEP/CMS Spoon-billed Sandpiper Action Plan)**

**1 June 2010**

## **1. Mitigation Activity Background, Objectives and Summary Achievements**

BANCA and the Spoonbill Recovery Team conducted three expeditions in the Bay of Martaban in January and February 2010, including a socio-economic survey of hunters in 15 villages in the eastern side of the Bay of Martaban. The socio-economic survey interviewed altogether 26 hunters in 15 villages identified and identified hunting as a primary and immediate threat to the Spoonbill Sandpiper (SbS). Five of these hunters were categorized as 'professional' (i.e. between 50 and 90% of income is from bird hunting and have they few alternative income opportunities) while another ten hunters were identified as 'opportunistic' hunters who hunt birds while fishing (for whom bird-hunting constitutes between and 10 and 25% of their annual incomes). Another number of hunters were classified as for 'occasional', for fun or consumption as a special snack food only. The 'professional' hunters were often the poorest in their villages, and expressed a keen interest taking up alternate livelihood activities to bird-hunting, because of Buddhist belief in negative karma for killing birds, as well as the fact that it does not provide a good income. (For more detail see Preliminary Socio-economic Survey in the Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Calidris pygmeus/Eurorhyncus pygmeus* Occurrence Area in the Gulf of Martaban, Mon State, Myanmar. March 2010, BANCA).

As the results of the survey became clear (hunting is a significant threat to the SbS and birdhunters are eager to find alternative livelihoods), and since April and May is prime bird hunting time, as it is open season (good weather) with wintering birds as well as migratory birds are in the area, the Mitigation Activity was quickly planned and implemented in the hopes of working with bird hunters to immediately cease trapping activities, and save birds, especially the Spoonbill Sandpiper. The activity also was intended to lay the groundwork to work with local villages and relevant authorities after the monsoon (beginning in October 2010) for protection of the SbS and formation of a Local Conservation Group.

As set out in the Conservation Immediate Action Plan, the specific objectives of the mitigation activity were:

1. To identify any remaining professional bird hunters and opportunistic hunters in the target area of 10 villages (over 4 townships).
2. To make conservation agreements with all professional bird hunters (at least 5) and opportunistic hunters (at least 10) to stop hunting immediately.
3. To provide livelihood inputs as part of the conservation agreement.
4. To do informal and opportunistic awareness-raising with villages about the need for conservation of the spoonbill sandpiper.

The mitigation team was composed of the following four BANCA members: Aung Kyaw Nyunt (Team Leader and BANCA Executive Committee member), Khin Than Win (Vet. Surgeon), Khin

Pyone Kyi (PhD candidate, Zoology, Yangon University), Khin Thida Lwin (PhD candidate, Zoology, Yangon University).

The mitigation team worked from March 22-27 in Yangon to prepare the fieldwork and then worked in the field from 28 March to 13 May (For detailed itinerary, see Appendix A). The team visited altogether 14 villages in the target area in eastern Martaban over four townships (Thaton, Bilin, Kyaikhto, Paung) confirmed and/or identified altogether 24 hunters (3 of whom were not known to the team before), signed conservation agreements with 15 hunters and distributed livelihood inputs to 15 hunters.

For those hunters who are ‘occasional’, raising awareness of the wildlife law and the conservation value of the Spoonbill Sandpiper was deemed sufficient to discourage further hunting. For those who are ‘professional’ and ‘opportunistic’, the team asked them to sign conservation agreements and provided a measure of livelihood inputs, dependent on relative needs and percent of income formerly derived by birds. In general, each ‘professional’ hunter received livelihood inputs with a value of about USD500 (boats and fishing nets), while each ‘opportunistic’ hunter received goods with a value of approximately USD150 per hunter.

All of the above objectives were achieved up to and beyond expectations, including laying the groundwork for future work with the communities. The activity achievements are detailed in the report below, including identification of hunters, signing of agreements, distribution of livelihoods inputs, and awareness-raising.

