REPORT ON THE UNESCO-IUCN MISSION TO THE MANAS WH SITE, INDIA

DRAFT OF 20/22 APRIL, 2005

1. GENERAL DETAILS

Date: 31 March to 6 April, 2005

Mission Team: Kishore Rao, Deputy Director, UNESCO World Heritage Centre and David Sheppard, Head Programme on Protected Areas, IUCN

Mission Aims:

1. To ascertain the current state of conservation of the Manas World Heritage Site

2. To review whether the conditions exist for removal of the Manas World Heritage Site from the List of World Heritage in Danger

2. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Mission Team would like to acknowledge, with appreciation, the assistance of the UNESCO Delhi Office and staff from the Indian Ministry of Environment and Forests whose assistance was invaluable in relation to the planning and implementation of the mission. In Assam the mission was greatly assisted by Mr M.C. Malakar, Chief Conservator of Forests and Chief Wildlife Warden for Assam. Within Manas itself, the mission was deeply appreciative of the support and assistance from Mr Abhijit Rabha, Conservator of Forests and Field Director Manas National Park, Mr R.C. Bhattacharjee, Deputy Field Director, Tiger Project. The mission would like to thank and acknowledge the dedication and hard work of the field staff of the Manas WH Site, who have managed to continue their activities over many years in very difficult circumstances.

3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Manas Wildlife Sanctuary (here-after referred to as the Manas WH Site) was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1985 under natural criterion (ii), (iii), and (iv). It was inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger in 1992 due to threats related to an insurgency in and around the Wildlife Sanctuary, which resulted in depletion of forest habitat and wildlife populations and destruction to park infrastructure. Security conditions at this site have improved in recent years and a mission was invited by the State Party to assess the State of Conservation and this was undertaken in April 2005.

The mission noted that on ground conservation action has commenced after the signing of an agreement between the Bodo people and the Government of India and the formation of the Bodoland Territorial Council in 2003. Specifically, action has recently commenced in rebuilding guard posts and infrastructure in the park. An ecotourism initiative has been developed by the Bodo villagers of Kokilabari on the eastern fringe of the Manas World Heritage site, in co-operation with the Silguri based Help Tourism and Ashoka Holidays. This is a very positive initiative that aims to involve villagers in park management and specifically the control of poaching, but requires close coordination with and supervision by the park authorities. The mission noted that the long running insurgency appears to have had

significant impacts on the forests and the wildlife populations of the park, particularly rhino, tiger and swamp deer populations, however this will need to be verified through a comprehensive baseline survey. Further, the mission noted the level of control of the park is significantly less in the western part of the park (Panbari Range) and there are on going impacts associated with the removal of timber. A number of other issues are covered in the mission report including the release of funds from the Assam State Government to the Park and transboundary issues with Bhutan.

The mission concludes there is positive progress at this site but that the conditions within the park have not improved to the level at which the site could be removed from the List of World Heritage in Danger. The mission recommends the State Party undertake a comprehensive wildlife survey in the park in 2005, which could act as a future baseline for assessment of the possible removal of this site from the List of World Heritage in Danger. The Mission further suggests the State Party invite a mission to this site in 2007 to assess the potential for removal of the site from the Danger List. The Mission recommends a number of benchmarks which could be used to assess possible removal from the Danger List. This report also includes a draft Decision for the 29th Session of the World Heritage Committee (attached to this report as Annex A).

4. BACKGROUND TO THE MISSION

The Manas WH Site was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1985 under natural criterion (ii), (iii), and (iv). The IUCN 1985 evaluation report specifically noted that: "Manas provides critical and viable habitat for more rare and endangered species than any of the Indian sub-continents protected areas". The site was inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger in 1992 due to threats related to an insurgency in and around the Wildlife Sanctuary, which resulted in depletion of forest habitat and wildlife populations and destruction to park infrastructure.

Support was subsequently provided by the World Heritage Committee to the State Party to assist with site management, including equipment purchase, rehabilitation of infrastructure and community activities. Previous missions to the site were undertaken in 1997 and 2002. The 28th World Heritage Committee, held in Suzhou, China, noted the improving conditions within the Manas WH Site and recommended a monitoring mission to further investigate the situation and evaluate the damage to the property in collaboration with the State Party. This mission was held from 31 March to 6 April, 2005 and the results of this mission are outlined in this report.

