Kaas Plateau:
A World Natural Heritage
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FORWARD

Mega Example of Mini-Site : Looming challenges

UNESCO’s list of World Heritage Sites now boasts total of 1121 sites from 167 countries, including 213 World Natural Heritage sites. These include the inscription of 29 new sites approved by World Heritage Committee of UNESCO at Baku, Azerbaijan in July 2019.

Out of the 29 new sites inscribed, only 4 were under category of natural heritage and remaining were cultural heritage (with one as both cultural and natural). The total area covered by the World Natural Heritage sites is growing steeply. At present, it is 300 million hectares having nearly doubled in last decade. This is good news for conservation of nature.

Considering that the area covered by Kaas Plateau (one of the 39 serial sites of the Western Ghats, which was inscribed as World Natural Heritage in 2012) is only about 1600 hectares, its importance appears to be insignificant. But the mega example this mini-site has created in encountering the growing challenges and threats is simply amazing. That’s what this annual report card reveals.

Kaas Plateau, northern most natural heritage site in the Western Ghats is in the close vicinity of high mountains. Just about 25 kms from the district city of Satara, which is 140 kms from megacity of Pune and 280 kms from India’s financial capital, Mumbai, it is literally encircled by fast urbanizing habitats. The tourists from these cities, with their increased mobility, barge-in at the gates of the Kaas Plateau posing unparalleled threat to the sprawling carpets of fragile wild flowers of varied colours. The world knows ‘wild fauna' tourism, but this tiny site is famous for ‘wild flora’ tourism.

The horde of tourists not only pose threat that endangers the wild flowers but it also risks the very basis of the ‘outstanding universal value’ of the Kaas Plateau, the criteria on which the site is inscribed by UNESCO.

The climate change associated with extreme weather events and potential danger of indiscriminate human intervention under the shadow of development, also pose the perils that menace the sustainable living of the local communities.
TERRE Policy Centre, recognising these threats have been tracking the progress of the sustainable management (or lack of it) of the site and publishing the Annual Report Cards (ARC) right from 2013.

The methodology adopted by TERRE in preparing such ARCs is transparent, inclusive and consultative in nature. At the core of the consultation is the local community and Joint Forest Management Committee (JFMC) mentored by the Government’s Forest Department. Led by young team of research experts and interns, Anuja Gurjar, Neha Potnis and Akshay Kulkarni, this ARC tracks the trends of over last 7 years, recognises the positive development mainly attributed to the hard working JFMC and local habitat, underlines the growing threats and makes well-thought out recommendations.

The team also benefitted from consultation with researchers, journalists, academicians, local NGOs, Forest Department and tourists. The resulting ARC, while appreciating the constructive efforts of the JFMC, also points to the challenges ahead.

UNESCO has the provision of adding the heritage site ‘under danger’ list, if the species are on the verge of extinction. Indeed for the same reason, the Island and Protected Areas of Gulf of California in the meeting in Baku was added to the ‘List of World Heritage in Danger’.

There is an urgent need for raising awareness among the tourists and developing a network of the JFMCs of the 39 sites of the Western Ghats, starting with 4 sites of the northern cluster that are in periphery of 300 kms. Such network of JFMCs would help in sharing information and learning from successes and failures.

I hope this Annual Report Card, prepared by TERRE without any external financial help and with full voluntary contribution would help in continued progress of the sustainable living off the Kaas Plateau communities.

**Rajendra Shende**

Chairman, TERRE Policy Centre

Former Director UNEP

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1 The Annual Report Cards of previous reports are available on http://terrepolicycentre.com
ABOUT REPORT

TERRE Policy Centre, coordinating organization of this annual report card 2018-2019 was instrumental in supporting the Government of India in getting UNESCO’s inscription of the Western Ghats with its 39 sites as World Natural Heritage. Kaas Plateau is the northern most and the smallest of the 39 sites. It is also the most distinct among all other World Natural Heritage Sites in the world because of its unique universal value in the form of the endemic wildflowers.

TERRE Policy Centre has also been providing regular mentorship, guidance and consultation to the local community and the Government authorities for the preservation of the plateau without any external monetary support.

The Annual Report Card is an important document that tracks the progress of the management of the site and provides recommendation to conserve the site in the coming year.

The report recognizes the cumulative efforts of the Joint Forest Management Committee, Forest Division of district Satara of State Government, local community, researchers, experts and journalists.

The information shared in this report card was collated and compiled by TERRE Policy Centre during various communications and the visits undertaken to Kaas Plateau and villages in 2018 till June 2019.

**Annual Card was prepared under the overall guidance of:**

Rajendra Shende, Chairman TERRE and Former Director UNEP

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1. Background of Kaas

Located in the Satara district of Maharashtra state in India, Kaas Plateau (or Kaas Patthar, as it’s locally known) is a hotspot for biodiversity in India’s Western Ghats, also called as Sahyadri that sprawls about 1600 kms in length and 140,000 square kilometres area in total.

At the World Heritage Committee in Saint Petersburg, Russia in the year 2012, the Kaas Plateau, among 39 other sites became the part of UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site.

It is situated on the top of the hill, where the grasslands on the volcanic soil of few centimetres turns into a ’valley of flowers’ during monsoon season, particularly from August to early October.

Geographically located at 17º42’- 17º45’N and 73º47’- 73º56’E in the Satara district of Maharashtra, it is situated at an altitude of 1200 metres and is approximately 10 sq km in area.

Kaas plateau is a “Rock Outcrop”. Outcrop, in geological terms, is a portion of naturally formed bedrock or other landform protruding through the soil level. It supports unique vegetation and has abundant endemic species.

