

The 7th International Hornbill of the World Conference

It was a wonderful experience to attend the Hornbill Conference and I am very grateful to Rockjumpers Birding Tours for making it possible for me to be there, in Kuching, Borneo.

The Theme was: “HORNBILLs Fly Free, Fly High” and the delegates discussed the status and future of the 32 Hornbill species there are in tropical Asia. There were only 2 presentations from Africa, mine and Dr Lucy Kemp’s. I was apprehensive about being in a conference with so many scientists and professors, but I didn’t feel left out at all and it was easy to interact with them. I liked the way the conference focused specifically on Hornbills. I am used to conferences where many different bird species are presented, as happens in Birdlife SA’s LAB (Learning About Birds).

A highlight for me was the Keynote address by Dr Pilai Poonswad from Thailand. She is the president of the Hornbill Research Foundation. They have projects in the villages in a 240 square km area. The good thing about their project is that it is funded by individuals from the USA and Thailand. The villagers are happy to work protecting the Hornbill nests for the next generations. They have a programme called “Adopt a Hornbill family” for people to become “adoptive parents”. This is leading to an increase in Hornbill populations.

She said that Hornbill work required a passion for working in forests and doing research. It was also important to create collaboration by networking with other organizations.

She has coined the acronym “**ITCHINESS**” to emphasise her message:

Irresistibility... passion/inspiration

Time

Curiosity.....broad and deep study

Hard work ...determination/ patience

Improvement

Networking

Ethics ... obey laws/be honest

Sincerity

Sustainability.... integrate and implement knowledge with local wisdom.

The presentation helped me understand that research can be done by local people. It doesn’t require someone who has studied science, although it helps to work with scientists who can take DNA samples.

There were presentations on some of the Asian Hornbill species, the **Wreathed, Malabar, Rufous-Necked, Oriental, Pied, Helmeted and Great Hornbills**. The Hornbills are all facing the challenge of loss of habitat caused by the human destruction of the Tropical Rainforests for cash crops and plantations. Nesting is a problem for many species. Some



conservationists have introduced artificial nests and have done research on the Hornbills' preferences. The birds prefer natural nests, but when there are none available, they do use artificial nests.

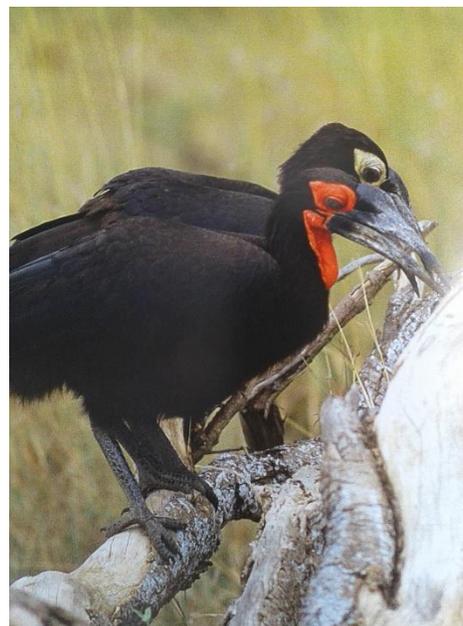
I was fascinated by the presentation on **the Helmeted Hornbill**. It is as threatened as our Rhinos here in South Africa. They require vast ranges and primary/tall forests. The Helmeted Hornbill is unique as it has an 'ivory' casque. A surge in demand for Helmeted Hornbill ivory over the last five years has pushed this species to the brink of extinction. The trade is in the hands of organized criminal gangs and the hotspots are Japan and Indonesia. It is difficult to arrest the smugglers as they use e-commerce sites or antique collectors' forums and sell to buyers on personal mobile accounts like WeChat. Chinese nationals visit the source countries to buy casques. Black Market prices in China are up to five times higher than for elephant ivory.

A working group is tackling the crisis at both ends of the problem. They employ anti-poaching patrols and restrict access to the birds' habitat. Intelligence operators are investigating the entire trade chain from the cross border criminal networks to the carving industry. The working group knows which cities and shops sell the ivory products and has awareness campaigns to persuade consumers to not to buy ivory products.

Hornbills and Oil Palm Plantations

At least half of the food items that we buy contain palm oil, from baby food and chocolate to cooking oil, shampoo and detergent. Oil Palm plantations have removed millions of hectares of tropical rainforest in Asia, Africa and South America. In Asia the oil palm plantations are greatly threatening the scores of Hornbill species. One presentation claimed that Hornbills live in palm plantations and even showed statistics. Dr Poonswud challenged the claim and said it was not possible because Hornbills need natural habitats. Some Conservationists told us how they are working with palm oil companies to contribute to Hornbill conservation. When establishing the plantations, these companies leave large natural forest patches inside the plantations. Consumers can support this work by buying products that are Rainforest Alliance and Fair Trade Certified.

My presentation on the Southern Ground Hornbill was on the last day of the conference. I told delegates what my organization, Women's Leadership and Training Programme, has been doing to conserve Ground Hornbills in the grasslands and forests of southern KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. I combined my findings with Dr Lucy Kemp's DNA research findings. Lucy and her team members from the Mabula Ground Hornbill Project in Limpopo have worked with us in Centocow and Hlokozi, teaching us how to do research and awareness raising with communities.



I had done a survey in my Hlokozi community and found that the Zulu people knew about the birds that sometimes walk past their homesteads in family groups. In Zulu there are two words for the bird. It is called “Insingisi” when it flies and “Ingududu” when it walks on the ground. Some believe that they bring rain and have made up songs that mimic the birds’ calls. Luckily all believe that killing a Ground Hornbill will bring dangerous storms and this belief has saved the birds. We have involved traditional leaders and their communities in our work and are working with Mabula to appoint Ground Hornbill custodians.

Delegates liked my presentation because of the method I had used. Other presenters had focused on the species, but I had focused on the local people. During the discussion that followed, many delegates emphasized that all researchers should work with the local indigenous communities.

Matang Wildlife Centre

We visited the Matang Wildlife Centre to end the conference. Every delegate planted one tree and we then saw the tropical forest wildlife species that were in rehab. I saw Crocodiles, Orangutans, Leopards, Wreathed, Rufous and Rhinoceros Hornbills. The Matang team don’t keep animals very long, but release them back to the wild after they have been treated.

A Feast of Hornbills

I expected to see a lot of Hornbills in Kuching but was told that one very rarely sees them in the wild because so much of their habitat has been destroyed. But despite this there were Hornbills everywhere – in a large statue on the airport road, on billboards, in paintings and in tourist trinkets. The people love and value the Hornbills and the Hornbills are great economic assets. I contrasted this with South Africa where most people do not know what a Ground Hornbill is unless they live in the very few areas where the Ground Hornbills occur.

On the day after the conference, I went to the Borneo Highlands to do some bird watching with four good birders from the Philippines, Singapore and Cape Town. We saw 42 species in a day’s birding. I noticed that most birds are similar to ours, for example Swifts are called Bornean Swiftlets. I enjoyed every moment and we were lucky enough to see 5 Wreathed Hornbills flying along the forest edges.

I really love Hornbills. Each one is so uniquely beautiful and mystical.

Nomusa Mkhungo