5. ASSESSMENT OF ISSUES AND STATE OF CONSERVATION OF THE SITE

The mission carefully reviewed a number of issues concerning the state of conservation of the site, including all issues raised by previous sessions of the World Heritage Committee. The mission based its findings on the field inspection, review of relevant documents and consultations with government officials, at the State and Federal Government Level, with Non Governmental Organizations and with local communities.

This report is structured around the following key issues, drawn from previous reports of the World Heritage Committee:

- ✓ Status of the insurgency (Section 5.1);

- ✓ Status of wildlife populations in the Manas WH Site (Section 5.2);
- ✓ Site management issues, including infrastructure development and staffing levels within the Manas WH Site (Section 5.3);
- ✓ Administrative Matters, including release of funds from the Assam State Government to the Manas WH Site (Section 5.4);
- ✓ Involvement of the local community, including ecotourism development (Section 5.5);
- ✓ Other issues (Section 5.6); and
- ✓ Possible removal of the site from the List of World Heritage in Danger (Section 5.7);

5.1 Status of the insurgency

The mission noted that on ground conservation action has commenced after the signing of an agreement between the Bodo people and the Government of India in 2003 and the subsequent formation of the Bodoland Territorial Council. This Council has broad responsibilities in relation to land use in the Bodoland territory but cannot change the status of the Manas National Park as this is covered under over-riding federal legislation.

The mission observed that armed resistance has ceased in the majority of the Manas WH Site; the last recorded attack on park staff was in 2000. A number of park management activities have recently commenced, including rebuilding of guard stations and park infrastructure. The mission inspected an ecotourism initiative being developed by the Bodo villagers of Kokilabari on the eastern fringe of the Manas World Heritage site, in co-operation with the Silguri based Help Tourism and Ashoka Holidays. This is a very positive and welcome initiative that aims to involve villagers in park management and specifically the control of poaching, but requires close coordination with and supervision by the park authorities. It is noted that nearly 150 poachers surrendered their *gaziman* (handmade guns) recently to take up forest conservation and tourism conservation activities.

The responsibility for management of the park now rests with the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC) and specifically with an Executive Member (equivalent to a Ministerial level position) of the BTC. The mission met with the Executive Member, who outlined a clear and strong commitment to protect the Manas WH Site and also his strong wish to remove the Manas WH Site from the List of WH in Danger as soon as possible.

<u>The Mission recommends:</u>

The State Party and the Bodo People be commended for the successful resolution of the territorial dispute and the formation of the Bodoland Territorial Council;

There be close coordination between park staff and the representatives of the Bodo people in the planning and implementation of activities in the Manas WH Site; and

The situation be closely monitored and any new developments be bought to the attention of the World Heritage Committee

5.2 Status of wildlife populations in the Manas WH Site

A key reason for the inscription of the Manas WH Site was for its populations of "rare and endangered wildlife species". The mission was unable to review detailed wildlife population figures as there have been no recent wildlife surveys undertaken in the Manas WH Site due to the insurgency. Information in this report addresses key flagship species only and is based on previously available records as well as discussions with park staff and others. The current situation reflects a shortage of credible information, thus underlining the urgent need to undertake a comprehensive wildlife survey in the Manas WH Site as quickly as possible.

In relation to rhino (greater one horned rhino) populations, park staff advised there were 100 rhinos within the Manas WH site at the time of inscription (1985) but that this number has since been reduced dramatically, largely through poaching. It was reported to the Mission that signs of rhino had been recently seen in the park but these claims could not be verified by the Mission Team. It was also noted to the mission that there is a possibility that rhinos are now locally extinct within the Manas WH Site. This conflicting information again supports the call for a wildlife survey to be undertaken. The possibility of re-introduction of rhinos from Kazaringa National Park to Manas WH Site was noted although this would not be appropriate until the park management regime is in place to ensure that the rhinos could be adequately protected.

In relation to tiger populations, park staff advised there were 90 tigers within the Manas WH site at the time of inscription (1985) but that this number has since been reduced dramatically, largely through poaching. Available figures from the Project Tiger are set out below, although the accuracy of these figures has been questioned.