Kaas has been recognized as one of the hotspots of biodiversity due to its unique ecosystem and high degree of endemism, which is sensitive to external threats.

The threats arise not only because of insensitive tourism but also due to 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. The climate change and extreme weather events add to these threats.

Unfortunately, the villages surrounding this plateau are financially underprivileged and the literacy level is also comparatively low. Though they have been aware of the World Natural Heritage Site status, they have just recently started to acquire more understanding about threat to its natural assets and environmental wealth that directly or indirectly contributes to their very livelihood.

TERRE Policy Centre, Pune along with the Forest Department of Satara District and Joint Forest Management Committee (JFMC) undertakes the initiative of keeping a community dialogue at local level to assess the progress and plans of various activities related to nature conservation and community development.
2. Biodiversity Heritage of Kaas

There are few stories behind: why the plateau is named as ‘Kaas’. The Kaasa tree (*Elaeocarpus glandulosus*) is found in thick forests around the Kaas, therefore the plateau was named as ‘Kaas’. In the regional language, Kaasa also means a lake. The major lake on the plateau could have been one of the reasons for the place to be named ‘Kaas’.

The flora and fauna of Kaas is unique and endemic to the region. More than 850 species of flowering plants are reported in Kaas Plateau, out of which 624 species have entered the Red Data Book\(^2\), wherein 39 species are endemic to Kaas Region only.

The unique flora of Kaas, includes white *Habenaria* (ground orchids), bright yellow sonki (*Senecio grahamii*), Mickey mouse shaped *Smithia, Utricularia* (Seeta’s tears) and purple *Aponogetan satarensis* (Y-Tura). *Aponogetan satarensis* species is endemic to the Western Ghat region. Topali Karvi (*Pleocaulus ritcheie*) is found in abundance on the edge of the forests & cliff. Karvi has 250 species, out of which 46 are found in Western Ghats. Fauna of Kaas include, variety of amphibians, reptiles (Rat Snake - Dhaman), insects, butterflies (White Orange Tip, Common Silver Line, Blue Pancy) and mammals (Small rats to enormous gaur are among the most common and important mammals of Kaas).

\(^2\) The Red Data Book is the state document established for documenting rare and endangered species of animals, plants and fungi as well as some local sub-species that exist within the territory of the state or country.
3. Timeline of Kaas Plateau since its inscription as World Natural Heritage

Image 2: Timeline of Kaas Plateau since its inscription as WNH site of UNESCO

2012: The workshop on Community Dialogue was organized by TERRE Policy Centre (Pune-based NGO) and Ranwata (Satara-based NGO) in Satara city, not far from the Kaas Plateau. It included local village heads, forest officers, government representatives, experts from UNESCO, Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) and number of NGOs and news media. Series of meetings by the forest committee and the local communities to develop the plan of actions were held, even before the inscription by UNESCO for the Kaas Plateau, particularly on conservation techniques, monitoring the tourists and inclusive management by the local communities. UNESCO later inscribed the Kaas plateau as World Natural Heritage along with 39 sites in the Western Ghats.

2013: Plan of Implementation was prepared by the local forest committees and village Panchayats. An interactive event, first of its kind after the
inscription by UNESCO was focused on encouraging active participation between the villages and the Forest department. As a result of this dialogue, the Forest department helped in the installation of solar Lamps, LED street lights, water heaters, LPG gas connections, halogen bulbs and computers in the villages surrounding the plateau.

**2014:** The 2014 Community Dialogue was a continuation of the established participatory process and bottom-up approach. The dialogue was focused on how ecotourism could be leveraged for the development of local community. With active participation of Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC), the concept of ‘home stays’ was introduced to the locals. They were given guidelines and professional training on ‘How to manage home stays?’. Developments in skill building, education and concepts on sustainable living were also discussed as priorities.

**2015:** TERRE along with representatives from the Forest department, other NGOs, MTDC and the local community assessed the progress and reflected upon the discussions that took place in 2014 with required follow-ups.

The overall objective of this event was to evaluate the progress and efforts undertaken for the conservation of Kaas as World Natural Heritage site and plan for future activities with active involvement of organizations working at the grass root, state, national and international levels. Setting up of an information centre, medical centre and basic transport infrastructure were some of the civil issues discussed. Biodiversity conservation, maintenance of the cleanliness and 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 remained at the heart of the discussions.

The villagers showed their anxiety for the loss of their agricultural land that may happen due to expansion of Kaas lake.

**2016:** Joint Forest Management Committee (JFMC) was formed. Committee comprising of representatives from four member-villages of Kaas, Ekiv, Atali and Kasani, and an office bearer from the Forest Division of Satara were identified as the anchor-engines for Kaas Management. JFMC has been responsibly contributing the most in preserving the plateau since then. Community discussed the impact of increasing the level of Kaas lake on the sustainable livelihood of the villages.

For tourists above 12 years of age, the entry fee for maximum three hours on weekends and public holidays was decided as INR 100 per individual,
and on week days as INR 50. In addition, the Committee also decided to apply vehicular fee of INR 10 for two wheelers, INR 50 for four wheelers and INR 100 for all big vehicles including, mini-buses for minimum four hours of parking. *1 USD ~ INR 70.

2017: JFMC witnessed a structural reform with majority view that allowed the inclusion of two more villages i.e. Pateghar and Kusumbimura as members of the committee. Thus, the number of members increased from 11 to 18, with 3 members representing each member village. A president and a chairperson were elected democratically within the members of JFMC. In order to maintain gender balance and provide equal opportunities within the community, JFMC decided to include at least one female representative from each of the six villages.

