

Press Release

Pygmy hog is reintroduced in Sonai Rupai, Assam – creating the second wild population of this highly endangered species in the world

Twelve years after six wild pygmy hogs (two males and four females) were captured from their last surviving population in Manas National Park of Assam, sixteen captive bred hogs (s) are now being released to the wild. Seven male and nine female hogs, belonging to three social groups, are being released in Sonai Rupai Wildlife Sanctuary as the part of a proposed series of reintroduction projects in selected sites in Assam, conducted under the auspices of the Pygmy Hog Conservation Programme (PHCP). They were bred at PHCP research and breeding centre in Basistha near Guwahati before being transferred to a specially constructed 'pre-release' facility in Potasali near Nameri National Park. Under the 'soft release' procedure, these hogs were maintained in large 'pre-release' enclosures for five months and have now been transferred to final 'release' enclosures in Sonai Rupai. They will be released from these enclosures to the wild within the next two to three weeks. The new population of released hogs will be monitored using direct and indirect methods.

The Pygmy Hog Conservation Programme is a collaborative project of Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust (DWCT), Pigs Peccaries & Hippos Specialist Group (PPHSG) of World Conservation Union's Species Survival Commission (IUCN-SSC), Forest Department of the Government of Assam, and the Ministry of Environment & Forests of Government of India. The Programme is financially supported by DWCT and currently also by the UK Government's Darwin Initiative. EcoSystems-India, the local partner organisation of DWCT and PPHSG, is assisting PHCP implement its activities in Assam and is working closely with local communities and other stakeholders, including some NGOs such as Aaranyak and the Centre for Environment Education (CEE), to improve awareness about the species and the management of its grassland habitats.

The pygmy hog, (*Porcula salvania*, earlier known to science as *Sus salvanius*), is the world's smallest and rarest wild pig and most threatened by extinction. It stands about 25 cm from the ground and weighs 6 to 9 kg. The species was originally found in the narrow belt of tall alluvial grasslands that runs across the southern edge of the Himalayas in the Indian subcontinent. Tall alluvial grass habitats, being very rich in nutrients, are highly suitable for cultivation and therefore came under significant pressures from expanding human populations, agriculture and uncontrolled harvesting; all of which caused disappearance of this highly sensitive species. William Oliver, IUCN-SSC PPHSG Chairman, who has been working to save the species from extinction for the last 30 years and had initiated the collaborative conservation programme, says that: "the practice of indiscriminate dry season annual burning and uncontrolled livestock grazing threaten the last population of pygmy hog in Manas and, if continued, it may affect many other threatened and sensitive grassland species."

According to John Fa, Director of Conservation Science for Durrell Wildlife: “the Programme was aimed to study the causes of decline in the species and establish a sustainable captive population for reintroduction in their restored native habitat. The conservation breeding has been extremely successful and although it has taken a long time we are now ready to release dozens of captive bred hogs back in to the wild every year.”

The breeding facility at Basistha currently holds 50 adults (22 males, 28 females) and four new litters (with 4 to 6 babies each) born in early May 2008. At least four more pregnant females are likely to farrow there soon. While all the hogs from the pre-release enclosures have been shifted to Sonai Rupai, the holding enclosures at Potasali continue to house seven adults. Goutam Narayan, PHCP Project Director, pointed out that these are the only captive populations of the species in the world.

At Potasali, the hogs were prepared for independent survival in the wild in the three large ‘pre-release’ enclosures densely planted with tall grass to simulate their natural habitat. The pre-release routine has allowed them to become used to the conditions they will face in the wild and reduces contact they have with humans. It is highly encouraging the hogs started showing naturalistic behaviour within a few weeks there.

Meanwhile PHCP continues to work closely with Sonai Rupai authorities to improve protection and management and to control annual dry season burning of grass. Frontline staff of the Sanctuary have also been trained in wildlife monitoring and habitat management under a Darwin Initiative training course conducted in collaboration with Zoological Society of London. The Chief Wildlife Warden of Assam, M. C. Malakar, is confident that these training programmes will help in better monitoring and management of state’s Parks and Sanctuaries.

The pygmy hog is a highly sensitive indicator for its grassland habitat, which is crucial for the survival of a number of other endangered species such as the swamp deer (*Cervus duvauceli*), wild buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*), hispid hare (*Caprolagus hispidus*) and Bengal florican (*Houbaropsis bengalensis*). The Pygmy Hog Conservation Programme acts as an umbrella for extensive work with both the habitats and their surrounding communities. It is hoped that through this project and the release of hogs, we can support local communities to sustainably manage their natural resources and protect their unique biodiversity.

Issued for: Pygmy Hog Conservation Programme, a collaborative project of Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, IUCN-SSC Pigs Peccaries & Hippos Specialist Group (PPHSG), Assam Forest Department, and Ministry of Environment & Forests of Govt. of India

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