	1972	1979	1984	1989	1993	1995	1997	2001
Population of tigers in Manas Tiger Reserve	31	69	123	92	81	94	125	65

Source: Project Tiger: based on reports from States

There have been no surveys since 2001 and the Mission Team was unable to see any direct or indirect signs of tiger during the mission. The mission noted that that there had been isolated reporting of tigers and that Panbari Range staff (western section of the Manas WH Site) reported they had seen 2 tigers in March, 2005. It was also noted that a tiger census is proposed in late 2005; the Mission Team fully supports this initiative and suggests it be broadened to cover other species within the Manas WH Site. Discussions with Ministry of Environment staff noted that this tiger census in

5.3 Site management issues, including infrastructure development and staffing levels within the Manas WH Site

The mission noted that there is once again an active park staff presence in the Manas WH Site and that park infrastructure is being developed. The Mission Team observed the re-building of patrolling camps which had previously been burnt down in the eastern section of the Manas WH Site, specifically at Uchila, Latajhar, Dwmari and Buraburhi. One camp is being rebuilt by the Bodo community (Targunmara) and this activity is proposed as a key element of their ecotourism activities in the Manas WH Site (refer section 5.5 below). The current aim is to rebuild 8 to 10 camps per year with an objective of having 32 functioning camps within a 3 year period. This activity should be supported as a priority and should be linked to efforts to improve staff capacity and to establish effective communication systems within the site.

Another important infrastructure requirement is to re-build park roads and culverts/bridges within and leading to the park – these are currently in a very poor state of repair and this is a significant constraint to rehabilitation efforts in the park and is also a barrier to encouraging ecotourism efforts. The Mission noted a reported commitment by the Bodo Territorial Council to improve the main access road to the Manas WH Site by 2006. It is important that this commitment is met and adequate resources are allocated for this purpose.

The Mission Team noted the level of control of the Manas WH Site is significantly less in the western part of the park (Panbari Range) and noted on going and current impacts from the removal of timber, both as firewood and logs. The mission noted a number of impacts from past and current removal of timber in this area and also that most commercial timber appears to have been removed, at least from the buffer zone of the park. A similar degradation of forest quality was also noted in the Eastern Kokilabari Range. There is also an area within the buffer zone under the Panbari Range where there are 5,000 people living in a 1,600 ha encroached section of the park. Options for voluntary re-location are currently being considered but this does not appear to be likely to be implemented in the immediate future. The mission noted, with concern, the lack of active management within this section of the park and also that the boundary of the Manas WH Site is not clearly demarcated nor clear to park staff.

The mission also noted there are a large number vacant staff positions within the park establishment list. It was explained that it was difficult to attract staff to Manas, which has been considered a dangerous place to work. Given the improving security conditions in and around the park it is hoped that this situation will now be addressed and that recruitment of staff can occur as quickly as possible. The Mission Team noted the recruitment of an adequate staffing complement within the Manas WH Site is a very high priority and is essential for effective park management. Offering of additional incentive payments to staff to work in Manas may be worth consideration.

The mission reviewed a copy of the current Park Management Plan (Management Plan of Manas National Park 2002 to 2007) and notes there is much useful material within the Plan. However the mission feels that the plan needs to be updated to specifically focus on key management objectives and actions that will be necessary to effectively address the challenges facing the Manas WH Site.

The Mission recommends:

Work be continued on the establishment of park infrastructure, particularly patrolling camps and the establishment of effective systems of communication within the Manas WH Site;

Efforts be accelerated to ensure effective management of the Panbari Range Area of the Mans WH Site;

Vacant staff positions within Manas WH Site be filled as soon as possible and that the necessary resources for this be made available as a priority. Consideration could be given to payment of incentive allowances to encourage staff recruitment within the Manas WH Site; and

Particular attention be paid to improving the level of management within the Panbari Range area of the Manas WH Site.

5.4 Administrative matters, including release of funds from the Assam State Government to the Manas WH Site

The mission noted that the late release of funding for park management from the Assam State Government to the park has been a significant factor limiting effective on site management. This concern was also voiced by previous IUCN/UNESCO missions in 1997 and 2002. The mission team was advised of a recent ruling by the Supreme Court of India that funding must be released by the State Government within 15 days of receipt from the Central. This ruling responds to a recommendation of the Central Empowered Committee established by the Supreme Court to monitor and ensure compliance of its orders on forest and wildlife matters and related issues. It is anticipated that implementation of this ruling will address the previous issues associated with the late release of funds and this should be welcomed as a very positive initiative.