## **2. Confirmation of Existing Hunters and Identification of Remaining Hunters**

*Objective: To identify any remaining professional bird hunters and opportunistic hunters in the target area of 10 villages (over 4 townships)*

The team visited altogether 25 hunters in 14 villages, which was four villages over the target of ten. In each village the team visited the home of each of the hunters who had already been identified in the socio-economic survey. During the discussion these hunters were asked to identify any remaining hunters in the village or nearby villages. Later the village heads were also asked about any remaining hunters. Using this process, all hunters in the target area were identified.

The team was able to identify and visit one village (Mutin Village, Bilin Township) that had not been covered in the Jan/Feb socio-economic survey and where three ‘new’ hunters were found who hunt only ‘occasionally.’ These hunters received awareness-raising and education. In summary altogether 22 hunters were confirmed (of which five ‘professional’ and 10 ‘opportunistic’) and an additional 3 identified (as ‘occasional’ hunters).

## **3. Conservation Agreements Signed**

*Objective: To make conservation agreements with all professional bird hunters (at least 5) and opportunistic hunters (at least 10) to stop hunting immediately*

The team discussed with each hunter what their current and future plans were around bird-hunting. The team found that many of the hunters had already ceased hunting birds since their awareness of the law and conservation value of the bird had been raised during the socio-economic survey visit, as well as the encouragement of the village head. For those who were still hunting, they were keen to stop hunting in exchange for livelihood inputs, saying that they were only hunting because they had no other means of income.

The team asked the village head to take responsibility to support the hunters in their pledge to stop hunting. The village heads were reminded of the provisions of wildlife law which under Article 15 A lists the Spoonbill Sandpiper and other shorebirds as completely protected species, not to be collected in any form, and of the consequence listed under the Myanmar Wildlife Law is 37A which is up to 50,000 kyats (USD50) and/or up to 7 years in prison, for collection of completely protected species.

Finally, 15 conservation agreements were signed by the hunters (either by signature or thumbprint--- about half of the hunters are illiterate), and undersigned by the village head and BANCA representative as witness. The conservation agreement text reads:

“I the undersigned in XX township and XX village, with XX name, understand that shorebirds are completely protected under Wildlife Law article 15A and prohibited from being caught, netted, poisoned, captured or killed in any way, and/or held in hand or traded, and completely accept and agree to comply with this law. I understand that catching these birds in any way is punishable under article 37A. I understand and agree to the above.”

One copy of the agreement was left with the village head and the other with BANCA team.

#### **4. Distribution of Replacement Livelihood Materials and Collection of Bird hunting Gear**

After the conservation agreement was signed the team discussed with each hunter what it was they needed to help them in their livelihoods if they were no longer hunting birds. Most of the hunters wanted fishing inputs as they would rather fish than hunt birds. For those who were very poor and had no alternative livelihood opportunities, they mostly wanted small boats and nets. For the opportunistic hunters, as birding is only a small part of their income and they already have boats, they requested and received only small items including fishing nets and iceboxes for fish storage. The hunters were taken to the market to choose their own livelihood replacement materials, which were purchased for them by the team with project funds.

Each hunter signed an inventory record/receipt and ‘use pledge’, witnessed by the BANCA team and village head, which listed all the materials received and purchase cost by that particular hunter. The written pledge was made to use the materials only for family production and income, take responsibility for own maintenance and repair, and not sell or transfer the materials to another person. A copy was left with the hunter and a copy for the BANCA team for project records.

The range of livelihood replacement material costs per person for the five professional hunters was from MMK501,000 to 560,000 (USD 500 and 560), and for the ten opportunistic hunters MMK130,000 to 154,700 (USD130 to 154). See Appendix B for the full list of hunters, materials received and cost. The total spent for 5 professional hunters was MMK2,638,000 (approx USD 2640) and for 10 opportunistic hunters was MMK1,368,300 (approx USD1368).

After receiving the livelihoods materials, the hunters brought out all their bird hunting gear and gave it to the team. This includes bird nets and bird-holding baskets. The team collected altogether 63 sections of net and 2 baskets. The hunters now no longer hold any equipment with which to hunt birds.

