

THREATENING TRADE IN BUTTERFLIES

Md. Khalid S. Pasha

Butterflies have always attracted attention, like birds and mammals, among the people. It is their dazzling colours, varying shapes and size which make them such popular subjects of interest. About 13,000 butterfly species are known to occur throughout the globe, making them one of the largest representatives of insects. India is home to about 1,500 species (almost 12% of the world butterfly fauna) representing 9 families belonging to the order Lepidoptera to which moths (their near relatives) also belong. The Southern Birdwing is the largest among Indian species with a wingspan of 190mm, the Grass Jewel being the smallest has a wingspan of 15mm. Among the butterflies of the world Queen Alexandria's Birdwing is the largest with a wingspan of 250mm. It forms emblem of Papua New Guinea's Oro Province.

In our country many species are rare and unique to our forests, like the Southern Birdwing, the Apollo, the Tree Nymph etc. The rapid decline of such species would necessitate protection of the entire habitat. Apart from the degeneration and loss of the habitat, commercialization is another threat to which they have been exposed to. Out of the total species present in our country 50 percent of them are protected by the Wildlife Protection Act (1972). However efficient enforcement of the law is lacking.

The crass commercialization has resulted in rampant and highly profitable trade in butterflies in India, which poses a threat to them. The main centres of this trade are in states like, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Assam, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and in other parts of Western Himalayas which are an abode to almost 80% of the total species present in the country. Urbanisation, growing road network and flourishing tourism industry in these area has paved easy way for trade of these insects. The butterflies are killed, mounted on frames and sold as craft to the tourists. The annual turnover worldwide is estimated to be more than \$20 million. This has made the trade more lucrative. Nearly, 50,000 specimens of butterflies are smuggled out of

the country every month. Of the species traded in India the Kaiser-i-hind and the Bhutan glory are top on the list.

This requires firm decision and proper implementation of wildlife conservation and protection policies. Community participation by encouraging locals to establish butterfly rearing centres and sustainable use through farming can ease the pressure on the wild population of butterflies. Establishment of such centres especially in the high trading zones would be of great value. Well trained staff should be recruited. The following things should be kept in mind:

- (a) For rearing, species threatened due to trade should be given top priority.
- (b) Careful selection of the food plant species.
- (c) Release of some individuals from the reared population every year in suitable habitats.
- (d) Every traded species should carry some basic detail like the name of the species, code of the centre, complete information of the customer etc.

In 1983, M.G. Morris, the then Deputy-Chairman of the IUCN'S Lepidoptera Specialist Group had struck on the idea of butterfly farming in India. Still this concept has not fully emerged. Careful and diligent planning by scientists, field officers and higher officials is required to put the idea into action. The best-known example being of Papua New Guinea, where commercial farming and conservation of butterflies is going hand-in-hand and has proved beneficial to the locals and the invaluable species. There is an urgent need for a study to augment impacts of the trade on the butterflies and review their status and assemblage of existing information and coordination among the ongoing research programmes on the butterflies. The NGO's and other nodal agencies involved in field of wildlife should come forward and jointly take an initiative in promotion of education awareness and conservation programmes paving way for better future of these forest jewels.