

Green soldier

Be it black buck poaching in Rajasthan, tiger skin smuggling or denudation of rain forests in South Africa, wildlife is threatened the world over. Jungles, an NGO formed in 1986, has been working at the grass-roots level to address issues related to environment and wildlife conservation both in India and abroad. Pioneers in wildlife conservation projects, this city-based NGO plans to invite ecologist Dr J. Michael Fay of the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society and a Conservation Fellow at the National Geographic Society, to India.

RAJA CHATTERJEE, founder member and secretary of Jungles, spoke to **SUJATA DUGAR** about their key projects, problems and plans.

● **Why do you call yourself The Jungles?**

We are a group of like-minded individuals who formed the group to address issues related to wildlife conservation. Our main objective is to create awareness about environmental issues and act as a catalyst between people and the government. We were named The Jungles by our founder president and author Buddhadeb Guha who felt that it would help us develop a sense of belonging.

● **How do you spread the message of wildlife conservation?**

Since its inception, The Jungles has organised field trips to acquaint the members with various eco-systems of our country. Debates, slide shows, photography competitions on wildlife and nature on World Environment Day are regularly organised and campaigns have been carried forward through its quarterly newsletter, *Game Trail*. However, it was only after a visit to the Achanakmar sanctuary at Madhya Pradesh that we learnt firsthand about forest problems and decided to pursue the issue of conservation at the grassroots.

● **How did the Achanakmar visit change your approach?**

At Achanakmar, we came face to face with the problems faced by forest officers and conservators. Illegal cattle grazing, log cutting and deer killing were the big problems. We prepared a project report for the Central govern-

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ment and asked for converting the human corridor between Kanha and Achanakmar into a National Park and thus allow the free movement of animals.

● **What are the other projects you have undertaken to create awareness at the grassroots?**

In 1989, we chanced upon the Purbasthali Gangetic Isle, close to Mayapur in West Bengal. We spotted rare migratory birds including the spoonbill, Ruddy shelduck and Garganey among

several others. We were shocked to learn that these birds were killed for their meat. We decided to conduct a detailed survey and educate the locals about the need for preservation of these birds. We submitted a project to the National Environment Awareness Campaign, a funding project to NGOs working on conservation.

After approval and adequate funds, we undertook a mass awareness campaign.

● **What was the outcome of the campaign?**

Poaching has stopped completely. A range officer has been placed at the spot and the local economy has improved considerably due to tourist inflow.

● **What are the other campaigns?**

We have undertaken surveys on the tribals of Phulbai in Orissa, wildlife habitat at Manas in Assam, participated in the tiger census operation at Dudhwa, Ranthambore at Sunderbans in 2002. We have launched anti-poaching operation in Simlipal and signature campaign against the killing of black bucks.

SUNDAY INTERVIEW
RAJA CHATTERJEE