#### **5. Awareness-raising**

The team conducted many kinds of awareness-raising, including working individually with hunters and village heads, presenting formal talks and discussion in one pagoda festival and four

village meetings, and in numerous informal small group discussions. The team also talked with township authorities to lay the groundwork for continued intervention of BANCA with local communities and authorities for conservation of the SbS. In meetings with hunters and members of the local communities, the team explained the conservation significance of SBS and the international importance of the wintering shorebird populations at the Gulf of Martaban. The team highlighted the impact that trapping is having on SBS and other shorebirds and explained that SBS and other shorebirds are totally protected in Myanmar under the Wildlife Law. While discussing with hunters and village heads, the team emphasized the legal protection status of the Spoonbill Sandpiper and other shorebirds. The team also posted posters and distributed education pamphlets and other materials. Through these activities, the team considers that most people in the target area will have now heard of the SbS, its protection status under law, and its conservation value.

#### *Raising awareness of individual hunters*

When working with hunters at the beginning of the village visit and throughout, the team emphasized the value of conservation as well as legal protection status of the SbS with each hunter. The team was also sympathetic to the hunters' livelihood situation and their reasons for bird hunting. The hunters for the most part welcomed the opportunity to change their hunting habits as are not satisfied with the occupation of bird hunting. The team perceives that the hunters are firm in their commitment to no longer hunt birds. The team also perceives that as a result of the awareness raising, distribution of materials and follow-up visit, the team has created a positive rapport with the hunters, and they will be likely to want to work with BANCA and their communities as active participants in any future Local Conservation Group.

#### *Pagoda festival talk*

The village heads arranged for the team to do an awareness raising event at the pagoda festival on the occasion of *Gasone* full moon day, in Ahlat village, Paung Township. The event was held in the Ahlat monastery, and attended by villagers from surrounding villages. A pagoda festival is a traditional event at which people from surrounding villages gather to worship as well as shop, share in fun activities and exchange news. The main village of Ahlat has a population of about 1000 households, Wepadan about 100 households (of temporary migrants come for fishing), and other nearby villages are smaller with less than 500 HH each. The SbS talk was held after the boxing event, and spectators at the boxing were invited to come to the talk which was attended by representatives of the fire department, police, people's militia, fishermen, and farmers.

The team presented the talk using visual materials like posters on topics including the Spoonbill Sandpiper conservation value and its migration route, its protected status under the law, the value of birds, interaction between birds and people, knowledge of biodiversity conservation and environmental awareness. The event lasted about 3 hours and was quite active with much discussion, questions and participation. The village heads also spoke to encourage conservation behavior, and the hunters shared their experiences and learning about bird conservation. Altogether about 500 persons attended the talk at the pagoda.

#### *Village meeting in four villages*

Awareness raising talks about Spoonbill Sandpiper conservation value and protection status, and environment protection in general, were held in four villages, specifically Mayangone village in Thaton Township, Muthin village in Bilin Township, Taungbine Quarter and Kawtin village in

Kyaikhto Township. The meetings were called by the village head and usually held in the monastery. These meetings were attended by key formal and informal village leaders including Village Peace and Development Council members (the local government authority), people's militia members, and school teachers; as well as other local people including hunters and fishermen. The number of participants ranged from 30 to 100 persons per village.

At these meetings, two hunters presented the team with banding rings which they had collected from shorebirds (not SbS), one from Thailand and one from Kuala Lumpur. These are with the team awaiting instruction on where to send.

#### *Informal small group meetings*

Informal small group meetings of interested persons happened naturally as people gathered where the team was staying or working, for example in the cool area under people's stilted houses, or on the riverbank among fishermen, or while walking along the road. Informal meetings were also held in three villages with senior monks at the village monasteries.

#### *Education materials used and distributed*

Educational materials used in the awareness raising talks included prepared laminated wall posters about the SbS conservation value, migration route, and importance of local threats of hunting. Specific heading of the ten posters used are as follows:

SbS conservation value; SbS migratory route and distribution; benefits of birds; map of established protected areas in Myanmar; key biodiversity areas in Myanmar; endemic species in Myanmar; root causes of environmental and biodiversity degradation; negative consequences of environmental degradation; people's participation in environmental conservation; benefits generated from the environment.

Materials distributed to hunters, village heads and villagers include wall posters and pamphlets about the SbS, copies of the Wildlife Law and list of protected animals, T-shirts and kerchiefs with the SbS photo and BANCA logo. Posters were also posted in local restaurants and tea shops and road junctions.

