

Highlight of the Month

Moratorium in Ratnagiri-Sindhudurg extended till Mar 31st 2013



Moratorium extended till Mar 31st

The moratorium for consideration of projects in the Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg region of Northern Maharashtra has been extended up to 31st March 2013. According to the previous official memorandum, the moratorium was to be effective till 31st December 2012.

The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel headed by Prof. Madhav Gadgil had laid down some clear guidelines about projects in Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg. Only the eastern parts of these districts come under the Western Ghats and had been classified by the panel into Ecologically Sensitive Zone (ESZ) 1, 2 and 3. The key recommendation of the panel was to have an indefinite moratorium on new environmental clearances in the ESZ 1 and 2 places. Apart from that they had also recommended that there should be a gradual phasing out of mines from ESZ 1 by 2016. Another crucial recommendation was that no new red or orange category industry including coal based power plants should be set up in ESZ 1 and 2. The previous moratorium was announced on the basis of these recommendations.

Keeping in mind, the announcement of the Kasturirangan committee, to examine the WGEEP report in a multifaceted and holistic manner and their pending recommendations, the moratorium has been extended. The news has been received with a lot of enthusiasm from environmental activists and conservationists working in the region.

State govt. okays heritage tag for Western Ghats sites in Goa: Environmentalists rejoice

Early last year, 39 sites of the Western Ghats lying in the states of Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra had been included in the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list. The pristine sites from the Goan Western Ghats were conspicuous by their absence. After a long and sustained agitation by the environmentalists in the state, the state government has finally given the nod to the proposal to include 775sq km of protected area in the heritage site list.

The work on the proposal was set to motion in August last year. The state government has suggested that all wild life sanctuaries and protected areas of the state be included in the UNESCO list and accorded heritage status. The report states that the heritage status would give more impetus to the tourism opportunities in the state and also encourage more researchers to study the species diversity of the region. The Western Ghats in Goa are one of the most protected terrains in the region with 4 wild life sanctuaries and one national park.

The proposal has been forwarded to the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun which was the nodal organization behind the inclusion of the Western Ghats sites in the heritage list. The proposal will be presented in the next session of the UNESCO.

(With Inputs from The Herald, Jan 21, 2013)

Contents

Farmers as agents of Forest Conservation in Shimoga---	2
Seminar on Sustainable cities in Dharwad, Karnataka-----	3
Eco-Tourism venture in Bhimashankar-----	3
KFRI compiles data on endangered plants in Western Ghats-----	4
Kerala Western Ghats creates ripples in International Tourism Trade Fair-----	4
Landmark judgment by Karnataka High Court-----	4
Checking human animal conflicts through check dams-----	5
Green Covers for the Highways: Transplanting old trees in Nashik-----	5
Deadline for Kasturirangan Committee report extended-----	6



Farmers as agents of Forest Conservation in Shimoga

Farmers in the catchment areas of the rivers Tunga, Bhadra, Bedti, Varada and Sharavati are now active participants in the process of Forest Conservation. They have now successfully been able to save 12000 acres of Forest Land in about 25 villages in the Shimoga district. The farmers were made aware of the crucial need to protect forests in their respective areas which is essential for access to clean environment and drinking water. Mr. Anant Hegde Ashisar, speaking to the national daily, The Hindu said that small village committees were formed incorporating villagers, NGOs, self-help organizations and environmentalists. These committees asked as action groups to protect the biodiversity of the region. Mr. Ashisar is the chairperson of the Western Ghats Task Force.

According to the Hindu report

“..in the year 2010-11, 2,500 acres of Devarakadu/Kanu forests in Siddeshwara, Varadamoola and Varadahalli in Sagar, Ammana Ghatta and Billeshwara in Hosanagar and Halesoraba in Sorab forest zone were protected and conserved. In 2011-12, 5,000 acres of Jambani, Veera Bhandreshwara, Banashankari, Kotekoppa, Kannur, Sampalli and Gilalagundi in Sagar taluk were conserved. Mr. Ashisar also said that 4,000 acres of forests in Baroor, Hulkodu, Lavigere, Chikkenelluru, Jambani, Guthanahalli, Gautamapura, Hosagunda, Ghantikoppa, Koragi, Iruvakki and Narasipura in Sagar taluk, Jamballi forests, Melinasampalli, Hunavalli in Hosanagar taluk and Kasaraguppe, Kuppe, Baragi, Hareeshi, Gunjanoor and Chandraguthi in Sorab taluk during 2012-13 came under the control of the village committees.”

Mr. Ashisar also threw light on the long spiritual association that the natives have with the Forests they live in. In many cases, the forests are revered and worshipped. People still depend on the forest covers for their livelihood and routinely extract medicinal plants, fuel wood, fodder and minor forest produce for their daily consumption. What is important to be noted is that all this extraction is done without causing any damage to the flora and fauna of the forests. The local communities are extremely conscious of the rich natural wealth which they are surrounded by and with some help can prove to be excellent conservationists.