With the signing of the agreement between the Bodo people and the Government of India in 2003 and the subsequent formation of the Bodoland Territorial Council, the funds will now be transferred directly from the Assam State Government to the Bodoland Territorial Council. Nevertheless the same requirement, for release of funds by the Assam State Government within 15 days of receipt from the Central Government, will apply.

The Mission emphasises strongly that adequate funds must be made available to the field level within the Manas WH Site as quickly as possible. The recent Supreme Court Ruling is very positive but the effectiveness of its implementation should be kept under review.

Additional resources are required for the Manas WH Site. Support recently received, including from the UNESCO World Heritage Fund (for re-building bridges and guard stations) and from other non-governmental organisations (for supporting basic operating expenses such as purchase of petrol), has provided invaluable support for operational activities in the Manas WH Site. Extra support should be requested, including from the UNESCO World Heritage Fund, from the World Heritage Biodiversity Programme of India and from other sources. Increased internal resources should also be allocated from the Government of India to assist site management activities. The mission noted that Kazaringa World Heritage Site received increased funding through a “special dispensation” in 2005, to assist the celebration of 100 years of the site. Given the challenging situation in Manas and the need to boost investment at this site the mission considers that there is a clear case for a similar arrangement to be applied to the Manas WH site. Where possible systems for

increasing on site revenue generation should also be developed and, associated with this, clear guidelines for revenue sharing with local communities should also be developed.

The mission also noted that establishment of a Trust Fund arrangement for the Manas WH Site may have merit. Previous experience with the Wildlife Areas Development and Welfare Trust, which received funding directly for site management at the Manas WH Site from the UNESCO World Heritage Fund, has been positive and this may provide a future model for receiving and transferring funds directly to the site.

The Mission recommends:

Adequate funds be made available to the Manas WH Site from internal and external sources;

The Supreme Court ruling be implemented as a matter of priority to ensure the timely release of funds for park management. Further, that implementation of the Supreme Court Ruling be kept under review;

A request be submitted from the State Party for additional assistance to support management efforts at this site, including from UNESCO World Heritage Committee and from other relevant donors; and

Mechanisms for transferring funds directly to the site such as the Wildlife Areas Development and Welfare Trust, and for mechanisms for revenue generation at the site, should be explored.

5.5 Involvement of the local community, including ecotourism development

Effective involvement of the Bodo people is essential for the future management of the Park. There are 57 villages around the Manas WH Site and people living in these villages have a vital stake in the future of the park. The mission team noted a number of positive developments including ecotourism activities in and around the Manas WH Site. The mission visited one such project in Kokilabari in the eastern sector of the Manas WH Site. In this case village accommodation and tourism visits are arranged by the local communities and villagers, including some who were previously involved in poaching in the Manas WH Site, are now involved in conservation activities. There is currently one lodge in Kokilabari, which has been operating from January 1, 2005 and there are plans to expand these activities. This lodge employs local staff and revenue sharing arrangements have been developed. The Association of Bodo Student Union (ABSU) has played an active role also in coordinating activities in the villages, including in assisting with the development of ecotourism activities, the collection of guns and the development of educational programmes.

One ranger station is being rebuilt by the Bodo community at Targunmara and this is proposed as a key element of their ecotourism and conservation activities within the WH Site. Persons from the local community are being trained by park staff in environmental protection activities, such as plant and animal identification, and a close working relationship is developing. In general, a positive attitude between park staff and local communities was observed by the Mission Team in the eastern sections of the Manas WH site.

Tour operators are also working with villages with, for example, the company Ashoka Holidays involved in demonstration projects in Kokilabari and supporting marketing efforts geared to attracting specialised ecotourism markets.

Consultations with village representatives from Kokilabari stressed that the importance of protecting the natural resources within the park to provide a sustainable basis for future ecotourism activities. Village representatives also noted they have established a target of having the Manas WH Site recognized as a model park by 2007 and, accordingly, removed from the List of World Heritage in Danger at that time.

