



Technology, Education, Research and Rehabilitation for the Environment

Draft Report of Initial Survey

For the project

Engaging Local Communities in Stewardship of World Natural Heritage

*An Initiative towards creating an Innovative model for
Community led Conservation and Sustainable Management
of UNESCO sites in the*

Northern Cluster of Western Ghats, India

Background:

Conservation measures are proposed to reduce the risk of future declines in species diversity and the associated ecosystem services that contribute to the livelihoods of millions of people across the Western Ghats region. The sole purpose of declaring a particular biodiversity rich site as World Natural Heritage site is community led protection of that area.

Older than the great Himalayan mountain chain, the Western Ghats of India is a geomorphic feature of immense global importance. The Outstanding Universal Value of the Western Ghats is manifested in the region's unique and fascinating influence on large-scale biophysical and ecological processes over the entire Indian peninsula. The mountains of the Western Ghats and their characteristic forest ecosystems influence the Indian monsoon weather patterns. Such patterns mediate the warm tropical climate of the region, presenting one of the best examples of the tropical monsoon system on the planet on which the livelihood of nearly 1 billion people depend, directly or indirectly. The Ghats act as a key barrier, intercepting the rain-laden monsoon winds that sweep in from the southwest during late summer.

Apart from being sites of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance, they contain outstanding universal value from the point of life science and biodiversity conservation. The conservation and management of these sites is vital to not only meeting global biodiversity targets, but there is growing evidence that the conservation of biodiversity and its ecosystems can also lead to attaining the MDGs and the proposed new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through its contribution to poverty reduction, livelihoods and human well being by providing clean air, water and other ecosystem services.

The Western Ghats extend from northern border of Maharashtra touching Dang to a place near Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu, along the western coast, spread over 7,953 sq. km. The Western Ghats mountain chain is recognized as one of the world's eight "hottest hot spots" of biological diversity. The World Heritage Committee, which met in St Petersburg in Russia, acknowledged that the Western Ghats forests include some of the best representatives of non-equatorial tropical evergreen forests anywhere and are home to at least 325 globally threatened flora, fauna, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish species. Its ecosystems influence the Indian monsoon weather pattern. Moderating the tropical climate of the region, it presents one of the best examples of the monsoon system in the planet.

Even though the region has many protected areas, as declared by the Government of India, anthropogenic activities, by outsiders as well as natives, continue to threaten this delicate ecosystem directly and indirectly. The local communities are forced to exploit the biodiversity for their livelihood that disturbs the ecosystem. On the other hand, there is gross ingress due to urbanization on the fragile ecosystems in the Western Ghats through land procurement and unsustainable development of the area for the purely quick commercial gains.

Impact of the climate change on the biodiversity and ecosystems are already evident all along the length of Western Ghats. It can be concluded from IPCC's 5th Assessment Report that management and conservation of the WNH sites are in extreme risk, and in many cases the degradations have crossed the 'point of no return'.

There is an urgent need for taking concrete steps to preserve and conserve the natural wealth of this region, engage the local community in risk-management and move towards the sustainable development of the area through their meaningful involvement. Inscription of the World Natural Heritage sites in the

Western Ghats is a timely opportunity to leverage that tool to achieve the goal of conservation of nature and its bio-diversity. The partnership with Government, Business and NGOs is essential along with stewardship of the local community.

As per UNESCO best practices and guidelines community participation and engagement is the prerequisite for WNH management. National regulations related to management of protected area also requires public policy interface for a better management and conservation. Perspective from stakeholders' point of view is the driver for the policy setting.

During the side events of Convention of Biodiversity COP-11 in Hyderabad in 2012 and the UNESCO's regional conference held in New Delhi September 2013, the importance of sustaining the momentum and mobilizing people and communities in the Western Ghats was stressed. It was also concluded that there is the need to address the grave challenges faced by the site particularly due to urbanization and climate change.

It was highlighted by Wild-life Institute of India during the UNESCO's regional conference in New Delhi that northern cluster of WNH in Western Ghats i.e. Kaas, Koyna, Chandoli and Radhanagari should be the pilot sites to urgently initiate the conservation and management and demonstrate the effective risk-management arising out of urbanization and climate change. One of the sites, i.e. Kaas has already shown the momentum in taking initiative immediately after the WNH inscription in linking community development with conservation. (Please see the report card-2013 on TERRE's web site: www.terrepolicycentre.com. (Also see Annex i for Report card). The evidence-based policies that would emerge during the piloting would be guiding map for consideration for other WNH in Western Ghats. The piloting and demonstration would also build the network of all the WNH sites in Western Ghats for building the confidence and ownership as well as sharing of the best practices and experiences.

Gaps in the communication:

Of the 39 sites in the Western Ghats given the world heritage status, four fall in Maharashtra. These are Kaas plateau, Koyna wildlife sanctuary, Chandoli national park and Radhanagari Wildlife sanctuary in the Sahyadri range. But the world heritage site signboard is there only at Kaas plateau. Forest department officials said there was no enough community dialogue to aware local people about this. Community led conservation is not possible in such scenario. TERRE Policy Center has already taken efforts for such awareness programs at Kaas plateau.

Project Objectives

Overall objective of the project is to evolve a model of participatory and people-led conservation and sustainable management in Western Ghats UNESCO Natural Heritage Sites through a series of structured multi-stakeholder dialogues and field initiatives.

Short and Medium Term objectives

- Initiating Education, Awareness and skill building activities by engaging local youth, NGOs and women's self-help group.
- Exploring Sustainable livelihood options and opportunities for local youth and women to prevent migration.
- Devising ways for the Empowerment of women by promoting traditional handicrafts through skill training.
- Initiating Documentation and Deployment of traditional practices by utilizing the knowledge bank and experience of local seniors.
- Developing architecture for traditional nature based creative entrepreneurial training.
- Institutionalizing the gains of the project through creative sustainable financing under CSR activities of the private sector and local banks and financial institutes.

The long-term objectives achievable through the project are

- Create a Model for the Western Ghats WNHS, learning from the COMPACT experience and adapting it to local situation through community led conservation and sustainable management.
- Development of a communication strategy for building partnerships and resource mobilisation to scale up initiatives for conservation UNESCO sites in Western Ghats.
- Creation of a platform and network to attract and engage local communities, youth, women's self-help group, academicians into research and conservation of these sites taking into consideration CEPA (Communication, Education and Public Awareness) framework.
- Establishing a mechanism for raising the profile of natural WNHS at national and international forums