The committee also ensured that local communities achieve a sustainable livelihood from the tourism activities around the plateau. The JFMC in association with several other organizations and local residents organized capacity building initiatives like training for tour guides, waste management camps, crowd management and parking to maintain the serenity of the plateau throughout the year. Decision was taken to increase the level of Kaas lake to feed more water to Satara city.

4. Overview of year 2018

In the past 7 years, trampling of flowers by visitors and littering of plastic-ware has disturbed the unique flora and fauna affecting the aesthetics of the plateau. Once the sprawling beds of colourful flora of wild flowers, the famous Kaas plateau was now witnessing less bloom in 2018. Additionally, due to rapid forest fire incidents in the month of December and January, significant damage were caused to the flora.

Sunlight and rain are the two depending factors for flowering. Lack of one or both of these necessities led to less blooming of flowers in the year 2018 and the blooming season delayed from August to September’s second week. However, despite the delay, visitors were flocking the site, especially during weekends.

There is a tradition of welcoming guests in Indian culture. Keeping the Sanskrit dictum ‘Atithi Devo Bhava’ (meaning, guest is akin to god) in view, 15 tourists from Japan were welcomed by JFMC members - Somnath Jadhav, Dnyaneshwar Akhade and Forest department.
Restricting visitors’ access through fencing, managing traffic, setting discipline through penalties and effective land-use management (95% land is under conservation and only 5% to be used as a public zone) are some of the efficient steps taken by JFMC in the Kaas Plateau. There is also engagement of the local community to make these conservation efforts sustainable.

4.1 Management of Kaas Plateau: The Forest department, Joint Forest Management committee (JFMC) and local villagers-turned-volunteers are working on conservation, security and maintenance of Kaas plateau.

This management of Kaas has been divided into following six sections and one head has been appointed for each section:

Water supply: A dedicated team is handling the water related activities. Water tankers are brought from Satara to supply water for toilets during heavy inflow of tourists to maintain hygiene and sanitation in the area. To reduce plastic bottle waste, 60 litre mineral water cans are kept for tourists during the flowering season.

Waste management: For sanitation, solid waste management and sewage waste disposal a dedicated team is appointed. Carriage comes from Satara for proper collection, disposal and treatment of solid waste.

Security (Day and Night Shift): Six people have been designated to guard the entire plateau of around 1,800 hectares. After the fire incidents in the plateau, the number of guards were increased to 12 for regular patrolling. Six guards in the day and six guards in the night have been assigned for the same.

Guide: Committee encouraged the local villagers to pursue employment opportunities, especially as tourist guides and maintenance team.
Parking: Parking of cars and other vehicles is not allowed on the plateau. Around 500 metres from the plateau, parking space is provided for all vehicles and the State Transport has provided mini buses that ferry the visitors to and fro from the site at a minimal cost.

Office: A temporary facility is set up for administration, maintaining records, managing online booking data-list and solving the queries of visitors.

4.2 Tourism: Since the declaration of the Kaas Plateau as UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2012, hundreds and thousands of tourists are visiting this tourist spot. Consequently, this increase in the number of visitors has put plateau in the risk of being polluted and destroyed.

The Committee developed a special website for providing tourists with information pertaining to the plateau, as also for registering themselves for their next visit. Forest officials were keen on making online booking mandatory for all days. Currently, online booking is compulsory for Saturday, Sunday and Public Holidays. Officials allowed the sale of tickets on the site but restricted the daily number of visitors to 3,000 and in case of crowd or traffic jam, tourists are restricted at Satara city itself with the help of police and volunteers. The revenue generation was on the rise till 2016. In 2017, due to the unfortunate incident of landslide on the hilly road leading to the plateau, the season for tourism was shortened by 2 months. This affected the number of tourists and resulted into generation of lesser revenue.

In the year 2018, the plateau received online booking of 39000 visitors and counter ticketing of 53342 people.
Graph 1: Number of tourists visited the plateau during 2012 to 2018

4.3 Revenue Generation:

The revenue generation from the year 2012 up to 2018 was as follows:

Graph 2: Number of Visitors vs. Annual Revenue
Revenue generation during flowering season: 01/09/2018 to 31/10/2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No of visitors</th>
<th>Online visitors</th>
<th>Offline visitors</th>
<th>No of students</th>
<th>No of Senior citizens (Online)</th>
<th>No of Senior citizens (Offline)</th>
<th>Fines collected</th>
<th>Bus service</th>
<th>Books sale</th>
<th>Rickshaw service</th>
<th>Total Revenue Generation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revenue</td>
<td>39,868</td>
<td>50,614</td>
<td>3,905</td>
<td>2,746</td>
<td>6,863</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>105,53,779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>39,86,800</td>
<td>50,61,400</td>
<td>74,100</td>
<td>9,609</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12,48,990</td>
<td>1,67,500</td>
<td>3,780</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1,05,53,779</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Image 4: Revenue Generation

4.4 Revenue Allocation:

The fees collected from visitors during the season is used for maintenance and salaries of the villagers working there under various responsibilities. In the year 2018, INR 6,00,000 was spent on developing space for parking. There are activities, which are planned and submitted for technical sanction from government. The total revenue obtained gets distributed in the following way:

1. 50% of the entire revenue is used for the development of Kaas Plateau

2. 30% of the entire revenue is used for the development of six villages that mostly includes, road repairs, water supply. It is also used for management as well as infrastructural needs of schools in these villages.

3. 20% of the entire revenue is saved as fixed deposit in the IDBI bank (Industrial Development Bank of India).
4.5 Community Development:

Over the last five years, JFMC has supported member-villages to execute household and public welfare activities.

