Raju Acharya’s transcript from Effective Owl Education Workshop, World Owl Conference, Portugal 2017

Everyone, good morning. I’m Raju and I’m doing a presentation on behalf of my friend, Mr. Yadav, who is not here. Today we are presenting about the effective owl education practices which we are using in Nepal. Before I start, I would like to briefly inform you about Nepal, because some of you might not have been there. Nepal is a very small country. You can see the total area which is very small. The total population is just 29 million. It is a landlocked Himalayan country. It lies between India and China and is very small.

Despite its size being small it is very rich in culture. It has more than 125 languages and more than 125 ethnic groups. And you can see the cultural variation. I’m telling you about the cultural variation because when there are more concerns, more people, more reasons then we can see more issues with the owls as well.

Nepal is popular for community forestry and participatory wildlife conservation. We have 886 bird species in Nepal, out of them 23 are owls. They are all Least Concern, according to IUCN. But according to the national government 9 species are under various threat category. So before I start the education program, we should know why the owl education program is so important in Nepal. What are the issues we have, so that we are trying to educate the people, educate the students. There are some issues, there are some positions of people, like the owl is sometimes perceived very positively while sometimes very negatively.

I will give you an example. Those people who live in the high lands in Nepal (because Nepal extends from 70 meters above sea level to the top of Mount Everest) believe that the owl protects the home, the village. So they keep some feathers or parts of owls in their homes so they believe that the owl is a god, and will protect the home. But at the same time, some people believe that the owl is not so good. If they come near a village or a house and call then it is believed that someone from the village or that house will either die or get injured. So this is a mixed situation in Nepal. Some people think it’s good, some people think it’s bad.

Even the small owls are generally considered to be good luck in Nepal, and the larger owls are supposed to be bad luck. So it’s a mixed perception. At the same time, people believe that parts of an owl can be used as a medicine of value. For example, some people believe we can replace our eye with an owl’s eye so we can see in the night. So some people believe that the feather of the owl and oil, if you make a paste using these two things, it can be used in the hair, it’ll reduce hair loss. And the meat can be used to cure cancer or diarrhea. There are so many things. The meat soup can be used to remove pain in joints. If we make a necklace from the bones and wear it, we can walk anywhere in the middle of the night and we can increase our confidence.

So these are the issues that people believe in various parts of Nepal. Nepal is also a multi-religion country. In Hinduism, people believe that an owl is an envoy of the goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. So it’s more than an owl, they think that it’s the god. Veda, an ancient scripture in Hinduism, describes an incident where Lord Vishnu sent his utmost devotee Narada (messenger) to go to the Lake Mansarovara in the Himalayas and learn music from owl. In Maha Vajrayana wing of Buddhism, they conduct an annual worship called Mahankal. In that worship people use feathers of crow and owl. They must offer two feathers ritual and it is believed that all the bad things from the human body, and all the bad things from the house or the society go away, and they make people feel very comfortable. These are some things mentioned in different religions in Nepal.

These all are issues, and I’ll tell you one more issue which is very common: hunting. People hunt owls, and you can see in the picture there are many ways: some people use a ladder to get to the nest, some people use a pointed stick, some people use a mist net, some people use a catapult (a slingshot). This way people hunt, sometimes they kill, sometimes they injure, or sometimes they catch owl chicks from the nest and keep in the home. You might ask why they are hunting them? People hunt them for meat, just like any other meat i.e. lamb meat or chicken meat. Some people hunt just for the entertainment while some sell it in the local market.

It is illegal to hunt owls in Nepal. The government has sanctioned that if someone hunts or kills or captures an owl, they have to pay 200-500$ as a punishment or imprisonment of up to 1 year or both. But general people and even many police personnel do not know about the provision in the law.

Owls are also traded like any other species i.e. one-horned rhino, Asian elephant, tiger and common leopard. Owls are traded from Nepal to both China and India, so the magnitude and intensity of trade might be high. It is possibly one of the top 5 animal species that are traded from Nepal to other parts of the world. All species of owls recorded in Nepal have been found to be hunted and traded.

