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Charles lauds the 'water warriors'

By Sunny Sebastian

BHANOTA (ALWAR) NOV.2. Prince Charles of Britain met an altogether different group of "parliamentarians" here today who talked about living in unison with nature, within the limited means available.

Led by waterman Rajendra Singh, they told him how they brought back to life the river Arvari, which had remained dry for over 60 years, and how they are keeping it alive now. The river was awarded the 'International River Prize'. The Prince, who climbed all the way to the hillock on the Aravalli mountains trudging over 1 km uphill to see the Sankhada dam built by the villagers some 15 years ago for rejuvenating the river, was visibly impressed.

"You are doing well. I hope the message gets around," he told the members of the Arvari Parliament who had lined up at the dam site to greet him.

The whole population of Bhanota-Kolyala, the villages upstream the river in this East Rajasthan region, had turned up at the entry point of the Bhairon Dev Lok Vanya Jeev Abayaranya (people's sanctuary), which was created with the rejuvenation of the river.

Two IAF helicopters brought the Prince and the rest of the visitors, including the British High Commissioner, Michael Arthur, and his wife, from Jaipur.

For the villagers, visits by celebrities have become not too unfamiliar ever since the river flowed once again in the semi-arid terrain with the support of the Tarun Bharat Sangh, the NGO led by Mr. Rajendra Singh. In March 2000, the then President, K.R. Narayanan, himself visited the area to present the "Down to Earth — Joseph. C. John Award" to the villagers.

"They are water warriors," Mr. Singh told Prince Charles. "They fought to keep the dams they built intact, to ensure no one exploited the resources such as fish in the river. They decide what crops should be raised in the 70 villages in the command area of the river," Mr. Singh told him.

The Prince wanted to know about the sessions of the Arvari Parliament from Dhanna Gujjar, president of the Bhanota-Kolyala gram sabha.

He also had many queries of humane interest including ones on how the villagers cooked and what was the roofing material for their houses.

He returned to the base at around 12.55 p.m. after spending an hour treading the rugged land.

"I am going back with lot of memories and positive thoughts," he told people who had squatted on the ground to interact with him.

"I wanted to visit Arjun Gujjar's house but have no time," he said referring to the elderly man, who had accompanied him during the walk.