

Dance, Deer Sangai!

Hi! I wonder if you know me? And even if you do, I wonder by what name. You see, I have lots of names. Those from the world of science call me *Cervus eldi eldi* *McLelland*. I'm also known as the Manipur Brow-antlered Deer. But for your sake I'll make it all very simple. Just call me Sangai, okay?

Frankly, I don't like these new names that are being appended to me. I don't even understand some of them. As if the *Cervus* and Brow-antlered bit were not enough, the other day I heard someone call out, "Look, there goes the endemic, rare, and endangered Sangai."

Anyway, let me stop grumbling and move on. My friend and I grew up together in the northeast of India. You must have heard of Manipur. There is a large lake here called Loktak. To the south of this is the Keibul Lamjao National Park (KLNP for short). It is the only floating national park in the world! And it is our home. Yeah! I've a floating home! Let me explain.

A part of Loktak and the KLNP are made up of islands called *phumdis*. One-fifth of the landmass floats

above the water surface, while the rest of it is submerged. So these *phumdis* look like they are floating on the water! These *phumdis* are abundant in vegetation, and the soil is rich with nutrients, too.

That reminds me of yet another name I have. When I walk on these *phumdis*, it looks as if I'm dancing. So, I'm also called the Dancing Deer.

One day, my friend and I went to the lakeside to discuss some strange happenings in our home. I kind of knew that the reason was the huge concrete dam and artificial water tank that had been built here a few years ago. We realised that our *phumdis* had thinned after their construction. The *phumdis* would soon sink if they were constantly flooded with the water in the artificial tank. But, since I trusted my friend's judgement more than mine, I wanted to talk to him about it.

As we began talking, we heard the barking of dogs. We thought the noise came from the nearby village. But it became louder and louder.

And my friend shouted... "Run, come on, run, they are here to kill us!!" I got up and scooted. I ran ahead and my friend was just behind me. I ran as fast as I could, and the barking closely followed me, too. And then, all of a sudden, my head struck against a tree branch and I fell flat on the ground. I think I was unconscious for



MAHE....

a while. When I got up, I was surrounded by a lot of people. My head was hurting. I looked for my friend. But I could not find him. I could hear the people talk about the merciless hunters who trap and kill Sangai deer. I immediately thought of my friend. Maybe they had caught him, and were now planning to sell his meat. 'Oh god!' I thought. 'Are these people the merciless hunters that I've often heard about? Is it my turn to die now?' Tears filled my eyes.

Just then, I heard my friend calling out for me. I got up so suddenly that I scared the people who had gathered around me. They moved aside and gave me way. I rubbed my face against my friend's, happily. I plied him with questions. I was curious to know what had happened after I konked off.

My friend told me that the dogs had almost caught and killed him. "Boy!" he said. "They looked really ferocious." I gulped and asked, "How are you still alive then?" "Thanks to these youngsters who live nearby," he said.

I was happy and felt indebted to the youngsters for saving our lives. My friend added that these people really loved and respected the Sangai deer. They believed that killing the Sangai was an unpardonable sin. According to a Manipuri legend, the Sangai are the link between humans and nature. So, killing us would mean breaking a bond. My friend informed me that people concerned

In the year 2000, the annual Sangai census recorded around 162 deer in the Keibul Lamjao National Park. This last natural habitat of the deer species, covering a total of 40.5 sq.km. with a core zone area of 15 sq.km., is unique. It is mostly made up of a floating biomass, locally known as *phumdi*. Besides the KLNP, there is a single pair of Sangai in Iroishemba Zoo in Imphal and 6 Sangai in the Sangai Captive Breeding Centre at Langol.

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about animals like us have formed a group. They teach others to protect animals, too.

The news that people are trying their best to save the *phumdis*, deer like me, and the Loktak Lake, infuses new hope in me. 'How nice of them!' I thought.

Anyway, it is getting dark and my friend and I have to return to our herd. And those of you who are around can enjoy our dancing gait as we trot back home.

It would be great if I could meet you again. We could dance together at KLNP, if you can make it here some time!

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