In the near future, the Western Ghats Task Force has decided to take up the conservation of 25000 acres of forest land in Shimoga district and the Malnad region. They intend to undertake a full scale study of the region to identify the threats to the eco-system before drawing up an action master-plan. This recent success has certainly proved to be a major motivation and will continue to influence larger efforts in biodiversity conservation in the Western Ghats. This successful initiative should act as a catalyst for many such sustained efforts in the Western Ghats.

(Sourced from The Hindu, Bangalore Edition, Feb 10, 2013)

Seminar on Sustainable Cities in Dharwad, Karnataka

A seminar on sustainable cities and development of smaller cities in Northern Karnataka was organized in Dharwad on 28th December. This seminar was conducted by Eco-Watch, Bengaluru in association with Karnataka Urban Infrastructure Development and Finance Corporation. They were supported by the Hubli-Dharwad Municipal Corporation and the State Pollution Control Board. This one day seminar was attended by all kinds of stakeholders ranging from Government officials, civil society actors, technical experts, scientists, members from industrial and corporate houses, entrepreneurs, archaeologists and students.

The seminar was an attempt to move away from the unmitigated development of Mega-cities which puts at risk the Urban ecology and hampers urban infrastructure. This skewed development seen in mega-cities can be stopped by trying to project smaller cities as growth poles. But, this growth needs to be sustainable in character with efficient energy consumption, holistic development and adequate involvement of local communities. The seminar discussed the need to find new growth parameters making use of local natural and human resources through avenues like tourism. The discussions centered on making the local administration and local communities take cognizance of this new perspective of development. Some of the key issues discussed in the seminar pertained to resource mapping in North Karnataka, use of non-conventional energy sources, development of thematic tourism, urban infrastructure development etc. The seminar was graced by eminent speakers and intellectuals like Dr. Gopal Kadekodi, Prof. M.N Sreehari, Dr. T.V Ramachandra, Prof. M.D Subhash Chandran etc. Mr. Suresh Heblikar, Director of Eco-Watch and eminent environmentalist delivered the final address and expressed his resolve to carry forward this issue beyond the reach of the seminar.

Eco-Tourism venture at Bhimashankar, Maharashtra

Applied Environmental Research Foundation, Pune has been working with the Mahadev Koli community of Bhimashankar to flag off an Eco-Tourism venture. All their efforts garnered success when the first two batches of guests travelled to Mhatarwachi Wadi, a small hamlet in Bhimashankar, nestled in the lush greenery of the Western Ghats. The guests were put up in a guest house named 'Jambhuldary' which is a fully furnished place with adequate provisions for a relaxing stay. The guest house is located 1km off from the Nigdale village right in the heart of the Nigdale forest. The forests which surround the guest house have been preserved by AERF through long term conservation agreements with the local communities.

The members of the local community are responsible for the guests and the maintenance of the guest house. The guests are presented with the local cuisine which makes use of the village produce. Local organic rice, 'Warai', 'Nachni', Curd, Ghee, Buttermilk and Herbal tea are some of the food items that are served. The guests are taken on local nature walks with the help of a guide who belongs to the community and is well acquainted with the area. These guides have been trained by AERF. Some of the popular nature trails are Kondhawa, Guptbhima and Nagphani.

This novice venture has generated much enthusiasm among the locals. The news of a unique and refreshing vacation on offer, right in the heart of the Western Ghats is also making its way through traveler circles. The success of this venture should pave the way for more such initiatives in the Northern Western Ghats.



KFRI compiles data on endangered plants in Western Ghats- Researchers to benefit

Research in the Western Ghats hotspot is an arduous task by itself. Researchers have a lot of work cut out for them which includes working in a difficult terrain and in one of the hottest biodiversity hotspots of the world. The lack of a common database of plant species in the Western Ghats is another cause of worry for the researchers as it leads to duplication of work. In order to tackle this problem, the Kerala Forest research Institute (KFRI) are creating a database of rare, endangered and threatened plant species of the Western Ghats. Their work will cover the Western Ghats of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. The documentation of these plants has been done on the basis of population dynamics, population structure, climate and edaphic factors, conservation strategies, restoration and evaluation. This database will help researchers in building their work on existing data and prevent duplication of work.

(Sourced from Times of India, Kochi Edition, Feb 4, 2013)

Kerala Western Ghats creates ripples in International Tourism Trade Fair

The 2013 International Tourism Trade Fair was recently organized at Madrid, Spain. This prestigious Tourism Fair sees a gamut of travel media and tourism business participants from around the world. This year Kerala Tourism promoted the beautiful Western Ghats in their stand which garnered a lot of support from the participating crowd.

Kerala Tourism showcased the flora and fauna of the Western Ghats in Kerala and exhibited pictures of its beautiful landscape. The stand was built on an area of 56 sq meters and offered Ayurvedic massages to the audience as a bid to promote their tourism ventures. Incidentally, last year Kerala Tourism had been awarded the best stand at the Tourism Fair. The Western Ghats has a huge potential of tourism based activities and such promotion is definitely a move in the right direction.