Gram Sabha of six villages presented their proposal to JFMC. Those proposals were sent to the Forest department. Since then, 30% of the revenue is used for development of six villages.
Before the start of the season, employment forms are filled up by the villagers and based on their skills and capacities, the work type (like, duties for the cleanliness, maintenance, tourist guides, patrolling, parking on the site, tourist guides) gets allocated. The upper age limit to work in Kaas for men is 70 yrs and women are 50 yrs. There has been an increase in the employment among the community members. During the season, approximately 100-140 local people are employed and 20-25 people continue to work during the off-season for the maintenance and patrolling. The daily wage of INR 400 is provided to them.

### 4.6 Key activities in 2018:

The following activities took place during the year 2018:

1. Private vehicles were stopped on the plateau. Parking was made available at a distance of 100 meters from the Plateau. Bus facility for pick-up and drop was arranged at the minimal cost from parking place to Kaas plateau and vice-versa.

![Image 7: Parking area for tourists](image)

2. Workshops were conducted for all women in villages to make homemade food products to gain some additional employment by various non-profit organizations.

3. Mr. Milind Sawant\(^3\) distributed computers to the Zilla Parishad Primary School, Ekiv village.

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\(^3\) A businessman from Mumbai in Maharashtra state of India
4. In the joint operation of the Executive Committee of Kaas Plateau and Forest department of Satara, free notebooks were distributed to the students of Primary and Secondary Schools of Zilla Parishad. Important messages are written on notebooks as general reminders to keep awareness instilled among the students.

5. **Interaction with the local Individuals:**

The TERRE-team visited the villages and had an informal interaction with the local people to understand their views on the growing tourism on the site. Following are the two key interactions:

**Ankush Ahire, Atali Village**

Ankush Ahire is working as a driver for regular patrolling on the Plateau. His wife is an active member of JFMC. Both of them talked about their experience as JFMC members. He said the villages have benefited greatly because of the tourism. The tourists come here to witness the flowers and explore local food. Therefore, employment opportunities have increased and the villages are also getting visibility among the tourists. The JFMC meetings are conducted twice a month. Important discussions of the
meetings are then informed to the rest of the villagers for wider understanding and effective cooperation for its implementation.

**Image 10: Talk with Ankush Ahire**

**Sangita Gore, Ekiv Village, Sarpanch (Head of the village)**

JFMC and local people are working for the maintenance, cleaning and security of the plateau throughout the year. There are dustbins and toilets provided on plateau for the tourists. The waste that is generated on and off the season is collected weekly and sent to Satara city for proper disposal, treatment and recycling.

Our ancestors have followed the traditional ways to conserve the biodiversity of the plateau. We should follow the same. Sangita feels that the fencing has restricted the movement of grazing animals, which may have resulted in the reduction of flowers during blooming season. This however cannot be fully agreed, as the committee has ensured that grazing is not restricted completely on the plateau.

**Image 11: Talk with Sangita Gore**
6. Interaction with the Stakeholders

Ever since, Kaas was declared as the World Natural Heritage site, the local community has received proactive guidance from various individuals and organizations for sustainable tourism and management. These collaborations. Following are the instrumental stakeholders who have been actively engaged in the protection of Kaas plateau:

Prerna Agarwal, Independent Researcher (Recreation Ecology), Founder- Ecosphere Connect (a consultancy firm providing solutions for biodiversity conservation)

Prerna Agarwal has been doing her research work on the impacts of mass tourism on Kaas plateau since the year 2012. She has made a great contribution in regulating community-based tourism on Kaas plateau, such that the negative ecological impacts are reduced, while providing solutions towards alternative livelihoods to the local communities. By training the local villagers as eco-guides, helping set up homestays, and run sensitization programs, she has demonstrated that ecotourism can work through joint collaborative efforts. She has also developed a booklet for guides, which reflects the vast local knowledge regarding Kaas and its surrounding habitats.

According to her, the biggest challenge at hand is restricting the visitor numbers based on the ecological carrying capacity of the plateau, and regulating their movement strictly on the designated paths only. According to her study on visitor trampling impacts, some endemic species such as *Utricularia purpurascens* cannot tolerate even ten human passes, while most species are severely damaged by 500 human passes! If 500 people can cause such damage, the impact that hundred thousand visitors can cause every year is beyond imagination. She pointed out the catastrophic effect mass tourism will have on the soil seed bank and on the rare, endangered and threatened species if tourist numbers are not controlled. At the same time, certain invasive species have started growing on the plateau, posing a serious threat to the endemic species. Populations of endemic species like *Cynoglossum malabaricum* is fast dwindling. She further stressed the need to have long term scientific research to understand impacts of anthropogenic disturbances on populations of these unique habitats. One of the biggest challenge still existing is the Solid waste management in the new tourist spots mushrooming around Kaas plateau. Since, this is an area close to Koyna Wildlife Sanctuary, improper waste disposal can have serious effects on the wildlife of this region. Proper
regulation of tourist numbers, effective collaborations with authorised waste management stakeholders, smart outreach strategies and setting up of a research infrastructure to actively find solutions to the challenges ahead were some important recommendations shared by her. She added that though the functioning of the JFMC has improved significantly since 2012, a lot still needs to be done in terms of protecting the Outstanding Universal Value of this UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Her work was funded by the Rufford Foundation (Year 2012-13), Inlaks Ravi Sankaran Small Grants (Year 2014-15) and the Satara Forest Department (Year 2014-15).

