Status of the AWC in India and future development and data quality programme (Discussion Paper)

Asad R. Rahmani, National Coordinator, India
Sunil Laad, IBA Associate Officer
Zafar-ul Islam, Project Manager, Important Bird Areas Programme

The AWC was started in India in 1987 at the initiation of the Asian Wetland Bureau (former name of Wetlands International) in collaboration with Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS). Mr. S.A. Hussain was the coordinator at that time. During that period, the BNHS had a Bird Migration Project funded by U. S. Fish and Wildlife Services. Some funds from this project were utilized for collating, collecting and analyzing the data. The Bird Migration Project ended in 1992. By that time Mr. Hussain and other senior staff left BNHS. Between 1992 –1997, the AWC was coordinated by Dr. J. Samant, the then Director of BNHS.

The BNHS is a membership organization and has members all over the country. These members and BNHS researchers were used to collect information on wetlands and waterfowl. Many non-members also participate in the AWC. In order to gain support from BNHS members, state coordinators were appointed in most of the states and the participants were encouraged to send the forms first to the state coordinators for checking and then through the state coordinators to the national coordinator at BNHS. However this was not so the straight forward and many of the participants, would send the forms directly to BNHS or even to Wetlands International. This results in confusion and delays. Moreover, such forms are not checked by state coordinators so data quality is compromised.

The number of sites and number of participants varies from year to year, directly related to the funds available in BNHS for this programme (Table 1)

Table 1. Number of sites covered and number of participants between 1994 and 2002. Data for 1997 and 1998 are not available.

	1994	1995	1996	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Participants	389	354	326	14	44	190	327	549
Sites	986	577	573	16	51	193	356	462

New sites and new participants join every year while many earlier participants and sites drop out, hence it is difficult to compare the data across years and across sites. For instance, in 2002, 356 sites were covered while in the year 2003, 461, but only 189 were repeated, 166 were not counted, and 273 new sites were covered (Table 2). The state-wise coverage also varies from year to year. In some years, 15-20 sites would be covered in a state, next year either nil or 3-4 only or just the double of previous year. The type of wetlands covered varies year to year, and in some years, internationally famous wetlands such as Keodaleo National Park (Bharatpur) are not covered!

Table 2. Comparison between 2002-2003

Total sites covered (2002 and 2003)	628
Sites (2003)	461
Sites (2002)	356
Repeated in 2003	189
Not counted in 2003	166
New sites in 2003	273

Shortcomings: While AWC has certainly created interest in India for wetland conservation and this exercise is also extremely useful for nature education, its main purpose to collect meaningful data on waterfowl population trends and wetlands is not being implemented, mainly due to the following reasons:

1. Lack of trained manpower
2. Haphazard coverage
3. Same sites counted by many participants
4. Obsession with numbers overlooking the facts that even a low count gives a general idea of a waterbody
5. Lack of proper coordination between participants and state coordinators
6. Lack of good field guides and equipment (binoculars and telescopes)
7. Inaccessibility of some good sites
8. Favourite sites or unimportant sites counted
9. Administrative restrictions to count in protected areas
10. Inadequate follow up

Another peculiar problem is that during January, some extremely important high altitude wetlands in Ladakh and Sikkim are left behind because they are snow-covered. This problem needs addressing by the Wetlands International. As many of the migrants to the Indian plains breed in these high altitude lakes (e.g. Bar-headed Geese *Anser indicus*, Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*) during summer, their population trend is extremely important to know. Similarly, most of the high altitude wetlands in Ladakh are selected as Important Bird Areas (IBAs), therefore, long-term monitoring is needed of these wetlands.

Future developments: In order to address these problems and questions, the following steps are required:

1. Training of the participants
2. Database training of the state coordinators
3. Long term funding
4. Selection of sites in all the habitat types and across the country for long term monitoring
5. All Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in wetlands to be covered
6. Development of identification guides for waders, ducks, and inexpensive census manual.

7. Quick publication of results
8. Involvement of Indian Bird Conservation Network (IBCN) members
9. Regular updating of 1% threshold for waterbirds
10. Monitoring of threatened wetland species
11. Online website (e.g. Kagu)
12. Coordination between neighbouring countries
13. Mapping of important species, wetlands
14. Special attention to flagship waterbirds and important wetlands
15. Media coverage
16. Training of front line field staff of Forest Department and policy decision makers
17. Some sort of recognition and distributionof certificates/mementos for continued involvement by participants

Quality control: In order to get scientific information from AWC, it is necessary to maintained quality control. This can be achieved by:

1. Vigorous and intensive training
2. Involvement of serious and experienced bird watchers
3. Programme development for filtering erroneous data
4. Centralised Data Bank for Storing and Disseminations

Some other future steps to improve the AWC would be to train state coordinators and active participants to take up local and regional projects and raise funds on their own to expand this activity in their region. For this, some of them would require special training for:

1. Training programmes for writing proposals
2. Long term storage and retrieval of data
3. Online data dissemination
4. Generation of maps and status of species
5. Knowledge of site monitoring protocols
6. Involvement of decisions makers and local communities