It is too early to assess whether the ecotourism model will succeed in Manas. Nevertheless it appears that early results are positive and that activities are contributing to better relations between local communities and park staff. As mentioned by the Executive Member for the Bodoland Territorial Council: "the people are realizing that Manas is an asset and should be managed to protect wildlife".

Effective involvement of local villages in park management is essential if the Manas WH Site is to have a viable future. Results from Kokilabari are positive and should be carefully monitored over time with a view to possible application elsewhere. Future initiatives for the more effective involvement of local communities in the Manas WH Site should be carefully planned and implemented between local communities and park authorities; with roles and expectations of all relevant stakeholders clearly defined. Support from the Indian Government and the international community should be requested to support appropriate community development activities, such as ecotourism, within and adjoining the Manas WH.

The Mission recommends:

There be close co-operation between the Bodo people and the Park management authorities in relation to the future development of community development and park management activities within and adjoining the Manas WH Site;

Future ecotourism development activities specifically aim to protect and conserve native wildlife and that revenue arising from such activities benefit relevant local communities;

The experience of the IUCN/WCPA Task force on Tourism and Protected Areas be drawn upon in the development of activities within and based upon the Manas WH Site; and

Roles and expectations of all relevant stakeholders be clearly defined in relation to future community development activities.

5.6 Other issues

The Mission Team noted a number of other issues relevant to the management of the Manas WH Site; these are outlined below.

Transboundary Conservation issues. The possibility of a transboundary World Heritage site with Bhutan was noted at the time of the inscription of the Manas WH Site in 1985. Now that security conditions are improving within the Manas WH Site and that Bhutan is now a signatory to the World Heritage Convention (with ratification occurring in 2001), this earlier proposal could now be re-considered. Field staff consulted during the mission noted excellent working relations and close co-ordination exist between Bhutan and India in relation to the management of the protected area on both sides of the international border. The mission

considers that initial consultation could now take place between the Indian and Bhutanese official in relation to the nomination of a transboundary World Heritage site

Biosphere Reserve The Manas WH Site is the only site in the world which is recognized under all of the following designations: World Heritage Site; Biosphere Reserve, Tiger Reserve; and Elephant Reserve. These designations could potentially assist the Manas WH Site, both in raising national and international profile (and in supporting fundraising efforts) and also in relation to facilitating better and more integrated land use planning in and around the site. However it is noted that the area is currently not functioning effectively as a Biosphere Reserve and that there is limited awareness of the implications of the area being listed as a Biosphere Reserve.

Dam construction in Bhutan. The original inscription of this site noted the possibility of dam construction in Bhutan, upstream from the Manas WH Site. At the time of inscription, it was advised that a decision had been taken not to construct this dam. The mission team noted, however, that a dam has been constructed in Bhutan, upstream from the site and a release of water from this dam had been a significant contributing factor to flooding in the Manas WH site in May 2004. This flood was responsible for washing away a number of crossings/bridges and diverting the course of the river. In future there needs to be consultation between India and Bhutan in relation to the release of water from the upstream dam and the ecological impacts of such water release need to be a key factor in decisions relating to water release.

The Mission recommends:

Consultation take place between the Indian and Bhutanese official in relation to the nomination of a transboundary Manas World Heritage site;

The potential of the site being listed under a number of international and national designations be more effectively used to support conservation and land use planning efforts at the Manas WH Site;

There be consultation between India and Bhutan in relation to the release of water from the upstream dam in Bhutan and the ecological impacts of such water release must be a key factor in decisions relating to water release.

5.6 Possible removal of the site from the List of World Heritage in Danger

The mission considered whether the conditions may exist for removal of the Manas WH Site from the List of World Heritage in Danger. The mission found that excellent progress is being made but that the conditions for removal of the site from the List do not currently exist.

The mission notes a number specific benchmarks which could be used to assist decision making in relation to the future removal of the Manas WH Site from the Danger List, including:

(a) recovery of wildlife species, as measured against the benchmark figures which will be derived from the wildlife survey to be undertaken in 2005 in the Manas WH Site and also considered in relation to wildlife populations at the time of inscription of the site;

(b) completion of efforts to re-build park infrastructure;

(c) filling of vacant positions within the park;

(d) ensuring timely release of funds to the park, in compliance with the recent Supreme Court ruling; and

(e) positive progress towards having the contiguous Royal Manas National Park inscribed on the World Heritage List as a transboundary property.

