

Cranes, nature and godliness

Nepali Times
November 25, 2018



Co-founder of the International Crane Foundation George Archibald with Vice Chair of of the Lumbini Development Trust Awadhesh Tripathi. Photo: OM ASTHA RAI

George Archibald is Co-founder of the [International Crane Foundation](#) and is in Kathmandu for the consecration of the crane sanctuary in Lumbini. He spoke to *Nepali Times* this week. Excerpts:

George Archibald: When I was eight in Stillwater, Nova Scotia, I heard a radio broadcast on Canadian Broadcasting Corporation about the nesting grounds of whooping cranes. It was about a male and female crane that had flown 2,700 miles from Texas to their breeding ground in Canada. Since then I have been trying to find out everything about cranes. Eventually, at Cornell University I did my doctorate on the evolutionary relationships of cranes. I found out that very little was known about cranes around the world, and that if somebody didn't do something we would lose many of the crane species.

What is it about cranes that makes them so charismatic?

Cranes are the tallest birds, they pair for life, they dance to develop pair bonds and they have calls that carry for miles. There's nothing a crane does that is not graceful. They are important in so many cultures as symbols of long life, and so they are wonderful brand ambassadors for conservation programs for wetlands and for grasslands. They migrate across continents, and show how we all share in the global environment.

What is the significance of the sarus crane to Buddhism, and why is the Lumbini wetlands important?

Lord Buddha's cousin is said to have shot a sarus, and he was very moved when its mate tried to help the dying crane. The scene changed his life by inspiring him to seek a better way. The sarus should be revered by all Buddhists. Lumbini provides wetlands in which sarus can nest and rear their young.

Worldwide, what is the status of cranes, especially of the migratory ones?

There are 15 species of cranes, 11 of which are threatened, including the Sarus. The extremely rare migratory cranes have been strictly protected and are slowly increasing, but wetland habitats for them are still limited. Hunting of cranes in Central Asia has destroyed the population of Siberian cranes that wintered in Iran. After the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, there was shooting of crane, and the last birds were seen there in 2003. Siberian cranes are now gone from the flyways that took them to Iran and India. But we have a beautiful flock of 4,000 that winters in China but they are now critically endangered because the single lake where they winter is threatened by a dam. The battle goes on – in some areas it's hunting, in some areas it's habitat and in some areas it's both.

How important is the Himalayan ecosystem for the protection of migratory and resident crane populations?

The Himalayan ecosystem is on the migration route in autumn of thousands of Demoiselle and Eurasian cranes. In Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh of India, high altitude wetlands provide winter habitat for the endangered black-necked cranes. It is possible there are one or two pairs of black-necked cranes breeding in wetlands beside lakes in Sikkim.

The Indo-Gangetic plains are some of the most densely-populated regions of the world, and is suffering water-stress. How do we balance human needs with the need to protect endangered wildlife?

Sarus cranes and a plethora of other aquatic birds often breed on agricultural fields in regions where the Hindu faith is practiced. Large water birds and humans live in harmony in areas where Hindu values and traditional agricultural practices survive. In regions where industrial agriculture is practiced, biodiversity decreases.

Why is Sarus's significance to Lumbini?

The Lumbini crane sanctuary is a small area which provides an opportunity for pilgrims to learn about what pure nature is and how it can be protected. The Sarus is the ambassador of that message.