

Project Update: March 2009

Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary (BWLS) which is located in the Ambegaon and Khed talukas of Pune district in Maharashtra is an evergreen forest in the Sahyadri mountain range. It was given protection by the State in 1984, mainly for the conservation of the Indian Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa indica elphinstonii*) and its unique habitat. The area has been preserved as a cluster of sacred groves for generations, and hence, has been able to retain its immense biodiversity.

Bhimashankar also happens to be a place of great religious importance to the Hindus as it houses one of the 12 Jyotirlingas¹ found in India. "Mahashivratri" is the biggest event held annually in the sanctuary. Thousands of pilgrims congregate here on this auspicious day of the year to seek the blessings of Lord Shiva. It is unfortunately also the day when maximum garbage (especially plastic) gets discarded all over the sanctuary by the visiting tourists / pilgrims. Most of this plastic quickly finds its way to the source of the Bhima River, which is situated right behind the temple.

The major reason for so much plastic being used and discarded is that the offerings of coconut and flowers to the deity are carried into the temple precincts in plastic carry-bags, which are disposed off, the moment the offerings are made. And as the number of pilgrims is in the thousands, one can imagine the scale of pollution. There have been efforts from the Forest Department, the Temple Trust and various NGOs from time to time to curb this pollution, but no sustained programme seems to have taken place. There is a Supreme Court order in place banning the use of plastic bags in the area and there are sign boards in the sanctuary area specifying that the use of plastic is illegal, but there is no on ground enforcement of the ban.

To create awareness about the conservation and cultural value of Bheemashankar area and about the pollution caused by plastic waste, a small awareness campaign was undertaken by the students of Terungun school as part of the ongoing environment education programme by Kalpavriksh in their *ashramshala* (residential school). 20 children were selected (as it was not possible to take responsibility for a larger group owing to the huge crowds there), and a few activities were worked out with them. Permission from the Forest Department for the children to enter the cordoned area was sought prior to the programme by Maharashtra Arogya Mandal (MAM) which is the collaborating NGO for the education programme.

Two of the children were dressed as 'Plastic Monsters' with a mask and all kinds of wrappers, plastic bags etc taped on to them. They moved about in the crowd with the other children shouting slogans and singing songs on how plastic waste has been harming their area and appealed to the crowds to carry cloth bags instead. Some children also exchanged paper bags with the pilgrims in return for their plastic ones that they were carrying their offerings in.

¹ Jyotirlinga or Jyotirling or Jyotirlingam is a shrine dedicated to Lord Shiva where Shiva is worshipped in the form of a Jyotirlingam or "Lingam of Light". There are said to be twelve Jyotirlinga shrines in India. The Jyotirlingas look like any other Shiva Linga. However, it is believed that a person who has attained a certain degree of spirituality sees these lingas as columns of fire piercing through the earth. (www.mahashivratri.org)

Although symbolic, this exercise was empowering for the child as he knew that he was in a very small way providing an alternative to this very big problem. This was also the first time that the children were exposed to an activity where they could directly interact with the world outside their school and community. They carried back a sense of doing something worthwhile for their sanctuary, and their temple. It is hoped that in the future, this will translate into more environment friendly activities within the sanctuary by the children in addition to those carried on by other groups which are trying to make a change.

It is also hoped that the pilgrims who interacted with the children, and some of them who exchanged their plastic bags for the paper ones, also carry back the message with them.

It was interesting to note that many of the pilgrims themselves were suggesting that the shopkeepers should stop distributing plastic bags and stock paper bags instead.

The fact that a small group of children could add substantially to the other efforts towards attract attention to this important issue indicates that with perseverance and sustained effort from entities like schools, youth groups, locally based NGOs along with the Forest Department and the Temple Trust, the issue of plastic in the sanctuary can definitely be curtailed.

