

The Traditional Fire Burning Festival of Teressa Island: An Unheard Tale of Bringing New Life to the Island

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As part of the project entitled "Conservation Ecology of the Endangered Reticulated Python *Malayopython reticulatus* (Schneider 1801), in the Nicobar Archipelago, India, we had a remarkable opportunity to visit Teressa Island, where we witnessed a traditional festival that embodies the island's rich cultural heritage, an integral part of the exquisite Nicobar Archipelago. Our visit spanned ten days on the island from 28 April to 8 May 2023.

During our stay, we had the distinct privilege to witness a customary festival that unfolds within the unique social fabric of the island. A fascinating feature of this event is the synchronised burning of vast grasslands in each Basti, referring to the local villages, on chosen days. This significant event, steeped in tradition, is scheduled based on lunar phases, emphasising the islanders' profound connection to nature's rhythms.

The pinnacle of this festive occasion is marked by an elaborate feast, uniting islanders, officials, settlers, and visitors from neighbouring islands. After the tsunami, they have partially lost most of their indigenous food habits, like eating pandanus, and maggots. However, they still have managed to harmonise with the new food items. Notably, the culinary offerings presented during this grand occasion reflect the islanders' openness to embracing new savoury experiences. Traditional staples like pork, chicken, fish, and eggs harmoniously coexist with more exotic fare, including biriyani, rice, roti, poori, and dal, as well as indigenous delights such as wild tubers like Nicobari aloo, boiled banana, sweets made out of pandanus fruit, and pineapple, and meetha bhaji meaning sweet leaves which are collected from the forest.

It is remarkable how the festive spirit extends beyond culinary delights. The Nicobarese also hunt wild pigs and reticulated pythons, a practice not typically observed among the people on the islands, particularly for the latter animal, as these animals emerge from hidden places to save themselves from the fire when the grassland burning event begins. They usually hunt wild pigs, while the reticulated python, the giant animal on the island, was never

actively pursued other than the instances of retaliatory killing.

Traditionally associated with nurturing new grass shoots, the Fire Festival was significant for the islanders. During our stay, we observed the start of the Southwest monsoon, which locals believe can be encouraged by burning grass. This led to lush green grass growth on the islands. These resilient shoots would grow to form the vital thatching material for their traditional huts, typically located near the seashore. Additionally, the grass blades served a purpose as sustenance for the island's livestock, including goats, pigs, and cows. Remarkably, with proper maintenance, these meticulously crafted grass roofs could endure for up to four decades, as attested by the islanders. However, the catastrophic impact of the 2004 tsunami reshaped their way of life dramatically. This natural disaster obliterated their huts and resulted in substantial loss of life. In the aftermath, the community was compelled to relocate farther inland, seeking refuge in shelters provided by official authorities. This shift altered their living arrangements, transforming their dispersed dwelling pattern into a close-knit village structure where houses stand nearby.

As a poignant symbol of their unbroken ties to heritage and their ability to adapt, the fire festival endures as a cultural tradition. While the primary purpose of igniting the grasslands has shifted, this annual event remains a powerful uniting force for the island inhabitants. It allows them to congregate, share experiences, and reinforce their collective identity. Moreover, the festival has evolved to accommodate changing circumstances, serving as a platform for community engagement. Stalls are decorated with tender coconut leaves, showcasing traditional handicrafts such as pandanus mats, coconut oil, coconuts, pineapples, indigenous cots, pig cages, and other items emblematic of their culture. This commercial aspect upholds cultural traditions and nurtures economic prospects within the community, diverging from the practised barter system. It is also noted that this custom of burning grasses is only celebrated in Teressa and adjacent Bombuka islands, as these are the only islands with vast grasslands and have remained less connected with other islands for a long time. Scientifically, the ritual aids grassland maintenance, which necessitates a study of its ecological impact on species, including potential negatives.

The Fire Festival's transformation underscores the islanders' resilience in adversity and capacity to imbue their heritage with new significance. It is a testament to their enduring connection to their roots, even as they evolve into novel communal and gastronomical dimensions. This annual celebration fosters unity and showcases their creativity and adaptability while preserving the essence of their cultural legacy.

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