

Interim Report

Community outreach for landscape level wildlife conservation in the Western Ghats of Karnataka



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Project Narrative

Nearly 60% of the Western Ghats—a global biodiversity hotspot that also supports the largest remaining populations of the tiger, Asian elephant and other globally-threatened species—lies within the state of Karnataka in south-western India. Fragmentation and chronic degradation of habitats from a variety of anthropogenic activities are key continuing threats in this landscape. Addressing these threats within the larger democratic governance structure requires constant engagement with a wide variety of public stakeholder groups.

Bringing about constructive changes for conservation requires a better understanding of conservation issues among key stakeholders including local elected representatives, policy and decision makers, social leaders, the print and electronic media, a larger public constituency (through the media) and perhaps most importantly, the local community.

Most public outreach activities for conservation undertaken in India are focused on urban groups that reside far away from protected areas. Although this sector is important, it is perhaps much more necessary to undertake outreach efforts within the communities living in and around protected areas. Although many of these outreach activities are relatively simple, they provide a compelling means of bringing about positive changes for conservation especially when the understanding of conservation issues is enhanced among key stakeholders and accompanied by systematic follow-up activities. Most local people, who are adversely impacted by protected areas through loss of crops and livestock to conflict-prone wildlife species, have rarely experienced the protected areas they neighbour in any positive manner.

This project aims to improve the range and impact of conservation through outreach activities to strengthen the positive impact of local communities for wildlife conservation. We attempt to reconnect local communities, who frequently suffer wildlife-inflicted crop and livestock loss, to PA landscapes that are set aside for conservation of wildlife. There is an economic offset mechanism provided by the Government for economic losses suffered by people due to human-wildlife conflict

through compensation schemes. Here we use public outreach as one of the tools to improve attitudes of communities towards wildlife conservation.

Project Objectives:

- To improve and enhance the understanding for the need for wildlife conservation among local policy makers, key social leaders and local communities.
- Developing public communication tools to help convey the impacts of human activities on wildlife.
- To inspire and encourage youth to proactively take part in wildlife conservation initiatives.

Project Activities:

Conservation outreach activities in villages around the target protected areas of Bandipur, Nagarhole and Biligiriranganathaswamy Temple were carried out through a network of conservation volunteer groups. These volunteers come from various walks of life and include engineers, computer professionals, accountants, marketing professionals, students and others. The outreach activities that focused on local communities included street theatre, screening of conservation films and face to face discussions. These activities were carried out in public spaces in the villages mostly at night after people in these farming communities had returned home from their fields.

The films featured the rich biodiversity of the protected area that bordered the villages and the need for conservation that drew interest of communities. Plays in the street theatre style were scripted and performed in villages and highlighted various anthropogenic pressures that affect wildlife including forest fires, hunting using snares, tiger poaching and the positive role that could be played by local communities in the protection of wildlife.

Other public communication tools such as posters and pamphlets were also used to deliver the message visually. These posters are permanently displayed at locations that witness regular assembly of people such as tea shops, public water supply points (where women come to collect water for household utilisation), post offices, primary health centres, local government offices, veterinary hospitals, schools and other similar locations. Sample of a poster developed under the project is given in Annexure-1.

During the reporting period, a total of 119 volunteers participated, contributing about 183 person days of effort to conduct the outreach programs. A total of 39 education and outreach activities in 33 villages (Annexure-2) in and around Bandipur, Nagarahole and Biligiriranganathaswamy Temple Tiger reserves were carried out. A total of 6 street plays were enacted in 6 villages and settlements of forest dwelling communities. Importantly, some staff of the forest department also took part in the street plays, which helps in bringing frontline field staff and communities together. These outreach activities have also helped in encouraging interested individuals within local communities to actively support park authorities and conservationists in curbing illegal activities such as poaching.

There is a spiralling growth in nature tourism to protected areas in the recent past. With the resulting increase in vehicular traffic, the highways passing through these protected areas act as serious threats to wildlife. The most visible direct impact of increase in vehicular traffic is the mortality of wildlife due to speeding vehicles. A poster was developed to highlight the importance of responsible driving (Annexure - 3) which is now displayed in restaurants, hotels, resorts, bank ATMs, petrol stations and other locations near protected areas that are frequented by tourists.

