

## *Nature conservation and tourism in Myanmar*

**A project for nature conservation and tourism is being established in northern Myanmar with the support of the local nature conservation organisation Sittwe Bird Lovers. In order to protect bird species, fishing rights were bought up and nature observation was promoted.**



A report by Christoph Zöckler

Our partner Ren Nou Soe has built up a new nature conservation organisation, both on site in Sittwe and on Nan Thar Island, and further developed this through small events. The name was changed to the Sittwe Nature Conservation Association (SNCA). T-shirts and banners with the logo and name have been produced and distributed at important locations, such as the boats.

Ren visited Nan Thar Island, on the coast not far from the border with Bangladesh, at least eleven times between October 2011 and Summer 2012. Furthermore, Ren has undertaken multiple trips to neighbouring villages, in one case together with an interested inhabitant of the island, who accompanied him to an area inaccessible to non-residents, in order to find further possible nesting places for the spoon-billed sandpiper and

the Indian skimmer. This did not produce any findings, however.

During the winter months spoon-billed sandpipers were observed three times, and in doing so allowed Ren to become increasingly familiar with the behaviours of the many different species of wading bird which is certainly also the result of the improved optical equipment (a donation from the British company Viking).

This can be explained by the success of the measures taken on stopping hunting on the island. The high numbers of fledglings that were observed and filmed by Ren in Spring 2011 (April) also support this (see previous year's report). Unfortunately this positive trend could not be re-confirmed in Spring 2012 and it remains unsure as to whether it will continue. Moreover, the numbers of other wading birds are too sparse or

unreliable to be used for comparison. This situation should be improved in the future.

#### Unrest in Autumn 2012

Due to the unrest that arose in the Arakhan Province, a state of emergency was again declared in Autumn 2012. This has multiple far-reaching consequences for the indigenous people, especially those on Nan Thar, and for our project. During the Summer, there were also violent conflicts between rival population groups on Nan Thar Island, in which the sunshade, which was funded by the Lighthouse Foundation, was heavily damaged. All further plans to erect bamboo huts as holiday accommodation for visitors must, for the time being, be postponed on the basis of the current situation.

Furthermore, all scheduled wildlife tours on the island or even elsewhere in the province are no longer possible due to the state of emergency. An alternative travel route through the Gulf of Martaban has been devised and a group of English, German and New Zealander eco-tourists will take the tour in January 2013 with the British tour company „Bird Holidays“ and ArcCona Ecological Consulting.

In order to ensure the existing funding for improving the infrastructure in order to mitigate the economic effects of the state of emergency in the region, further means for continuing regular observation on the island have been requested. Coupled with good maintenance of contacts, a relapse into old, unwanted conduct should thereby be avoided.

#### Public relations

ArcCona has, not for the first time, presented the success of the project at the British Birdfair 2012 and published an article in the German journal „Der Falke“, in which Nan Thar was also advertised as a travel destination and in each of which the Lighthouse Foundation was mentioned as a sponsor. A further scientific report is planned for the next bulletin of the Wader Study Group.

#### Successes through restricting hunting

Since March 2009, hunting on the island has

been banned, which has already resulted in a visible increase in the number of hibernating northern pintails and bar-headed geese, and may well also already be having an effect on the number of spoon-billed sandpipers. This development could not possibly have happened without the hunting restrictions, thus representing a huge first success, not only for the endangered species, but also for the people of the island, who have become increasingly proud of their rare fellow inhabitants.



A tourist group on the way to Nan Thar Island

In order to make the hunting restriction clear, Ren and a group of helpers erected multiple signposts on the island. The signs not only give notice of the ban on hunting wading-birds, but also on hunting tortoises and removing sand.