**Somnath Jadhav, President, JFMC**

While sharing his experience of working at Kaas as the President of JFMC, he said, “We have focused on three areas while working here. First, to protect the plateau. Second, to provide basic facilities to tourists like mineral water, toilets and provision of field guides to inform tourists about conservation of plateau. And third is employment generation for the local communities to work as tourist guides, guards, etc.” The Deputy Conservator of Forests in the year 2017, Mr. Anil Anjikar has honoured the committee for its excellent performance.
Vitthal Kadam, Member, JFMC

Vitthal Kadam from Ekiv village is an active member of KFMC. He said, in order to provide every village an opportunity of Presidency/Chairmanship, they have decided to draw lots to select the President and Chairperson.

There are 130 - 140 people working in Kaas Plateau on daily wages. JFMC members have created six sections (water supply, waste management, security, guide, parking and administration office) with the help of local people. One head has been appointed for each section wherein, 5-6 local people are deployed under his/her supervision for designated departmental works.

Asha Badapure, Member, JFMC

Asha Badapure, Member of JFMC (Kasani village) shared her experience of working in JFMC. She said workshops were conducted in the villages for all women on homemade food products to gain employment by the Forest Department and NGOs.
Most of the villagers get employment during the flowering season. Families who own farms continue to work in their respective farms in off season. However, the man-animal conflicts have always been a challenge for them, especially with the pigs destroying their crops. The villagers are seeking solutions to this problem to sustain them during non-flowering season at Kaas.

Shekhar Mohite, Sir Lal Bahadur Shastri College, Botany Department, Satara

He has described 12 months flowering period [month wise] in his book “Flowers of Kaas Plateau”. He has noted the peak flowering period as 5th to 22nd September, the maximum flowering season being from August to September. There are no drastic changes on the plateau since its inscription as World Heritage Site. For the year 2019, the college (Sir Lal Bahadur Shastri College) is preparing the team of students (only males) as guides in English language during the blooming season. He also emphasized on the importance of allowing animal grazing to certain extent before the beginning of the season as it helps in the seed dispersal.

Shailendra Patil, Local Journalist

Mr. Patil said that the villages of JFMC have problems of the stakes percentage with each village. Due to growing number of hotels, there is a huge problem of waste management. Air pollution is increased due to the burning of plastic for the stove usage for picnics/parties. The bypass road of Kaas plateau from Ghatai road to Kaas village is still pending for last 2 years due to political interference. Also, there is no police station/chowki around Kaas for any help in times of emergencies. JFMC helps to pay initial fees of LPG gas. He suggested that the deposit scheme for plastic bottles can reduce the problems of plastic on the plateau as well as the Kaas Lake.

Dr. Bharat Singh Hada, Deputy Conservator of Forests, Satara

Under the guidance of Dr. Bharat Singh Hada, Deputy Conservator of Forests – Satara, JFMC is working with local people to identify challenges and seek solutions in various areas, such as additional employment opportunities for the villagers throughout the year and expanding the tourist sites.

He said as the designated parking space is provided for all tourist vehicles and the State Transport Department has provided mini buses for carrying tourists to the flowering site, 80 – 90% pollution has reduced. We have tested the battery car on Kaas Plateau, but it is difficult to operate due to undulated roads. From next year, Forest department plans to start bullock
carts from plateau to Kaas Lake to provide traditional experience to the tourists. This will also help in preventing air pollution.

Dr. Hada strongly feels that there is a tremendous need to do structured and organized scientific research on Kaas Plateau. Many students and young researchers have been coming to get permission for study/research, who mostly submit partial reports, which does not give us any advanced information. For last three to four years, the growth of some species of flowering plants on the plateau could be on a decline or even new species could be growing, therefore a scientific research on the key issues under the guidance of experts will be on priority. The findings of the research would contribute to restore the unique universal value and touristic values of the place.

He emphasized that Forest Department with the help of JFMC and local people aims to continue in putting its huge efforts to conserve the plateau, which is a home to some rare, endemic and threatened species of flowering plants.

7. Progress and Challenges in the year 2018

7.1 Progress achieved:
1. The online booking is compulsory on Saturday, Sunday and public holidays. Authorities have allowed the sale of tickets at the onsite counter, but limit the number of visitors to 3,000 per day.
2. There are dustbins at regular intervals and 6 toilets on the plateau.
3. There are 32 water holes for animals on plateau.
4. This year, for the first time, the walkie-talkie was used to manage the tourists efficiently and avoided the chaos in the parking area.
5. Vehicles were not allowed on the plateau, and controlled nature trails were conducted on designated pathways in the tourist zones.
6. The number of tourists did not exceed 3000 on weekdays, except when people coming from long distance were allowed counter tickets for the visit.

7.2 **Challenges yet to overcome:**
1. There are alternative routes to reach to Kaas Plateau, which does not have security and checking post. This at times, have affected the number of tourists visiting the plateau and hence, no accurate data can be drawn.
2. Lack of employment in the off season.
3. During off season, even though there are dustbins and proper sign boards, small plastic waste such as fast food wrappers and chocolate wrappers are being disposed by tourists on the plateau.

![Image 17: Plastic waste at Kaas Plateau](image17)

4. Recent popularity and sudden growth in tourism is at present the most serious threat, not only to the plateau but also to the surrounding areas. Kaas Lake is one of the major environmental issues in Satara District. Garbage of eatables and plastic bottles, plates, bags, etc has become common problems at Kaas Lake.