A serious conservation challenge in India comes from religious shrines situated inside protected areas. Especially during festivals, these shrines attract tens of thousands of pilgrims and tourists, and pose a threat to wildlife in the form of pollution from massive amounts of plastic and other non-degradable waste, as well as from noise and disturbance from large numbers of people entering the forests in an unregulated manner. The volunteer groups have been assisting the forest department

in educating and regulating tourists and minimising the effect of such religious gatherings inside Bandipur Tiger Reserve. From our experience it is clearly evident that the amount of waste thrown inside the tiger reserve has largely reduced due to the efforts of the forest department with support from our outreach activities. Entering into the forests was completely unregulated in the past. Our efforts have reduced the number to almost none entering the forests. This has, to an extent, helped in reduction of forest fires that are set by people entering forests.

The first week of October is celebrated as Wildlife Week in India to highlight the importance of wildlife conservation. Hitherto these celebrations are largely focused in urban areas. We brought in these activities to schools around Bandipur Tiger Reserve to bring in a connect to school children with the protected area that abuts their villages.

All the activities have been carried out in collaboration with the Karnataka Forest Department that extends its support and highlights the need for co-operation between civil society organisations and the Government to achieve the common goal of wildlife conservation. A few of the frontline staff have also taken part in the outreach activities and interact with communities.

The volunteers have also held a meeting with the local Member of the Legislative Assembly to discuss conservation issues and about the problems of unregulated tourism and pilgrimage activities within Bandipur Tiger Reserve. Such interactions help volunteers picking skills of working with important leaders to solve conservation problems apart from building wider constituency for conservation.

Training volunteers

The Principal Investigator of the project held four meetings with conservation volunteer groups to initiate and guide the project activities. Two presentations were made to interested individuals who evinced interest to take part in outreach activities and 56 volunteers attended these presentations. These presentations help in providing a base for understanding larger conservation issues, help in

recruiting new volunteers and also bring individuals from various sectors of life to join hands together. Such presentations in the past have also resulted in individuals connecting to form smaller conservation groups.

A formal training program was held to help volunteers in understanding conservation issues and the Forest Department better, as well as to be trained better in basic field skills such as the use of GPS. Such training activities help them deal better with Government officials and also in the smart use of technology to document conservation issues. A total of 14 volunteers took part in the program. One of the volunteers provided space to conduct the activity.

One of the volunteers in this network now supports us with GIS work, contributing almost 50% of his time; similarly three more volunteers help us by contributing a day in a week for various conservation issues such as working on a conservation website (www.conservationthreats.org) that helps enthusiasts document conservation threats in the Western Ghats, office documentation and other similar activities. One of the volunteers, who is formally trained as a Mechanical Engineer and worked in the field of engineering for four years, has now joined us starting this year as a full time professional to work on applied conservation activities.

Working with key local leaders

The Principal Investigator has worked closely with the local Member of the Legislative Assembly and the Forest Department to help in delineating and gazetting an eco-sensitive zone for Bandipur Tiger Reserve. Eco-sensitive zones that are identified outside the protected area boundaries help in regulating land use patterns in the immediate vicinity of protected areas and help further wildlife-friendly production activities. They also help in protecting wildlife corridors and other similar ecologically important areas. Bandipur Tiger Reserve was the first tiger reserve in the country to notify an eco-sensitive zone.

Communicating conservation issues to the wider audience

To bring the larger issues of wildlife conservation and specific threats, we have worked with media personnel and professionals. During the reporting period we helped media professionals by providing timely, evidence-based information, visual documents and other such material in bringing out a total of 42 news reports (28 in English and 14 in the vernacular Kannada language) on various conservation issues that highlight both threats as well as positive outcomes of the activities carried out by the forest department. Apart from working with the media at the state level, we work with local stringers for print and electronic media who are based near protected areas to help them highlight stories from these areas to a larger audience.

A total of 8 features (5 in English and 3 in Kannada) were written in various dailies and magazines to highlight conservation issues at the state and national levels and we participated in four television interviews.

Unforeseen difficulties that arose during the project and how these were tackled.

Local communities living in the periphery of protected areas are the ones that are severely affected by wildlife conservation through loss of crops and livestock due from species such as elephant, wild pig, tiger and leopard. Groups that are involved in conservation outreach activities often have to face the anger and frustration of these local communities. Issues regarding compensation claims for crop and livestock loss are often raised when these groups conduct their outreach activities, often blaming the Government or the organisations involved in conservation activities for their callousness to local community suffering.

