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ANIMALS

Protecting Great Birds Of Beauty

India's one and only peacock sanctuary strives to survive in challenging times

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Everyone in the small village of Naigaon in the Beed district of Maharashtra remembers well the many legends of Mathersaheb Dev. This holy man, who lived about 100 years ago, was famous for his love and care of wild peacocks. He lavished such abundant affection upon these beautiful birds that a growing number of them took up residence around his humble cottage. Even though a few of them sometimes wandered onto local farms to dine on standing crops, farmers were more than willing to overlook the damage they did. Such was their respect for Mathersaheb Dev and his benevolent love. Over time, the saint's gracious attitude toward the peacocks was adopted by most of the surrounding community.

Eight years ago, long after the passing of Mathersaheb Dev, the residents of that small town were still providing extraordinary care for the wild peacocks in the area; and in response, the Central Government of India established in Naigaon its one and only peacock sanctuary.

Today the sanctuary offers a compensation of us\$50 for each hectare of grain lost to peacock damage, but local landowners rarely collect their due. Although there are a few people who do not value the beauty of these glorious birds and some who even hunt them for food most of the people of Naigaon make special efforts to preserve the peace of the sanctuary and its peacocks.

The peacocks of Naigaon are fortunate. Elsewhere in India, peacocks indeed, all forms of wildlife are becoming increasingly threatened. More and more hunters are on the prowl, and drinking water is becoming scarce. Tree groves--essential to the peacocks--are vanishing due to encroaching technology and the escalating demand for cattle-grazing land. Never was the kindly spirit of Saint Mathersaheb Dev more needed than it is now. Certainly the beautiful but threatened peacocks of India would agree.

What About the Future?

The Naigaon Peacock Sanctuary is suffering from a lack of funds. Although it was established by the Central Government of India, it now receives only about us\$2,500 a year from the Maharashtra state government for the maintenance of its 20 square miles of land. This does not even meet the sanctuary's basic needs.

Sanctuary ranger Meera Iyer explains that managing the property is unusually difficult because it is not one continuous parcel of land but a collection of small fragments divided by privately owned properties. The sanctuary's current seven-man staff comprises two rangers and five guards. There are no vehicles, no phones, no firearms for the guards. More water wells must be dug; more trees must be planted. Some of this is being done, but not enough.

Will India's one and only peacock sanctuary survive? Time will certainly tell, but a little money wouldn't hurt.