![Image 18: Plastic waste at Kaas Lake](image18)
8. Future Plans of JFMC

1. Construction of pathways using jambha stone on the plateau to avoid people from slipping, getting hurt and also to protect the nearby plants.
2. Distribution of raincoats in the schools of member villages
3. Design temporary structure for providing shade to tourists during heavy rain
4. Design local food stall and souvenir stalls to generate employment opportunities for the local community. The revenue collected can be used for development of Kaas.
5. Increase the total number of tourists on plateau from 3000 to 4000 and limit the visiting hours for individuals to three hours in a day.
6. Create more home stay arrangements that will increase the revenue during flowering season (or in non-flowering season too).
7. JFMC is considering to charge INR 5 - 10 per individual for visiting Kaas Lake, which currently is an open access. This would help them to procure additional revenue and hence, depute the local villagers to maintain the lake clean and garbage-free.
8. Temporary tents can be built for the tourists to enjoy nature stay.
9. From next year, a bullock cart will be provided for the convenience of tourists to reach the plateau.

9. Community Dialogue 2018

Community Dialogue have been taking place under the leadership of TERRE since 2012, after the plateau was inscribed as a World Natural Heritage site. This annual event is organized to review and address the status of the issues faced by the community of Kaas, providing sustainable living for the conservation of biodiversity and economic development of the region.

The recent Community Dialogue⁴ for 2018 in Kaas was organized at one of its prominent temple, Ghatai Devi Mandir.

Leaders and representatives from the Forest Department, Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC), Researchers, Academics, other NGOs and local media actively participated in the discussions and planning for the immediate as well as long term activities.

⁴ The Press Release of Community Dialogue 2019 is attached in Annexure
The communities from 6 neighbouring villages - Kaas, Ekiv, Atali, Kasani, Pateghar and Kusumbimura, all of which collectively constitute the Northern Cluster of the Western Ghats were the key participants of the dialogue.

Additional discussions also included the introduction and plans for contributions to SDGs and impacts of Climate Change on WNH and women’s role in nature conservation.
10. **Recommendations**

1. Carrying capacity of public zone should be calculated to restrict tourists inflow and avoid human stress on the site.
2. The regular fees of INR 100 can be increased by INR 50 on weekends or small kids from 5 to 12 years can be charged with a minimal amount. This may aid in maintaining the tourists population.
3. Enhance understanding of World Natural Heritage sites and Kaas plateau among school students through poster exhibitions, essay competitions, etc to create awareness and consciousness to conserve the rich heritage that they have.
4. Local people believe that grazing and burning is important for more flowers on plateau and hence, these activities should not be stopped. However, since no baseline data is yet available, it is not prudent to make conclusions on the impact of these activities on the plateau diversity. There is in fact, urgent need for awareness and scientific research on these activities. It is important that local communities are well informed on the misconceptions for instance, grazing is undoubtedly crucial for grassland ecosystems. However, over grazing can be equally deteriorating on a long run.
5. There is a need to increase the strength of staff for better management of plateau. Additional staff should be deployed at Kaas plateau, Kaas lake, tourists spots during monsoon (June to November) for protection and conservation of the biodiversity.
6. A facility of first-aid centre should also be considered.
7. The Satara Hill Half Marathon, which is held annually in Satara attracting runners from all around India and elite athletes and running enthusiasts from all around the world, could be used as an opportunity to create mass awareness on Kaas as World Natural Heritage site and declaring it as ‘no-garbage zone’ for waste management.
8. Create self-sufficiency mechanism on site, for instance, instead of sending waste to landfill sites setting up of small recycling units of plastic
waste in villages or selling recyclable solid waste like old newspapers and plastic waste to recycling units/companies at reasonable rate will help them to generate more revenue.

9. Encourage the use of cotton bags, biodegradable plates, cups, and packing material on local food stalls and souvenir stalls.

10. There are numerous trekking and tour groups’ offering camping packages for Kaas, Thodeghar, Sajjangad and surrounding places. It is the major threat to the rich biodiversity and natural habitats, as majority of them do not follow eco-tourism approach. Therefore, formulating eco-friendly policies in the context of trekking and camping could be very beneficial to empower the local people and also protect the biodiversity.

11. Conclusion

Though the Forest department, JFMC Local NGOs, researchers with the help of local people are taking efforts to conserve and protect the Kaas plateau, a long term mutual vision could serve in making this collaborative action more efficient.

Awareness among the local villagers is necessary to understand, enjoy and respect the beauty of Kaas plateau. Visitors also need to be sensitive about the vulnerability of such ecosystem while visiting the plateau, ensuring that no damage is caused by any of their activity.

A detailed scientific research needs to be carried out to understand the change in biodiversity over the years, i.e. species that may be no longer existing and species that could have invaded in the recent years. There should be a periodical observation for the invasion of exotic species on the plateau.

Waste management is another big challenge in Kaas. There should be a proper way of waste management that focuses not only on the disposal of the waste but solves the core issue of waste generation at the source. Kaas could be declared as ‘No single-use plastic zone’ to reduce and eventually stop the plastic pollution.
Scientists find rare freshwater diatom species at Kaas Pathar

By Himanshu Niharika, Pune Mirror  Apr 8, 2019  06:00 AM IST

Scientists at Agharkar Research Institute (ARI) in the city have recently discovered a new freshwater diatom (alga) species, Ninnastremnikova latensia, from a temporary water pool located in the laterite plateau of Kaas. This work was also published in Phytotaxa, a peer-reviewed international scientific journal for botany.

Kaas Plateau, also known as Kaas Pathar, is situated 25 km west of Satara and is famous for its rich diversity of flowers during the monsoon.

“The unique characteristic of Kaas is that it holds a different ecological system. Many micro-organisms and endemic, endangered plants and animals, live and flourish at this place in rainy months,” said Karthick Balasubramanian, a scientist at ARI.