Volunteers have encountered such situations very often during the outreach activities. But this has helped them in understanding the ground realities of wildlife conservation. Such understanding has helped them highlight these issues better to park authorities and to offer help in bringing about improvements in the implementation of such conservation schemes.

Three most important outcomes of our project.

The project has helped greatly in building a cadre of deeply committed wildlife enthusiasts who have gleaned a solid understanding of the ground realities of wildlife conservation and problems of communities. The Principal Investigator continues to motivate and encourage young conservation enthusiasts to take up wildlife conservation initiatives seriously and the project has been largely successful in recruiting cohorts of committed volunteer conservationists. These efforts have added over 50 volunteers to the pool in the recent past.

We hope to build a similar cadre of people from within local communities to support the conservation efforts of the park and of conservationists, although we recognise that this could take a fairly long time. Our outreach activities have motivated a small but dedicated set of individuals in the local communities to take serious interest in contributing to wildlife conservation. We are encouraging and supporting these enthusiastic and motivated individuals to proactively engage in both outreach and conservation efforts.

These outreach activities give conservation volunteers a valuable opportunity to develop and strengthen a rapport with local communities, local leaders, school teachers, frontline forest department staff and other stake holder groups.

The involvement of local communities and how they have been benefited by the project.

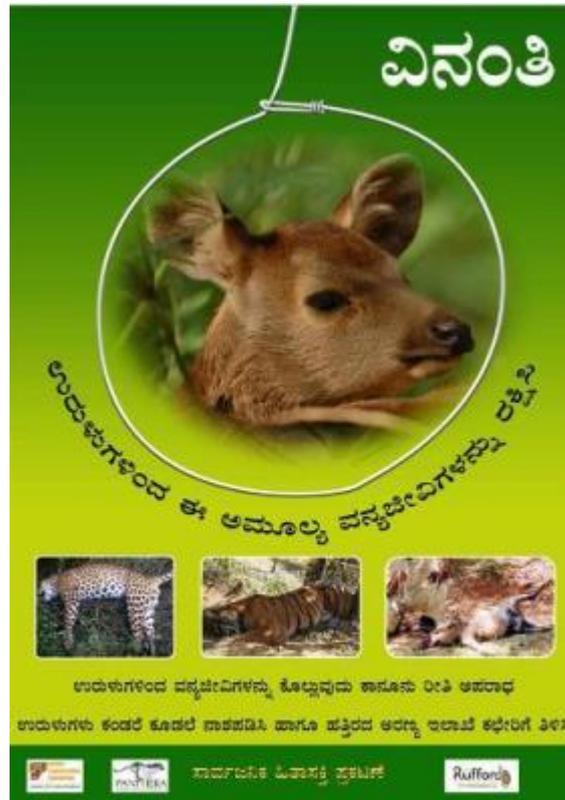
Other than targeting local communities in public communication efforts, our project also targets local opinion builders, as well as community and social leaders to support and strengthen wildlife conservation initiatives. Living in the periphery of protected areas and acting as a first layer of protection against external deleterious factors, their support for conservation efforts is absolutely vital for effective implementation of these programs. Although it is unrealistic to expect immediate results from these initiatives, from a longer-term perspective of these outreach efforts, we are

confident that our efforts can identify and support a small group of local people who will actively engage their communities and support wildlife conservation in the long term.

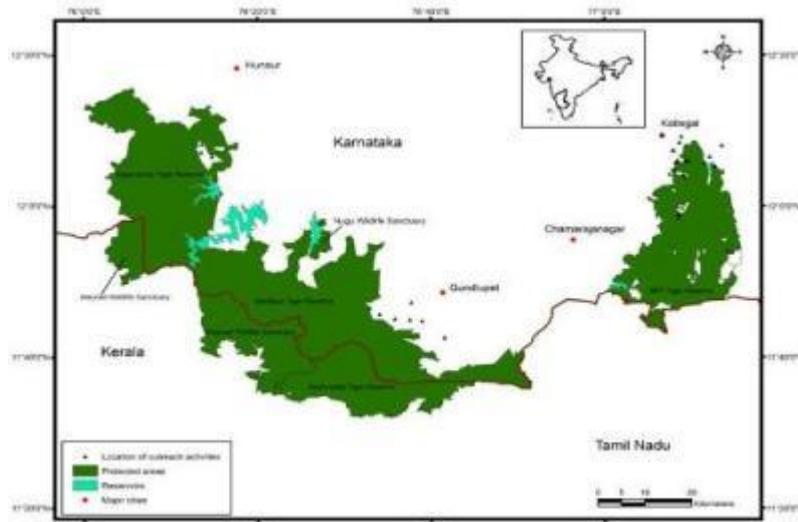
Did you use the RSGF logo in any materials produced in relation to this project? Did the RSGF receive any publicity during the course of your work?

The information campaign activities carried out under this project have been using public communication tools, both in vernacular language Kannada and English, such as posters, pamphlets and banners. All these communication tools use RSGF logo. (See Annexures 1 and 3). Some of the activities were also partially supported by other donors.

Annexure - 1



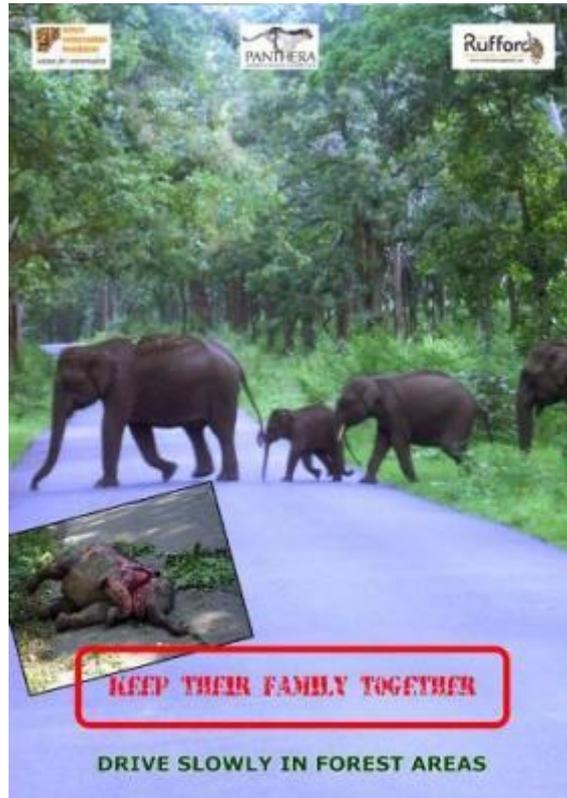
Annexure - 2



Locations of villages where outreach activities have been undertaken around Nagarahole, Bandipur and Biligirirangaswamy Temple Tiger Reserves

Locations of villages where outreach activities have been undertaken around Nagarahole, Bandipur and Biligiriranganathaswamy Temple Tiger Reserves

Annexure 3





Posters on conservation issues have been displayed at important locations where people tend to gather. © Aparna V



Street theatre helps in reaching out to communities in local language and idiom to highlight various anthropogenic impacts affecting conservation. © Prakash Matada



Outreach activities are conducted in the evenings after people return from their farming activities. ©Prakash Matada



Conservation films are screened at schools in villages around protected areas. ©Arun Simha



School children from villages around Bandipur Tiger Reserve are taken on a nature trail in Bandipur. ©Arun Simha

Officials, civil society join hands to restore wildlife corridor

Govt declares Kaniyanapura and nearby villages as reserve forest

Subhash Chandra N S

BANGALORE: This is one classic example of how concerted efforts by government officials and civil society can make a difference to conservation.

Sustained persistence of the case by a few bureaucrats and wildlife activists has ensured that revenue land, over 5,000 acres, falling in a critical wildlife corridor at Kaniyanapura is declared a reserve forest. The efforts bring to an end the two-decade old issue of protecting the Kaniyanapura elephant corridor - which links Bandipur Tiger Reserve and Mudomali Wildlife Sanctuary in Tamil Nadu.

Kashik Mishra, former additional chief secretary, B J Hosmath, field director, Project Tiger, Sanjay Gubbi, member, State Board for Wildlife, Banavara, assistant commis-



Jumbos move in the vicinity of an illegal resort in the elephant corridor. (DH PHOTO)

sioner, Kollegal and Manjunath, IAS, Gurdapet have together got thousands of acres of revenue land, which had features of forest, declared reserve forest.

"A notification under Section 4 of Karnataka Forest Act has been issued with an intention to provide legal status to this forest patch," Kumar Pushkar, Chief Conservator of Forests, Bandipur Tiger Reserve, told *Deccan Herald*. The

notification - dated February 2, 2012 - grants reserve forest status to more than 5,000 acres of revenue land to ensure their protection.

Pushkar said the corridor was very important as far as wildlife protection is concerned as almost all animals, including tiger and elephant, use this stretch for their movement. He said declaring such a huge stretch of land as reserve forest was not an easy task. Not doing

so would have been a great loss to wildlife as the notified area bisects north and south ends of the corridor, he said.

"This area had become a hub of numerous activities. We would have lost the habitat. By declaring it reserve forest, we have secured a for-wildlife," he said.

"This is the patch which connects Biligirirangana Hills Tiger Reserve and Saryamangala forest with Nagarhole and Bandipur," he added.

The revenue land falling in the limits of Chikyelechetti, Bachalli, Kobbepura, Kaniyanapura, Mangala, Yeriya, Heggonali and Koodakere villages have forests that connected the two important protected areas within the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve.

"Despite a Supreme Court order that land with characteristics of forests should not be diverted for non-forestry activities without proper permis-

sions, several resorts and private farms had come up here. Many of them were illegal and had reduced the corridor to a chicken neck in some locations," explained a wildlife expert who has conducted a study of this corridor.

Sanjay Gubbi conducted a quick survey of the area with the help of volunteers from Vanya and Aranya wildlife groups in 2011. An area of 9,662.3 acres was found to have forest cover and a report was submitted to the government recommending that these areas be declared reserved forest. Finding that an area of 5,599.05 acres was not diverted to private use, the department officials made a proposal to the government to declare it reserved forest under the Karnataka Forest Act, 1963. This finally led to the notification declaring the area as reserve forest.

DH News Service

DNA 18-05-2012

Forest dept steps in to save tigers

Government withdraws permission granted to a private company to generate wind energy in a forest area

M Raghuram • SAKLESHPUR

The Karnataka forest department has foiled a private company's bid to convert part of a shola forest in the Western Ghats into a wind energy hotspot since the project would have occupied a tiger corridor.

A Bangalore-based hydropower company had, in June 2009, got the government's approval to use the area to generate 25MW of power. Following the government order, the forest department too had granted permission to the company to undertake testing work at the Moorkangudda reserve forests, which hosts one of the most thick shola forests in the state besides a wildlife corridor.

However, a public interest litigation (PIL), filed by Western Ghats Environment Forum (WGEF), challenged the government's order on the ground that it would cause irreparable damage to

the sensitive ecosystem. Taking note of the PIL, the forest department cancelled the permission it had earlier given to the company to extend its testing period. With this, the energy department, which was hell-bent on starting the project, had to withdraw the permission.

Moorkangudda is a critical link between Pushpagiri Wildlife Sanctuary and Kudremukh National Park, and is host to endangered species including tiger, leopard, wild dog, gaur, sambar and several others protected under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. The area has grasslands and shola forests, and matches Bababudangiri area in its natural beauty.

"This is a positive step taken by the forest department to save this excellent tiger habitat. Though this area might have a low density of large carnivores, it acts as a critical corridor between southern and northern West-

ern Ghats," wildlife biologist Sanjay Gubbi told *DNA*.

"In the interest of long-term tiger conservation in the state, it is critically important to connect all protected areas through existing corridors or else once these corridors are lost, the concept of source-sink model for tiger conservation will be obsolete," he added.

Last year, the forest department had proposed that a few reserved forests in this area be added to Pushpagiri Wildlife Sanctuary owing to their high ecological value. "It is now clear why some unknown vested interests were opposing adding these areas to the Pushpagiri sanctuary," said Sunil Gaikwad of Wildlife Matters Trust of Bangalore.

Gubbi said the most important aspect of this episode was the saving of the tiger corridor. The cats use the canopy cover to remain undetected during migration. He said Karnataka

has the highest tiger density in the country, but to retain this pride, the state will have to take proactive steps in stopping diversion of important forest areas.



Features written in some of the major dailies