However, during this Winter-Spring period, new problems have come to light that have not yet been satisfactorily resolved. Once again, so called „Muslim“ hunters have appeared on the island. These are nomadic hunters without known residence who come to the island illegally and are, for the most part, either unnoticed or tolerated, and who continue to hunt wading-birds. That these hunters are now also associated with the Muslim minority in the region, who are considered aggressive and rebellious, is very unfortunate and has led to much disturbance of the island. Overall, the upheavals of the Rohingya, as the Islamic minority in the Rakhine State is called, have provoked far reaching unrest, leading to a state of emergency in Sittwe that is

until now (mid-August), still in place, and which has considerably hindered our work. There are, however, many signs that calm has been restored and the state of emergency will be lifted.

### Hunting rights

In order to secure hunting rights in the long term, a permanent lease on the island, held by the SNCA or the BANCA has been considered. This is currently being legally reviewed by the regional government.



A fishing village near Dawei in the Gulf of Martaban

### Development and expansion of tourism

In the medium term the income of the island inhabitants should be bolstered through the expansion of nature tourism. For this purpose, extra funding and the expansion of the infrastructure for foreign visitors is necessary, and was further developed. With the help of additional funding from the Lighthouse Foundation, it is intended that four small bamboo chalets be constructed as accommodation. However, for now this will have to wait till November, in part in order to wait out the rainy season, but also in order to be sure that the unrest of the previous summer does not reignite.

The condition of the toilets and the sunshade, erected with the help of Lighthouse Foundation funding, was examined on site in January and was found to be outstanding.

Although one of the tours planned for January together with Bird Holidays did not materialise for a number of reasons, at least three tourists

nevertheless stayed on the island for 6 days, being entertained by the local population on a visit that, despite the unfamiliar cuisine, resulted in no serious consequences for all involved.

More organised tours are again planned for the coming winter and should also include neighbouring areas with similar problems of nature conservation and attractive bird species, such as the Indian skimmer, and draw attention to the planned Ramsar nature reserve.

ArcCona will continue to help in this respect and offer and organise future tours. Further in this regard, ArcCona is also working in conjunction with BANCA and the British tour company „Bird Holidays“.

### Conservation efforts and threats

It is beyond dispute and foreseeable, that the rapid development of the whole country will include the region around Nan Thar. A sign of this development is the danger that was observed on Nan Thar this spring and unexpectedly threatened the island. Namely, it came to the notice of BANCA that the continuous work on the construction of a deep-sea port in Sittwe required the removal of sand in huge amounts and Nan Thar had already been selected as a site. It was only through the rapid intervention of BANCA Chairman Tony Htin Hla that this was parried, and Nan Thar temporarily protected.

### Next steps

The next important step planned is for Nan Thar to be incorporated into the countrywide programme for the definition of over 35 Ramsar nature reserves in the whole of Myanmar which is currently being pushed forward. Corresponding initial talks by BANCA at the national conference in February, where ArcCona was also represented, and with the local government in Sittwe took place in February and March. This once again displays how crucial it is to involve our partner BANCA in this project.

The possibility exists to lease the entire island for 30 years at the cost of approx. US\$ 10,000. This would not only mean security for the local peop-

le, but also a long term guarantee of the hunting ban. In order to restrict hunting across a larger area, BANCA sent a team of experts to the region to carry out a socio-economic survey, in line with other coastal areas. Ren was incorporated and the results are now available.

With the help of a small amount of support provided by the Species Task Force and ArcCona, Ren is able to continue to regularly visit and monitor the island during the summer months, as well as expanding and supporting the infrastructure of the island accordingly.

In the long- and medium-term legal protection is essential for the conservation of the wading birds, as well as the island community. However, without an alternative source of income, a return to catching wading birds and egg thievery is unavoidable. Cooperation with Bird Holidays, BANCA and other partners is therefore extremely important.

The effect of the project on the conservation of nature, the attitude of the islanders and their living conditions has reached far beyond all expectations. For this reason, the Lighthouse Foundation, BANCA and Ren Nou Soe are all very sincerely thanked for their contributions.

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