Researchers found that the new species is specific to laterite areas, which is an important discovery in that it will help in the conservation of laterite plateaus and their biodiversity. “Such spots already face the threat of urbanization. We need to conserve unique biodiversity even before we fully discover it,” informed Sunjith Roy, a postdoctorate fellow (SERB N-PDF) at ARI, who was a part of the finding and study, wherein the “ecology of diatoms in rocky pools of the Western Ghats” are being researched. This project is funded by the Science and Engineering Research Board (SERB).

Roy found the rare monospecific genus Ninnastremnikova in 2014, and also traced its presence to North America, Sumatra, New Jersey, Brazil, Namibia and Laos. The first species was found in 1937 in Indonesia.

“Last year, a group of Russian and American scientists discovered the second species of the genus in Laos and Vietnam. Shortly after, we are also able to find a third from the Western Ghats. This corrects the missing link to understanding the biogeography of these unique microbes,” Roy said.

Kaas Plateau is visited by thousands of tourists between June and October every year for its beautiful landscape. “There are many pools, streams, rivers and other small water bodies that become home to biological life. These small ecosystems are completely different from other water systems,” added Balasubramanian.
Less blooms on Kaas plateau worries authorities, visitors

Press Trust of India | Sathara | January 20, 2018 Last Updated at 11:35 IST

Once a bed of colourful flora, the famous Kaas plateau in Maharashtra is now witnessing less blooms, worrying officials, tourists and nature lovers alike.

The plateau, recognised by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee as a heritage site in 2012, is home to around 350 flowering plants, including some rare and endemic species.

With the flowering already going down, a couple of fire incidents last month in the area, causing a damage to the flora at the site in Sathara district, has now set off alarm bells for the administration.

The state government has thus decided to take up a slew of measures, like better guarding of the place and inviting researchers to study why this picturesque site in the Western Ghats is losing its blooms, which were a big tourist attraction.

According to forest officials, human negligence, possibly lit cigarettes, could have caused the twin fires that gutted a portion of the world-famous plateau recently.

"The forest department, along with a joint management committee of forest officials and local village- turned- volunteers, has now decided to take certain safety measures to avoid incidents which could endanger the flora of the Kaas plateau," the range forest officer, Sachin Dombale, said.

He said those guarding the plateau have now been provided hand-held pressure water sprayers.

"The plateau does not have big trees or plants. It is actually a grassland, so even if the grass catches fire, it can be doused with the help of these sprayers," he said.

Earlier, six people used to guard the entire plateau of around 1,800 hectares. After the fire incidents, now 12 people are manning it in the day and six at night, he said.

Now, the visitors are frisked at the entry gate of the tourist site and are not allowed to carry inside combustible items like cigarettes, matchbox or lighters, he said.

Somanath Jadhav, the president of the joint committee, said they have also started putting up "firebreaks" along the roadside.

"For the firebreaks, we burn the vegetation and grass in five metres of area along the roadside, so even if someone throws a combustible object, there won't be a fire," he said.

However, due to unavailability of power supply in the forest area of the plateau, they have not been able to put up CCTVs for keeping a watch.

"But, we are now thinking of using solar panels to address the power issue, Jadhav said.

He said the gram sabhas of five villages (the locals of which are part of the committee), have also decided to put forth their proposals to safeguard the plateau and conserve its biodiversity and flora.

One of the committee members said the state government should provide funds for proper maintenance of the site.

"We have to depend on the fees collected from visitors during the season, which is only for two months (September and October), to pay for the maintenance and salaries of the people working to guard the place," he said.

"We seek government's attention, cooperation and funds so that this plateau of flowers can be conserved," he said.

Jadhav said for last three to four years, the growth of some species of flowering plants on the plateau is on a decline, thereby calling for a study to find out its reason and restore the beauty of the place.

"We are now planning to write to various universities in Maharashtra to send some researchers and students of botany to study the reason behind this," he said.

"We are making all-out efforts to conserve the plateau, which is home to some rare, endemic and threatened species of flowering plants, as it would then also lead to an increase in the number tourists at the site," he added.
'Kaas Plateau’ is inviting you! And the best time to visit here is now.

September's first week is the best time to see 'Maharashtra's Valley of flower' as the entire plateau covered by various beautiful flowers blanket. The forest department has announced that the 'Kaas Plateau tourism season' will be started from 1 September. The forest department had recently organized a meeting to plan and manage tourists.

It is one of the most beautiful places in Maharashtra that deserves your visit. Kaas plateau's flowers not blown yet due to the continuous raining from last one month, but now flowers are taking fresh bloom. So the first week of September is a good time to visit here. At other times of the year, the plateau is covered with soil and grassy patches. So don't miss the season, just pack your bag and leave.

The 'Kaas Plateau' (Kaas Pathar) is situated 25 kilometers away from the Satara and 280 kilometers from Mumbai. It is also known as 'Maharashtra's Valley of flower'. It is famous for various seasonal wildflower bloom in August and September of every year. It becomes a UNESCO Natural Heritage Site from 2012 and after that, it becomes very famous among tourists.

There are more than 800 varieties of flowering plants, shrubs and many species of butterflies. Flowers here rarely rise more than a foot. Over 10 square kilometers area is covered by colorful flowers, which make very unique and attractive to this place. It is the sight to experience the beauty of nature.

The state government has announced a plastic ban. Earlier on the plateau, the forest department had imposed restrictions on the plastic use of tourists. Forest officials will be more alert and take action against the tourists. Tourists will be checked near the entrance. Therefore, the forest department has urged the
Human negligence likely cause of Dec fires at Kaas plateau

Pune, Jan 18 Human negligence, possibly a cigarette butt, could be the cause of two fires that ravaged a portion of the world-famous Kaas plateau in Satara in December, forest officials said today.

