



Saving the Sarus

Preserving the Lumbini Crane Sanctuary

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“Compassionate and constructive interventions produce a ripple of beneficial actions that reverberate throughout the universe. By the same token, damaging one strand of the net sets off a cascade effect.” The Metaphor of Indra’s Net

Culture is inextricably bound to the environment in Nepal. Natural resources that can be sustainably harvested are disappearing nearly as fast as the people who are skilled in their traditional use.

Habitat for humans and wildlife alike is undergoing a vast transformation. The need for a sustainable approach to restoration and revitalization of areas challenged by rapid climate and social change is urgent in wetland areas worldwide. It is even more crucial in a place like Lumbini, which has so many rich layers of nature and culture that can be taken care of or risk being lost forever.

During my first trip to Nepal after the earthquake in 2015, I was introduced to a young Lumbini born Theravada monk and activist, Venerable Metteyya. When he

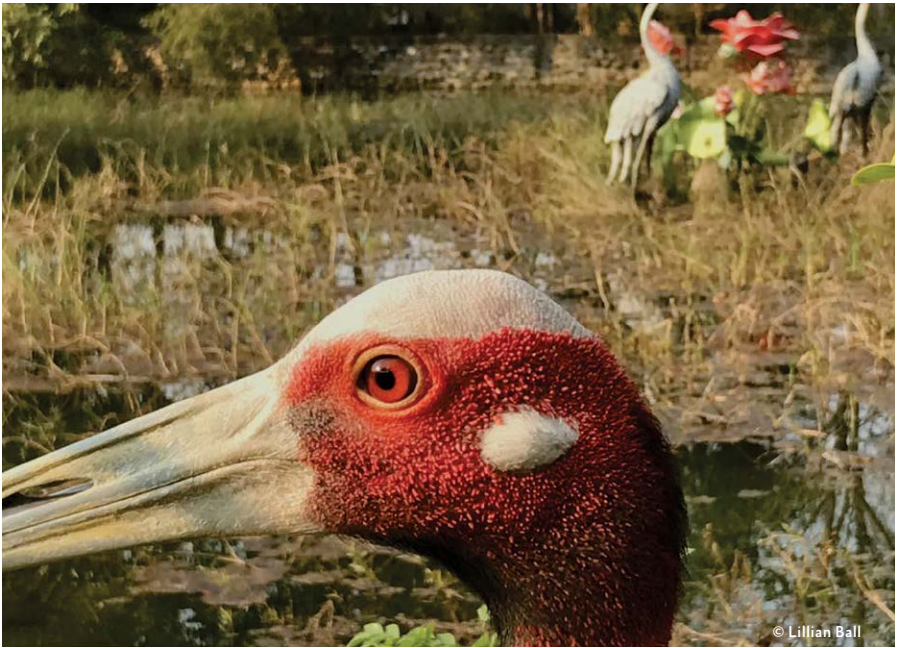
Sarus cranes in the circular pond next to the Sacred Garden



A Sarus guards its nest against predators

heard about my ongoing work with wetlands, he told me about his lifelong history of involvement with the threatened Sarus cranes at the Lumbini Crane Sanctuary near the Sacred Garden where the Buddha was born. These are the tallest flying birds in the world: striking with their bright red heads, they still inhabit the rice fields around Lumbini and several pairs annually nest in the Sanctuary.

He also told me the popular story of how Buddha rescued a crane and nursed it back to health after his cousin Devadatta shot it with an arrow. Devadatta claimed the bird but Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha's name before enlightenment) insisted he had rescued the bird and therefore was entitled to it. The elder judges of the area who were called in to decide the case ruled in Siddhartha's favor, wisely stating "The right to life belongs to those who seek not to destroy it but to preserve it." Therefore, Sarus cranes are a piece of living history and a wonderful illustration of Buddhist Dharma. They can demonstrate it in a meaningful way, elucidating



A Sarus crane at the Lumbini Crane Sanctuary

both the lessons of conservation and the teachings of the Buddha, who was born under a tree, enlightened under a tree, and died under a tree.

As a child, Venerable Metteyya learned about the world's 15 species of cranes from George Archibald, the co-founder of the International Crane Foundation and Rajendra Suwal, a wildlife biologist then working for ICF. It was through their efforts that the Lumbini Crane Sanctuary land was officially leased for 50 years by the ICF in the 90's. But as the years went by, the ICF shifted its focus to the Sarus crane population in India and the Sanctuary became considered abandoned land. Of course, for wildlife purposes the Sanctuary is excellent habitat with only minimal interventions.

We are currently designing a basic nature trail and sustainable educational center to attract visitors to learn about how wildlife conservation can be done in this



New Lumbini Crane Sanctuary sign designed by Lillian Ball

ancient land. George Archibald and the ICF are also back, involved again and very concerned about the fate of the Sanctuary.