These are the issues. We are trying to motivate people, inform the policymakers, inform enforcement agencies about the importance of owls. We have started our owl conservation program in 2008. The concept is reduce hunting and trade, reduce forest fire intensity, inform the local people and the enforcement agency, and teach people to be friends with owls. People have heard about owls but they don’t know about owl biology and importance.

Method, we use the Power Point presentations, and we have the kids do a game, and essay competition, first program is a school-based outreach camp. Up to now we’ve done 500 camps and have met with 15,000 students. This is a very good and positive method. We focus on the students. The issue we try to deliver is biological importance of owls, trade, legal sanction and the role of students in how they can protect the owls. We request head master of the school to formulate eco club or nature club in the school and try to collect the catapults (slingshots) from the students. We also ask them to discourage students from stealing of eggs. Students steal the eggs from the nest and they just eat it. This is the last message we try to have the students understand.

We do public outreach as much as we can. Purpose, method, audience is almost the same (as with students), but there is one more issue here. We tell local people not to hunt or involve yourself in any trading in owls because if you do, there is a legal provision, a legal sanction, you will be in jail. It will create a bigger problem for you. This is the additional issue which we include in the public version of the camp.

The production and distribution of the conservation materials, like posters, pamphlets, books, so many things… Here’s a book we just published three days ago, and luckily I have two copies. It’s a mini encyclopedia of owls in Nepal. Everything is here, but unfortunately it’s in Nepali language because we want to motivate the local people first. Maybe in the following year we can have an English copy.

The Nepal Owl Festival. It was inspired by the International Festival of Owls from the USA. We attended this event in 2011. We started and tried to introduce owls to the local people as a farmer’s friend which it actually is. We believe that once we’ll be able to do that maybe people will start to love them and will stop killing owls. This is the main purpose of the Nepal Owl Festival. The festival is a fusion of culture, local games and owl education. Without blending local culture, games and other forms of entertainment it is difficult to bring in more people for the festival. Festival runs for the whole two days during which local people participate in the event. Various conservation and education related activities like owl museum, owl face paint, nail paint, owl watching, and others are organized during the whole event.

We do radio programs at various stations where we try to convey the message about the biological information, hunting and trade and all other things I talked about before to general people. We had a regular annual program on the different radio programs. The BBC Nepali service has highlighted the Nepal Owl Festival for six years, with 6 million listeners.

There are some other programs, like eco-clubs, collection of owl materials, preliminary investigation on hunting, student research grant, Nature Conservation Award, and building artificial nests.

Here are some challenges. The government has very low priority for owl conservation. The priority animals include one-horned rhino and tiger, which is a challenge for owl conservation. The next challenge is that we have a very long historical record on bird exploration but very limited resources on owls. Even many conservationists are not fully aware on the importance of owls. Furthermore, it is very difficult to reduce the hunting and trade because of the porous international border with India. Habitat destruction is very high in Nepal. Lack of technical and financial resources is an important factor that limits owl conservation in the country.

There are still a few things we have to do. Like we did a preliminary assessment on the hunting and trade but we don’t know the details or dynamics of hunting and trade, which is essential. Another one is conservation camp for students which have been mostly carried out away from the international border of either India or China. Now I think we should focus on the border areas of India and Nepal and the border of China and Nepal, which is more effective. We are also trying to establish an owl conservation center, which could include an owl rehab center, owl museum, training hall and restaurant. This is what we’re trying to establish in Nepal, but we have very limited resources and other more important programs. In our area, we could put up artificial nests like in South Africa, which could be very good in Nepal as well. The Nepal Owl Festival, we have to continue.

Q: Larger owls seem to be more frequently traded than smaller owls?

A: Yes. Larger owls have higher prices in the international market, so they trade larger owls like the Eagle Owls. We have the Rock Eagle Owl, Eurasian Eagle Owl, Brown Fish Owl, they’re traded more, the smaller owls are hunted more.