#### **6. Monitoring check-up (two weeks after materials distribution)**

All 15 hunters were visited approximately two weeks after they had received the livelihoods replacement materials, to check whether they are able to use them according to plan. The team found that some former hunters were going out fishing already, while others were preparing the nets and repairing their houses and boats while waiting for the fishing season to begin. (This year the rains are late, and the fish come in commercially viable numbers only after rain begins). Thus fishing ongoing for subsistence only, although some were already able to catch enough fish to sell. One creative person was using their icebox to sell cool drinks. The team also found that the former bird hunters were definitely not hunting birds anymore.

Each of the 15 hunters had received a book to keep records of their income from the materials given. For example, one former professional hunter, U Hla Moe Kyaw, had already sold 60,000 kyat worth of fish in the last two weeks, whereas before he received the boat and fish net from BANCA he didn't fish at all; this income was from fishing by standing near shore only as he was waiting for the rain to take the boat out. U San Chit and U Aung Min reported that their fish catch

has increased because they now have more nets as provided by BANCA. In general the hunters were happy with the inputs they had received, are using them or preparing to use them as planned, have a positive rapport with BANCA team members, and are likely ready to continue to support bird conservation in the future.

## 7. **Lessons learned: Factors which contributed the successful outcome of the activity**

Several factors worked to make the mitigation activity successful, and uncharacteristically for fieldwork of this type, there were no major challenges.

The first factor which contributed to the successful outcome was the local attitude of support to the BANCA mitigation team objectives and activities. For example, in two villages, the village leaders took the initiative to assign the former birdhunters the role of *seheinmu*, which is the person in charge of ten households according to local administrative systems. This is an honor which shows trust in a person as well as bestowing them with responsibility. By assigning the hunter the responsibility of *seheinmu*, the village leader makes their behavior more visible to the community as well as making them accountable to the community, increasing the likelihood that they will uphold the law and no longer hunt. This could be suggested to other village heads in the future.

The team found that the village leaders were easy to work with, friendly and hospitable, and took care of the team, including any concerns about personal security in a slightly insecure area (should avoid overnight stay in certain villages because of possible 'bandits'). Also, the field visit began during a sensitive moment of Armed Forces Day (March 27) and the announcement of the election law, and there was a concern that gathering people together for awareness-raising might be sensitive as it could be mistaken for political activity. Luckily this did not prove to be a problem and the team was able to work freely and easily through good communication with village level authorities. The team did meet with township level authorities in Kyaikhto before entering the villages in order to clarify their activities and objectives.

The time taken and expense to prepare educational materials in advance of the field visit was well worth it. The wall posters about the SbS and its conservation value and legal protection status, the pamphlet copies of the wildlife law, and SbS/BANCA T-shirts are a visible reminder about the SbS conservation need remaining in the village, in restaurants, village offices and crossroads. The hunters themselves have all received T shirts, as well as the BANCA logo stamped on some of the material inputs, which reminds them of their responsibility as well as reminding those who see them. The community has been 'branded' by the SbS conservation need and their responsibility, as well as BANCA, whose logo is on all the education materials.

Because the rains were late this year the weather also was not a problem. Some of the villages become inaccessible to cars during the rainy season because the road washes out. The team was able to travel by rented car the whole way.

## 8. **Conclusions**

The *conservation objectives were successfully achieved in the target villages*. The level of success exceeded expectations. Key measures of success in the reduction, or eradication, of bird-hunting activities in the target area include:

- The hunters have clearly accepted not to hunt anymore. This is clear not only from the conservation agreements that they signed with the village head as witness, but also from their own attitudes as expressed during the fieldwork in the initial

discussions as well as follow-up visits. The hunters are relieved to be free of the karmic burden, and social stigma of killing birds.

- The distribution of livelihood materials has enabled the hunters to make good their commitment to no longer hunt birds. The fishing nets and boats will help them to gain a better household income than they could get from hunting birds. This is likely to lead to a sustainable outcome for the former bird hunters livelihoods as well as the lives of birds.
- The hunters have already handed in their birdnets and hunting gear, and so no longer have equipment to use for hunting birds.
- Through all the activities described above, the local communities' awareness of the legal protection status as well as conservation value of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper and other shorebirds has been greatly increased. Through the village talks, the participants were actively engaged and interested in learning about environmental conservation in general.
- The law protecting the bird has been clarified and disseminated.