Working with a number of groups across a broad span of disciplines has resulted in partnerships with several organizations to preserve the Crane Sanctuary and its habitat: Lumbini Social Service Foundation, Green Youth Lumbini, UNESCO, International Crane Foundation, World Wildlife Fund, Natural Resource Development Centre, Nepali Knotcraft, Animal Nepal, and Canadian Engaged Buddhists. All these interactions demonstrate that collaboration is integral in the fight for conservation.

“Your sangha—family, friends, and copractitioners—is the soil, and you are the seed. No matter how vigorous the seed is, if the soil does not provide nourishment, your seed will die.” Thich Naht Hahn

Environmental destruction affects human as well as wildlife habitat. This Southern Terai area where Lumbini is located already suffers from very serious air and water pollution. When the three square miles around the birthplace were planned as a Protected Site in the 1970's, several villages were uprooted. The local population is as endangered as the cranes by this push for development.

Lumbini is rapidly growing into an international pilgrimage tourist zone, causing stress to diverse natural resources. For most of his life, Venerable Metteyya has been observing these changes and has developed multilayered plans for the conservation of Lumbini's environment as well as long-term programs benefitting its people, such as schools and hospitals. His Lumbini Social Service Foundation (LSSF), works in many sectors, particularly facilitating clinics for both humans and animals, neither of which have nearby healthcare.

In addition to paying the yearly lease and employing two men as stewards and data collectors for the 256-acre Crane Sanctuary, LSSF does public environmental outreach for the area's students as well as maintaining a girl's college and a grammar school. These projects go far beyond western concepts of Engaged Buddhism and are being woven into the fabric of local life.

Joint efforts between Green Lumbini Youth and Metta School student groups now organize clean-ups and competitions to raise awareness. Educational programs are planned along with a nature walk with engaging interpretive signage to acquaint visitors with the environmental perspectives of Buddhism. The resourcefulness of these conservation efforts will reach millions of pilgrims as well as benefiting the local population.

Using the Ramsar Convention's Inventories for Wetlands guidelines, we can focus on creative responses to cultural as well as scientific conditions in Lumbini. Our ultimate long term goal is to make the Sanctuary a sustainable destination for Buddhist pilgrims to learn about wildlife's central position in the historical ecosystem. Fencing is required to keep out cattle herders and the huge water buffaloes that trample nests. Nesting areas that have been bisected by highways need the roads to be closed until the young have fledged.



Construction underway in the Lumbini Sarus crane habitat

Ideally, we envision a nature walkway with educational interventions which encourage conservation ethics through an experience including wildlife quite similar to what might have been experienced there in Buddha's time.

Recently Venerable Metteyya has been appointed as the vice chairman of the Lumbini Development Trust giving hope for the future. As of this writing, he has already prevented development on the crane sanctuary for the time being. Yet, for the future there is much to be done to protect the cranes and livelihoods in Lumbini.

How can we possibly measure a place's value to its inhabitants? What kind of experience or ethics encourage people towards ecosystem protection and conservation goals? Both the feathered and the local human inhabitants of Lumbini are at risk as *"those who have been made absent by the controlling powers or institutional histories."*

Rupert Sheldrake



A Sarus scans rice paddies looking for food

The people as well as the wildlife must be considered when making decisions which affect them, they are not simply a part of the landscape. In the eyes of Aldo Leopold, the integrity and stability of ecosystems are beautiful because of their interconnection. This is a concept that many scientists espouse and it is also one of the fundamental teachings of Buddha.

Estella Leopold, environmental activist and Aldo's daughter, does research in paleobotany, the study of fossil pollen as a tool in reconstructing ancient floras. How useful would it be to have knowledge of the plants that graced the wetlands the Sarus inhabited in the Sacred Garden 2600 years ago? It would certainly make the botanical restoration of the wetlands in the sanctuary vastly more specific. But though we have been able to do surveys of birds, fish and wildlife, no such historical flora studies have been attempted in the Sacred Garden to date.



Lumbini basket weavers make cranes out of local plants

The Lumbini Crane Sanctuary can activate the gap between culture and nature, inspiring opportunities for scientists, artists, contemplatives, and public officials to restore human as well as natural environments. There is a strikingly unrealized potential in making those connections between conservation and wildlife to benefit local people and pilgrims alike.

“A garden is never finished”, Shunryu Suzuki



Sarus cranes with local children in Lumbini.
Film still from Sanctuary

Sanctuary, a film by Lillian Ball, 2018 - sanctuarylumbini.org

Initially, the documentary was shot on an iPhone during conversations with Venerable Metteyya, without realizing it would later become an actual film. It makes links between conservation science, local culture and Buddhist teachings. It advocates for the wildlife and humans of Lumbini, birthplace of the historical Buddha and a UNESCO World Heritage site. Sarus cranes, the tallest flying birds in the world, have lived in the fields around Lumbini since the time Buddha was young. Wildlife species and the local population are pressured by overdevelopment and tourism, which threatens to turn the area into a “Buddhist Disneyland” and build hotels on Sanctuary land. The film depicts Venerable Metteyya’s compelling initiative and shines a light on our transdisciplinary work to preserve the unique environment and traditions of Lumbini by protecting the endangered Sarus cranes.