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Who better to tell the stories of our wildernesses than those who experience it on a daily basis, suggests **Nandini Velho**, while sketching portraits of two members of the anti-poaching staff at the Pakke Tiger Reserve who also moonlight as wildlife filmmakers.



Photo: Chandan

Patro.

Anti-poaching staff moonlighting as wildlife filmmakers? That's exactly what Chandan Patro and Paro Natung, anti-poaching staff at the Pakke Tiger Reserve, have set off to achieve. Despite never having used a computer, the duo began to edit short clips of their footage within a couple of months of joining Green Hub, a youth and community-based video documentation centre in Tezpur. Imagine our surprise when along with the DFO we walked into the edit room where Patro and Natung were sitting behind a big, white Mac screen editing footage using Final Cut Pro.



Photo: Paro

Natung.

The story of their foray into film-making is closely tied to their lives growing up around Pakke. Chandan's father was a driver with the Forest Department at the Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary for many decades. During his school holidays, Chandan often visited anti-poaching camps with his father, which sparked his interest in the forest and wildlife. Unlike Chandan, Paro had a more adversarial introduction to wildlife. Growing up in Seijosa village just outside the Pakke Tiger Reserve, he remembers how he often stayed up to guard his crop fields against elephants. Much later, he participated in a camera-trapping exercise with the Forest Department, which led to his interest in wildlife. Today, both patrol and protect Pakke, which is one of the largest tracts of forests in the eastern Himalaya. Both were raised by their mothers, with Chandan losing his father when he was in class nine. Being daily-wage forest watchers, their lives are not easy. Fund crunches mean that job uncertainty is a given. Money has to be raised to even provision anti-poaching camps with rations for daily-wage staff, who do not get the benefits that regular forest guards do. The possibility of being trained as filmmakers therefore was a rare, golden opportunity for them. Rita Banerji, and her talented team run Green Hub, a one-of-its-kind school for video documentation based in

Tezpur. The previous year, I had the chance to work on nature-education camps with Anthony Tallo, a Green Hub fellow from the first batch (from the Shergaon Forest Division, of which Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary is a part) and was truly inspired by his story. After discussing and shortlisting candidates, who were daily-wage patrolling staff from Pakke, we decided to send in four applications. While helping Paro write his application, I found that his passion was palpable. I remember him saying, “*Dil lagake kaam karunga agar select hua toh.*” That’s what I wrote on his behalf and that’s exactly what he continues to do to this day. Chandan was innovative with his ideas even before he made it to Green Hub – he would attach binoculars to his mobile phone and take photographs of wildlife in the grasslands around his anti-poaching camp. Even as the course ended, Paro pleaded with me that he would like to go through the course again and join the third batch. His reasoning – he wanted to be a filmmaker as good as his Rita *ma’am*.

When Paro and Chandan set out to make *Protecting Paradise*, they wanted it to be a long film as previous films on Pakke were short documentaries. They also decided it must be about their lives in the forest – a film about the staff of Pakke, for the staff and by the staff.

Before Green Hub, the duo mostly used their mobile phones to record videos but they soon became comfortable filming in manual mode. They even began teaching the Ranger, DFO and me how to compose better photographs.

Film-making with them was an enriching and learning experience for me too. I learnt how to conceptualise storylines, review footage, give feedback on their rough cuts and much more. There were times where they wanted me to be with them as they hated to interrupt staff, who would talk continuously for 45 minutes on camera. At other times, I would have to intervene when a scene was being over-enthusiastically directed by everyone except for Paro and Chandan, or when they felt shy to tell their boss, Tana Tapi, not to shuffle while speaking and get him to do re-takes. Ultimately, however, it was their creative work and they were able to obtain the first live video footage of a tiger in Pakke, the unique Ibisbill, multiple herbivores feeding at natural salt-licks during the day – all signs of Pakke’s recovery - and stories of their colleagues that are worth telling and sharing.



Photo: Paro

Natung.

Their talent has consistently shone through the chaos that is part of life in the field. They completed editing their film on April 18, 2017, and had the opportunity to present it at an award ceremony for camera-trap images, where the PCCF was the Chief Guest. Despite the cable to the speaker amplifiers bailing on us on that day, the response to the film was enthusiastic. The staff wanted *Protecting Paradise* on their mobile phones, the PCCF wanted it on his pen drive and to this day the children of the staff want to watch it again and again to recognise the 'Who's Who' of Team Pakke. The reactions have been interesting. Kids exclaimed that this is what their abos (fathers) do, teenagers told Chandan and Paro that their film beat Bahubali-2 and the Division office staff now say that they know how hard the lives of the patrolling staff are. They even presented their work at the recently held Nature in Focus festival (as part of a session called Guards with Cameras) and screened *Protecting Paradise* at many organisations and institutes around Bengaluru, including where I did my Masters.

Chandan and Paro now hope to take their innovation and sincerity to succeed as filmmakers and protectors. In the long run, the regularised government post of cinema operators needs to be re-cast and rejuvenated to recruit talent such as Chandan and Paro for every tiger reserve and other Protected Areas. Such skills are not only beneficial for Protected Area managers but will improve the morale and motivation of all the other staff. There are stories in our wildernesses that more people need to know about and who better to tell these than those who experience it on a daily basis?

Chandan and Paro now wish to record the macro life of Pakke and are looking for support for equipment and editing. I realised that their love for macro went deeper when we talked about our favourite wildlife films – theirs' being *Queen of Trees*. Paro wondered if he would ever be able to make such a film. Having the means, support and guidance to tell these stories is my

hope for them and other protectors of India's forests.

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