#### *Laying the groundwork for long-term engagement*

To lay the groundwork for longer term engagement, the team began discussions with local government officials, specifically two staff of the township Forest Department, Kyaikhto Township Forest Officer Saw Moe Oo and Kyaiktiyo Wildlife Sanctuary Warden U Nyunt Aung. The team told them of the project activities and that there would be longer term conservation support activities from BANCA side. The township officers expressed interest in supporting this initiative, said they were ready to cooperate with the BANCA team, and that they would report about the BANCA visit, objectives, activities and plans for follow-up to their supervisors at the state level, eg Director of the Forest Department for Mon State. The success of these meetings was partly because these officers happened to be former colleagues in the Forest Department's Nature and Wildlife Conservation Division (NWCD) with some of the BANCA team members.

The positive rapport between the hunters and the local village leaders, as well as the clear interest of local communities as expressed during the awareness-raising activities, is also a good foundation for long-term engagement.

## **9. Recommendations**

### *Drafting of a five-year plan for the conservation of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper in Myanmar*

The ornithological and socio-economic surveys and mitigation work of the past few seasons has shown great potential in Myanmar for the conservation of the SbS. This work needs to be continued and expanded, on the basis of a medium and long term conservation plan specifically for Myanmar. The creation of that plan should be initiated by Species Guardian BANCA, with the participation and support of Arcona Consulting, the Russians, BirdLife International in Indochina, BirdLife Asia Council, BirdLife HQ in Cambridge, and others, including other local players, and local communities. A planning workshop should be held before the open season. This plan will use the CMS International Single Species Action Plan for the Conservation of the Spoonbilled Sandpiper for a framework. The plan will be used for fundraising as well as coordinated action for the conservation of the SbS in Myanmar. The components of this plan might include some of the activities described below.



### *Expanded target area for socio-economic and hunting surveys*

The western part of the Gulf of Martaban, as well as the southern coast of Mon and Tanintharyi, requires ornithological as well as socio-economic and hunting surveys (starting from October 2010). For the western Martaban it is likely that the situation will be similar to the eastern, and thus the hunters who are found there should receive the same livelihoods and conservation agreements was achieved in the eastern Martaban under this project.

### *Establishment of Local Conservation Groups*

Local Conservation Groups should be formed in the villages in the eastern Martaban, and eventually western, for the continued conservation of the SbS with the support of BANCA. These groups will likely include local communities, hunters as well as township officials in both forestry and fishery line agencies, as well as local authorities. This will require workshops with local authorities including Township Peace and Development Council (TPDC), Forestry Department, Fisheries Department, Nature and Wildlife Conservation Department (NWCD) and relevant army personnel, as well as with local communities. The LCG will be a step along the way to, and within the context of, establishing a formal or informal protected area in the Gulf of Martaban.

### *Continued awareness-raising through media with a wide reach*

Widespread awareness-raising about the SbS and its conservation value and protected status under the law should be conducted for a wide range of populations around the Gulf of Martaban and the Ayeryawaddy and Rakhine coast, where the bird is known to occur. This wider net of media will reach the general population, and can include school-based environmental awareness, radio and print media. This will be targeted to those who are 'occasional' hunters, as well as to the general population. The campaign will help local people take pride in their special habitat and custodianship of the unique and Critically Endangered Spoonbilled Sandpiper.

### *Annual bird census*

An annual census of the SbS and its status should be conducted to monitor the population trends in this Critically Endangered species.

### *Creation of a protected area*

The Gulf of Martaban is a special habitat, a tidal estuary with great tidal difference, and with local communities that rely on its special biological and physical characteristics. This estuary should be studied more carefully for conservation value in terms of special habitat, environmental services, value to fish and birds, and cultural values. The area should eventually be protected under an appropriate status depending on the recommendations of further research and a clear assessment of the potential advantages and disadvantages of specific protected status and conservation options.

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