The Mission recommends:

A mission be held in two years to ascertain whether progress has been sufficient to enable this site to be removed from the List of World heritage in Danger.

In making this decision the benchmarks noted in Section 5.6 of this report be used to assist reaching a decision on this matter

6. CONCLUSIONS

The conditions within the Manas WH Site are improving following the cessation of the insurgency and the formation of the Bodoland Territorial Council in 2003. Initiatives involving the Bodo Community in park management, particularly in relation to ecotourism activities, are positive and appear to have good potential for more widespread application. The wildlife populations of the park appear to be significantly impacted but this will need to be verified through a comprehensive baseline survey of the Manas WH Site. Despite the positive progress at this site the Mission Team concludes that the conditions within the park have not improved to the level at which the site could be removed from the List of World Heritage in Danger.. The Mission further suggests the State Party invite a mission to this site in 2007 to assess the potential for removal of the site from the Danger List and a number of possible benchmarks are suggested which could assist decision making in relation to this issue.

ANNEX A:

Draft Decision **29 COM**

The World Heritage Committee:

Welcomes the cessation of conflict at this site and the positive measures undertaken by the State Party to improve the conservation status of the site, including ecotourism initiatives in Kokilabari which involve the Bodo people and the re-building of park infrastructure.

Notes that the impacts of the conflict still exist, including in relation to wildlife populations (rhino, tiger and swamp deer) and timber removal in the Panbari range.

Requests the State Party to: (a) accelerate efforts to re-build park infrastructure; (b) take prompt measures to fill vacant positions within the park; (c) ensure timely release of funds to the park, in compliance with the recent Supreme Court ruling; (d) undertake a comprehensive wildlife survey in the park, which could act as a future baseline for assessment in relation to possible removal of this site from the list of World Heritage in Danger (e) report to the World Heritage Centre no later than 1 February 2006 on the results of the status survey of wildlife in the park and progress in re-building of park infrastructure, including a time-table for its completion, for examination by the Committee at its 30th session; and (f) work with the Royal Government of Bhutan to have the contiguous Royal Manas National Park inscribed on the World Heritage List as a transboundary property.

Decides (a) to retain this site on the List of World Heritage in Danger; and (b) that the potential for removal of the site from the Danger List should be assessed by a mission to this site in 2007.

ANNEX B: MISSION ITINERARY

Thursday 31, March:

Meeting with the Additional Director General of Wildlife and Inspector General of Wildlife (IGF) in the Ministry of Environment and Forests and discussed issues affecting the Manas WH Site. Followed by a meeting with Dr. Prodipto Ghosh the Secretary of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, and with the Inspector General of Wildlife who is the Director of Project Tiger with responsibility for the Manas WH Site.

Friday 1, April:

Travelled by air to Guwahati (capital city of the State of Assam). Meeting with the Chief Wildlife Warden (CWLW), and the Minister for Environment and Forests of the State Government.

Accompanied by the CWLW and the IGF (wildlife) Travelled by road to Manas WH Site, and met with the Executive Member (Forests) of the Bodoland Territorial Council (Minister in the local administrative set-up), Park Director and Deputy Director at the Park Headquarters in Barpeta Road. After the meeting, the mission traveled to the MNP accompanied by the Director and Deputy Director of the park.

Saturday 2 and Sunday 3, April:

Visited all parts of the national park to assess the state of conservation of the site, including habitat condition, status of wildlife, presence of staff at interior camps, progress with reconstruction of infrastructure, etc. Also met with the office bearers and members of the Mouzigendri Ecotourism Society, which is a community led initiative by the Bodo people from the Kokilabari Village and visited some of the facilities developed and under development by them. Returned to Guwahati on the night of 3 April.

Monday 4, April:

Had a debriefing and wrap-up meeting with the CWLW of Assam at Guwahati when the main findings from the mission were presented. He agreed with the assessment of the mission and expressed his full commitment to working with the park management and the local administration to speed up the restoration and rehabilitation efforts.

Returned by air to Delhi and to Paris, arriving on Tuesday 5, April.