

IDNR lawyer learns lessons in conservation from the Eastern Hemisphere



In mid-August, I traveled to Nepal as a delegate on the Legislative Fellows Program, an exchange program funded by the U.S. State Department. During our first few days in the capital city, Kathmandu, we began to learn about Nepal's government, political party structure, and foreign policy challenges through meetings with local leaders. We sat down with the U.S. Ambassador to Nepal, political party officials, and non-profit organizations. Each encounter revealed another aspect of the inner-workings of Nepali society. Slowly, I started to grasp the cultural, religious, and political diversity that is Nepal's biggest strength – and its greatest obstacle to political stability.

The highlight of our trip, that truly brought Nepal's diversity to light, occurred outside the Kathmandu valley. Our group visited Chitwan National Park, Nepal's first national park, established in 1974. The park is located in the *terai* region of Nepal, a section of marshy grasslands, savannas, and forests located south of the outer foothills of the Himalayas. As a new member of the IDNR legal team, I was eager to learn about the park's administration, including the issues concerning the protection of property and wildlife.

Fortunately, our meeting with the Chitwan Park officials and the National Trust for Nature Conservation did not let me down. I learned that Chitwan is home to many fascinating creatures and vast wilderness worth protecting: 68 species of mammals, 544 species of birds, 56 species of herpetofauna (reptiles and amphibians) and 126 species of fish have been recorded in the park. Equally astounding is that approximately 23% of the land area in Nepal is publicly owned, used by the Nepali people as national park areas, wildlife reserves, and hunting grounds.

The challenges that face Nepal's natural resources are closer to those that face our country than the great distance that separates us. Political gridlock frustrates the development of adequate infrastructure. Without consistent leadership or funding from the government, park administrators are unable to improve access to the park, or hire sufficient staff with the qualifications to carry out their environmental programs. Thankfully, the future of Illinois' natural resources looks brighter with the passage of the IDNR sustainability bill last year.

Nevertheless, park officials have been able to implement a number of significant programs at Chitwan. For example, biologists conduct relatively sophisticated wildlife research and monitoring. These measures are vital for the rare animal populations, such as the Greater One-Horned Rhino, which saw its population return to over 500 during the last decade, even though political uprisings led to increased poaching at the park. In fact, I was a beneficiary of the park staff's hard work, and witnessed preservation in action.

During an excursion into the park, atop an elephant, I saw a rhino with its one-month-old baby quietly cooling off in a giant puddle!



The park administration also manages a captive breeding program for the gharial crocodile, which in 2011 saw an increase in its population to 81 crocodiles. I cannot fail to mention the most famous animal in the Chitwan jungle, the Royal Bengal Tiger. Over the last few years, the park staff has been able to maintain the population around 120 tigers, in part by tracking the beasts using camera technology.

Arguably, the park's greatest achievement is its focus on sustainable development and ecotourism. Last year, approximately 170,000 people visited the park (that compares to more than 2-million annual visitors to Starved Rock State Park here in Illinois). The administration makes a concerted effort to involve local ethnic groups, who have mixed reactions to the park's policies. The local communities once relied on the park's natural resources to meet their basic needs, such as wood, food, and land for their animals to graze. Moreover, on occasion the wild animals escape to the villages, causing damage to buildings or injuries to local residents.

However, the administration has been able to get the local communities involved. More than 450 nature guides have been trained to improve the quality of tourism, while also providing employment for local residents. The government also implements a revenue sharing system, whereby 30-50% of the total earnings from park visits is shared with localities.

Although I never had the chance to look at Nepal from the top of Mount Everest, I still gained a bird's eye view of Nepal's political and social framework through my conversations with local officials and communities leaders. I learned that momentous achievements are possible in the area of conservation and environmental protection, despite all the challenges they face. It's something I see every day coming to work here at the IDNR.

Brendan Dailey is legislative counsel with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources