

2014

# Kaas World Natural Heritage site: Report Card



Technology, Education, Research and Rehabilitation for the Environment  
Leading platform for development through Alternate Path

## Preface

*Exemplary progress has been made at Kaas, thanks to the efforts of the local communities, the forest department and the NGOs working around the Kaas Plateau - one of the 39 sites in the Western Ghats of India inscribed by UNESCO as 'World Natural Heritage'. The progress and development of the surrounding communities of Kaas support the doctrine that Heritage sites can be leveraged for the sustainable development of local communities.*

*TERRE Policy Centre along with RANWATA and the local communities undertook a challenge in association with the local forest officers to make a small beginning towards leveraging the Kaas Natural Heritage site for sustainable development. This humble beginning has led to incremental progress in conservation and community development efforts and has started to bear fruit.*

*A one-day event was organized at the Kaasai temple in Kaas village on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August 2014. This day-long event mainly involved review discussions on the progress of the activities undertaken in the year 2013, the successes and the failures, key barriers faced, key achievements, what could be done more effectively moving forward, how locals could be involved to a greater extent and how new partnerships could be developed.*

*The overall objective of this event was to review the progress of conservation efforts undertaken for the Kaas natural heritage site and plan for future activities with active involvement of organizations working at the grass-root, state, national and international level.*

*This report presents information regarding the discussions held during the community dialogue held at Kaas on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August.*





Table of Contents

Preface ..... 1

1. Introduction ..... 3

2. Key points from speeches by Experts and Dignitaries ..... 5

3. Positives and Negatives Highlighted by locals ..... 7

4. Future Direction ..... 10

5. Conclusion ..... 12

Appendix ..... 13



## 1. Introduction

The State of Maharashtra, India hosts a niche-treasure of biodiversity in its Western Ghats called the 'Kaas - Plateau of Flowers'. Geographically located at 17°42' - 17°45' N and 73°47' - 73°56'E in the Satara district of Maharashtra, Kaas is a lateritic plateau at the height of 1200 meter above mean sea level. It is spread over about 1800 hectares of land. More than 450 species of wild flowers bloom in and after the monsoon season, most of which are endemic herbs. This area has been attracting the attention of tourists, botanists and environmentalists over the last decade. It is a sensitive biodiversity hotspot with several different varieties of unique endemic herbs, shrubs and other flora and fauna. Many studies have been undertaken to list their endemism.

This area has been under threat not only because of insensitive tourism but also because of the indiscriminate development activities undertaken without proper environmental impact assessment. Poaching and biotic invasion due to excessive traffic especially during the flowering season has endangered the natural habitat of the plateau. Unfortunately, the villagers surrounding this plateau are quite poor and their literacy levels are also quite low. They are aware of their neighboring natural heritage, but are only recently acquiring more awareness regarding the future threats to their environmental wealth which directly or indirectly contributes to their own livelihood.

Conservation and true development of Kaas needs to complement each other. The process of satisfying present needs should not compromise availability of natural resources for the future generations of the residents.

In the year 2012, history was made when UNESCO inscribed the Western Ghats of India— consisting of 39 serial sites with Outstanding Universal Values - as World Natural Heritage (WNH). The community dialogue that preceded UNESCO's inscription and which continued even after the inscription in the year 2012 has resulted in accelerated participation of the local community in nature conservation and sustainable development around the WNH.

Community dialogues in the years 2012 and 2013 were held at local level to review the progress and plan for the various activities related to conservation and community development. The 2014 Community dialogue was a continuation of this participatory process and bottom up approach.

The community dialogue held in the year 2012 by the TERRE Policy Centre and UNESCO in association with Ranwata Nature and Environment Society, Satara addressed the recommendations made by the World Heritage Committee for recognizing 39 sites of the Western Ghats as UNESCO World Heritage. This community dialogue addressed how the intervening period until inscription (as World Heritage site) could be utilized to kick-start actions on capacity building and awareness of the local community. Subsequent to the declaration of the WNH, such efforts conducted in advance greatly helped with conservation management, enhanced community participation and self sustained activities for the local community development.

The 2013 event was a follow-up organized by the TERRE Policy Centre to discuss on the progress of activities planned in 2012.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of August 2014 another one-day event was organized at the Kaasai temple in Kaas village. This day-long event mainly involved review discussions regarding the progress of the activities undertaken in the year 2013, the successes and the failures, key barriers faced, key achievements, what could be done more effectively moving forward, how locals could be involved to a greater extent and how they can be assisted further and how new partnerships could be developed.

The overall objective of this event was to review the progress of conservation efforts undertaken for the conservation of the Kaas natural heritage site and plan for future activities with active

involvement of organizations working at the grass-root, state, national and international level. Biodiversity conservation, maintenance of the natural beauty of the area, continued agricultural productivity in the area through enhanced pollination, nutrient cycle and biodiversity and development of the communities around the Kaas plateau were at the heart of the discussions.

Local communities, youth, researchers, academics, entrepreneurs, eco-tour operators, transport operators, food package suppliers, guides, trainers, government representatives (forest, environment, development), NGOs and Media participated in this event.

## 2. Key points from speeches by Experts and Dignitaries



(Mr. Ram Boojh of UNESCO lighting the inaugural lamp and being welcomed by Mr. Vishnu Kirdat, Sarpanch-Kaas)

The Community Dialogue 2014 at Kaas was inaugurated by Dr. Ram Boojh, Director UNESCO. A video graphed speech by Hon. Mr. Prakash Jawadekar graced the inauguration. He compared the beauty of Kaas with the Kashmir. He expressed his willingness to make the Kaas Plateau as a world tourist place and assured the Government support in all possible ways. He motivated people by describing the Kaas as the asset of Maharashtra.

After the inauguration and welcome, the dignitaries expressed their opinions about the development of Kaas as a Natural World Heritage site and made suggestions for its sustainable future. Some of the excerpts of their speeches are as below:

**Mr. Mohite** of the Satara Forest Department, while speaking about the Kaas plateau, drew parallels of its discovery by the TERRE Policy Centre with that of India by Vasco da Gama. He mentioned how the four surrounding villages have been working together around Kaas for its progress and development. Because of all the focused efforts of all the concerned entities, Kaas has developed from being an unknown location to getting international recognition and receiving a national level award. Mr. Mohite mentioned that the forest department which is involved mainly in undertaking research and providing exposure wishes to partner further with TERRE, UNESCO and other such organizations working at Kaas to develop the Kaas project.

**Mr. Chavan** of the Bank of Maharashtra, Satara branch on behalf of the bank offered to help the Kaas community in its efforts in any way possible. He mentioned that their bank would be willing to help with the homestay concept being developed at Kaas with funds and other required means. Mr. Chavan also mentioned that they would be providing uniforms to the school students at Kaas in the future.

**Mr. Ram Boojh** of UNESCO mentioned that he has been visiting Kaas since 2012. Kaas is the smallest of the 39 World Natural Heritage sites in Maharashtra. He mentioned that the Western Ghats are ecological hotspots and the Kaas plateau is the 'best of the best' and hence has received this



recognition. He mentioned that according to him the trend followed by TERRE related to community dialogue and involvement should be emulated world over. He mentioned that UNESCO would support the brilliant efforts being undertaken at Kaas in the future as per need be.



(Ms. Vaishali Chavan of MTDC addressing the audience)

**Ms. Vaishali Chavan** of MTDC in her speech mentioned how MTDC has been improving over the years and that there are many different schemes and tourism related activities that they are developing in-order to cater to different target groups.

She provided important information regarding the homestay concept and mentioned the following important points:

- The MTDC has 3 schemes that could be suitable for development of the home stay concept at Kaas. They are:
  1. BNB (Bread and Breakfast)
  2. Home stay – Bachat Gat
  3. Mahabhraman
- The procedure for opting for any of these three schemes is very easy. The minimum requirements are:
  1. The house that will be used by the tourists should be enrolled with the authorities.
  2. Atleast one separate room should be present with basic Hygiene, cleanliness and safety.
  3. MTDC license and Certificate is necessary (after this is obtained, the owner's name is visible on the MTDC website).
- For training the interested home stay owners in hotel and hospitality management, the central government conducts a 6 week training course for which the minimum educational requirement is 8<sup>th</sup> std. pass.

- There is also a guide training programme which is conducted at regular intervals.

Ms. Chavan mentioned how help from the local residents would be necessary at all levels for the efforts being undertaken at Kaas to bear fruit. According to her, documentaries on how such WNH sites should be developed should be shown to the villagers. Also, the forest department and the tourism department should work together more.



(Mr. Pradeep Gawda of MTDC encouraging and congratulating the efforts being undertaken and wishing good luck for the future)

**Mr. Shtrotri** of Ranwata while congratulating and encouraging all the community development and conservation efforts being undertaken at Kaas provided some tips on what could be done going forward. He mentioned how the biotic wealth of Kaas has prompted research by various national organizations such as ISSER and also some international ones. He suggested that all the help offered by the NGOs, experts and external agencies like the Bank of Maharashtra should be appreciated and made the most of in order to proceed further with even greater success.

While speaking about the 'Homestay' concept, Mr. Shtrotri mentioned that there was no need to have Mexican or Chinese food at the homestays. Instead, the humble 'Zunka Bhakar' would be much more appreciated as it would keep the homestay concept rustic and simple.

Mr. Shtrotri encouraged the villagers to invite their next generation youngsters, who have shifted to cities for earning their livelihood, to come back to Kaas to help with and engage in the new developments being undertaken at the plateau.

He posed a question as to why a Rs. 100 charge cannot be collected from the tourists instead of the current Rs. 10 charge. This according to him could help in accumulation of more funds.

### 3. Positives and Negatives Highlighted by locals





(The audience consisting of members of various organizations, villagers and media)

Various points were highlighted by the residents of Kaas and the surrounding villages. The villagers spoke about the progress of the Kaas community and about some of the problems that they currently face. The positives and negatives that they highlighted are listed below:

**Positives:**

1. All the villagers are happy about the progress and development of the Kaas Plateau.
2. The villagers are happy about the fact that there are many new means of earning a livelihood in Kaas.
3. New gas stoves and solar lamps provided to the villagers are being greatly appreciated.
4. The villagers mentioned that earlier they would try to keep away from the forest department, but now things have changed. Villagers are now learning from the forest department, which is a result of greater partnership development.
5. The older generation does not wish to shift out of Kaas. The new generation which has shifted to cities for work is also willing to come back to work in the village owing to the increase in employment and earning prospects.
6. Villagers now feel like they have a lot of support from different agencies including the forest department, various NGOs, MTDC etc. and hence are not scared of approaching anyone for redressing their problems. Due to this, problems such as forest fires, traffic, tourism related complex issues are getting under control.
7. The guide trainings are being greatly appreciated by the new guides and are proving very helpful.
8. Villagers are overall very positive and enthusiastic about the future of the plateau and the surrounding community.

**Negatives:**

1. There are some portions of land that get drowned in water every year. The villagers demand that they should get land in return of land instead of money.
2. Villagers seek permanent employment on the Kaas plateau.
3. Funds are necessary for commissioning of mobile toilets.
4. There is a persistent electricity shortage. The Kaas village has not had a steady electricity supply for the past 3-4 months. This could also act as a hindrance to homestay concept development as it will affect tourism.
5. Existing toilets need to be made functional.