(Sourced from Dailybhaskar.com, Feb 6, 2013)

Landmark Judgment by Karnataka High Court

In a crucial judgment passed by the Karnataka High Court, a writ petition against the setting up of 20 mini and micro hydel projects in the Karnataka Western Ghats has been disposed off. The petitioners Prashant G Yavaghal and the Western Ghats Environment Forum have hailed this as a landmark victory against 'mindless development in the environmentally sensitive Western Ghats'. The petitioners' had been fighting the award to 20 micro-hydel projects which had flouted the norms of the Forest Act. The judgment shall go a long way in preventing the fragmentation of water bodies in the Shola forests and subsequent destruction of habitats of wild animals like tigers, elephants and exotic birds like the Great Pied Hornbill.

8 out of the 20 projects had obtained the clearances from the state department by dividing their project into 2 parts. This was meant to flout the rule which makes environmental assessment mandatory for all projects which require more than 5 hectares of forest land and are above 25 MW capacity. The writ petition challenged these projects following which the authorities of the state department and Karnataka Renewable Energy Limited cancelled the clearances for 10 out of the 20 projects cleared. Following this, the state government also passed an affidavit stating that no such projects should be allowed in the Western Ghats. This led to the high Court disposing off the writ petitions.

(Sourced from DNA, Mangalore, Feb 28 2013)



Checking Human-Animal conflicts through check dams in Kerala forests

The Kerala Forest department has come up with a unique and eco-friendly solution to tackle the drought conditions in the forest. But these check dams have served the additional purpose of serving as water holes for wild animals which prevent them from venturing into downstream villages. The Forest officials said that inadequate water in the forests forced the animals to venture into nearby villages which aggravated the human-animal conflict there. With the aim of preventing this, the department has constructed shallow check dams which are only about 4 meters long and have concrete walls to check the flow of water. The cost of construction of each dam was nearly Rs. 4 lakhs but is an amount well spent as it replenishes the area around it and gives it a green cover.

Many animals including elephants, bisons, leopards, deer and bear have been seen flocking to these check dams to quench their thirst. The Wayanad Forest Range has now completed 5 dams in the Polanna-Elamala-Mathadam forest through which the Kabani river flows. The Forest Department now intends to set up 100 more of such check dams with the idea of preventing Human-Animal conflict due to water supply.

(Sourced from Times of India, Thiruvananthapuram, Feb 14, 2013)



Green covers for the highway: Transplanting old trees in Nashik

Apart from having a clear ecological dividend, green covers next to hot and dusty highways are a welcome respite to tired eyes. In order to accommodate the ever increasing needs of smooth transportation, road widening ventures are increasingly becoming the norm. But, without any proper implementation of guidelines to preserve the trees lining such highways, road widening projects often marks the end of the green cover. Additionally, there are no attempts to replenish and transplant old trees along highways, some of which have continued since the colonial period. Keeping these issues in mind, Mrs. Ashwini Bhat of the North Western Ghats Conservation Network has been fighting to save old trees along the Bhiwandi-Dhule highway and has been working on promoted transplant and replantation of trees.

Some of the trees were replanted in the year 2010 in Dhule and the results turned out to be completely successful with the planted trees remaining healthy since then. Infact, many such individual efforts at tree plantation and promoted transplant have borne fruit in the region. But, the same cannot be said for the efforts made by the Forest Department on the orders of Deputy Chief Minister of Maharashtra. Around 200 trees planted in the same highway in Mhasrul have proved to a failure.

Nashik Nagarik Kruti Samiti under the leadership of Mrs. Ashwini Bhat filed a public interest litigation against the negligence of the forest department in maintaining and protecting transplanted trees. In a recent judgment, the Mumbai High Court had asked the state forest department to submit the report about the reported tree cutting in this region. They have also been issued a show-cause notice for the failure of transplanted species. Members of the North Western Ghats Conservation Network have been supporting Mrs. Bhat's initiative and experts like Dr. Madhukar Bachulkar have been providing technical support for the same. This initiative and the litigation should prove to be a wakeup call for the government to act seriously on issues of protecting old trees and transplanted varieties of trees along the arterial highways of the state.

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Conservation on the
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Deadline for Kasturirangan Committee report extended

The Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India has granted an extension to the tabling of the Kasturirangan Committee Report. The Kasturirangan Committee was established to review the recommendations of the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel report (WGEEP) which was headed by Prof. Madhav Gadgil. This committee was set up with an aim of providing a holistic interpretation of the WGEEP report after detailed consultations with all the stakeholders involved. This panel was set up on August 17th 2012 and was supposed to table its findings on March 1, 2013, as directed by the Principal Bench of the National Green Tribunal. Now, according to the MoEF directive, the deadline has been extended to March 31st 2013.

Applied Environmental Research Foundation

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Applied Environmental Research Foundation (AERF) is engaged in conservation of valuable biodiversity of North Western Ghats through strong community participation. AERF promotes collaborative approach forging effective innovative partnerships for achieving long term conservation goals. AERF is committed to establish balance between conservation needs and ongoing development processes.

If you are interested in sharing your work with other spirited individuals and organizations, please send in your briefs or write ups to us at pratyasharath@aerfindia.org.