(A villager talking about his views on the development of Kaas)

#### 4. Future Direction



(Mr. Rajendra Shende of TERRE Policy Centre addressing the audience)

Mr. Rajendra Shende of the TERRE Policy Centre delineated the following future direction for the progress, conservation and community development efforts at Kaas:

1. To increase the exposure levels of the community, a study tour should be organized for the representatives of the four villages to other similar World Heritage sites which have implemented some unique features for successful conservation and community development.
2. Efforts should be made to communicate the success of Kaas as an example to other heritage sites in Maharashtra state. This will also facilitate networking and dialogue between the four heritage sites in the state.
3. A world class first of its kind interpretation centre should be set up at Kaas.
4. A research institute should be developed which could slowly develop into a full grown research facility with tie-ups with other national and international research and development institutions.
5. Efforts should be directed towards the beautification of the homestays/hotels in order to attract international tourists.
6. Training activities should be continued as per requirement.
7. Some beautification measures should be undertaken in order to blend the fence that currently exists on the plateau with its surroundings.
8. TERRE Policy Centre and UNESCO will provide necessary help with advertising targeting tourism development and the homestay concept.
9. A scholarship of Rs. 500 per month would be provided by the TERRE Policy Centre to a bright student from the Kaas village.

Apart from this, UNESCO has suggested that the government should demarcate a buffer zone around the Kaas plateau to restrict construction and promote sustainable development of the area.

At the end **Dr. Vinita Apte** of TERRE Policy centre motivated the villagers by a short story which appealed them to work with passion which surely will give the desired fruit.



## 5. Conclusion



(Forest Department trainees attending the Kaas community dialogue)

The one-day community dialogue that was held at the Kaasai temple at Kaas on the 26th of August 2014 in the presence of experts and dignitaries representing different national and international organizations turned out to be a great success. This dialogue brought forward the thoughts and concerns of the residents of Kaas and the surrounding villages. Ways and means of redressing problems currently being faced by the villagers were discussed on the same forum and platform, thus making the event a success.

Mr. Rajendra Shende of the TERRE Policy Centre provided future direction for moving forward with the development efforts at Kaas after considering various inputs from the experts present, making this another key event in the development of the Kaas plateau.

## Appendix

### Agenda for the Community Dialogue undertaken on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August 2014

| Time                | Session                                                                                                                    |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 10.00 am - 10.05 am | Welcome and Introductory Speech<br><b>Praveen Gawda</b> , Forest Officer, Satara                                           |
| 10.05 am - 10.15 am | Opening Remarks : Objective of the meeting<br><b>Rajendra Shende</b> , Chairman TERRE Policy Centre , former Director UNEP |
| 10.15 am - 10.30 am | Key Note: National & International Initiatives and Guidance<br><b>Ram Boojh</b> , Director UNESCO                          |
| 10.30 am -10.45 am  | Inaugural address : MTDC's active Participation<br><b>JagdishPatil</b> , MD MTDC                                           |
| 10.45 am - 10.55 am | Vote Of Thanks<br><b>VinitaaApte</b> , President TERRE Policy Centre                                                       |
| 10.55 am - 11.05 am | Tea Break                                                                                                                  |
| 11.05 am - 11.45 pm | Review and progress till date<br><b>Vishnu Kirdat</b> - Sarpanch KAAS and the Forest Department                            |
| 11.45 pm - 12.00 pm | Open Community Dialogue on the review                                                                                      |
| 12.00 pm - 12.45 pm | Visit to the 'Home Stay' Huts                                                                                              |
| 12.45 pm - 13.30 pm | <b>Guidance by MTDC</b> and Open Discussion Homestay concept development                                                   |
| 13.30 pm - 14.30 pm | Lunch                                                                                                                      |
| 14.30 pm - 15.00 pm | Dialogue on Future plans and expectations by<br><b>Experts, Media, NGO and Villagers</b>                                   |
| 15.00 pm - 16.00 pm | Round-up on proposals of specific projects : <b>MTDC, TERRE, RANWATA, Forest Department, UNESCO, MOEF</b>                  |
| 16.00 pm - 16.15 pm | Tea Break                                                                                                                  |
| 16.15 pm - 17.00 pm | <b>Concluding Dialogue</b> and closure                                                                                     |