The plateau, a UNESCO World Natural Heritage site since 2012, attracts visitors from across the globe who come there to see hundreds of varieties of flowers growing over a 1,800 hectare area.

"On December 21, a fire broke out at a portion of the Kaas plateau not frequented by tourists and an area of around four hectares was damaged. The fire was successfully doused by the forest officials along with local residents," a forest official from Satara division said.

He said that a case under the Indian Forest Act, 1927 had been registered against unidentified persons.

The second instance of fire was on December 30 and it destroyed an area of six hectares and a case had been registered in this incident as well, the official said.

"We suspect that the fire was caused by human negligence or someone might have set the area on fire on purpose. There is also a possibility that a discarded cigarette butt started the fire," he said.

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Slushy paths on Kas plateau now paved with red bricks for safety

Kas (District Satara): Mud bricks now line the most walked on paths on Satara’s Kas plateau.

The Kas Planning Executive Committee (KPEC) has laid the red bricks called "chinchwadi" in Marshal for the tourists to walk on safely. The paths are slick after the rain and visitors often slip and fall. The work will be completed in two phases by 2022.

The plateau is a biodiversity hotspot known for its seasonal wildflowers and species of endemic butterflies. On an average one lakh visitors come to see Kas's flowers every year in August and September.

Range inspector R M Parate of the Madhav forest range told TOI, "These pathways are being constructed as per the UNESCO norms. The committee has not used cement for the work. These bricks are installed on unpaved roads so that senior citizens and children will not fall at these spots."

"We identified the riskiest and most frequently used paths. Last year, over 100 tourists, mostly senior citizens and children, fell. When there is no proper laid down path, and to avoid slipping, many tourists enter the main fields and tragedy upon the flowers. Hence, the mud brick tracks were laid," Somnath Jalbhoy, president of the committee, told TOI.

"The flowers will become extinct if we do not take adequate care of the plateau. Visitors should not be allowed to walk into the fields. The committee’s guards and forest department officials need to manage crowd effectively," Bijendra Shende, former director of UNEP and chairman of Technology Education and Research Rehabilitation for Environment.

Online booking from Aug

The Kas Planning Executive Committee (KPEC) will start online booking from August 10. "This booking will be only for September. We are planning to open the biodiversity hotspot for tourists on August 16. Tickets will be given at the site," Somnath Jalbhoy said.

Visitors can now park about 2km from the site and go to the plateau by buses arranged for backpackers. "Many tourists would park along the roadside which led to traffic congestion in the area. We have now earmarked a parking area," Jalbhoy added.

*31 July 2019*
कास पठार पर्यावरण केंद्र वहाँ
डॉ. संदीप श्रीमूर्ति; वाडलेकोशल समिति व ते राज्यसभा सेंटर बृहस्पति वीणी कास परिसंहार लोकाचार सभा
कास पुष्प पठार पर्यटन पर्यावरण केंद्र बनवूँ: शैंडे

ग्रामस्थानी संगठन | युनेस्कोला अहवाल देनाया पथकारी भेट

लोकतंत्र

नवाब, जानकी वासारावरावाज या तिसरी संपत्रुति, सर्वाच्या मुळेने, कास पुष्प पठार च्या लिंग म्हणजेच या पर्यटन संस्थेच्या स्थानात येत नाही. त्याच्या वातानुसार, या तिसरी संपत्रुति म्हणजेच या पर्यटन संस्थेच्या स्थानात येत नाही.

लोकाच्या मुळेने, कास पुष्प पठार पर्यटन संस्थेच्या स्थानात येत नाही.

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Press Release

Community Dialogue for 2018 in Kaas Plateau

Bringing communities together for the of UNESCO World Natural Heritage site

“The People from six villages of Kaas Plateau working together to conserve its unique biodiversity and outstanding universal value of wild flowers is a great example of Sustainable living”, said Hon. Prakash Javadekar, Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) and Minister Information Broadcast (IB), while inaugurating the Annual Community Dialogue on Kaas Plateau, near Satara today. “This is precisely the message of PM Modi, Sabka Saath Sabka Vikas” added Javadekar. He was speaking to the Forest Guards and villagers representing the Joint Forest Management Committee (JFMC) from New Delhi via video.

TERRE Policy Centre in close association with JFMC of six villages - Kaas, Ekiv, Atali, Kasani, Pateghar and Kusumbimura organized the Annual Community Dialogue with the key objectives of reviewing the progress, threats related to climate change, overcrowding of tourists and opportunities for the sustainable development of the plateau. Since the inscription by UNESCO of Kaas Plateau - one of the 39 serial sites of Western Ghats as World Natural Heritage in 2012, the villagers there have followed good practices and demonstrated how conservation of environment and the inclusive development can go together. All the decisions including, allocation of income for activities like training and employment of forest guards, actions for bio-diversity protection, promotion of homestay and tourism-business, sustainable transport and enhancing the cleanliness and facility management for the plateau are taken by JFMC.

TERRE Policy Centre has been tracking the trends and mentoring the JFMC jointly with Forest Department.

“We are facing challenge of tremendous influx of tourists. However, we are benefitting from such community dialogues to address the challenges and to manage the site”, said Bajrang Kadam, President of JFMC, Kaas.

“More and more species of flowers are getting into the red list and in danger of extinction. There is an urgent need of research on these trends and impacts of climate change. Without such research, we will not be able to take action on
“conservation in the right direction”, said Rajendra Shende, Chairman TERRÊ Policy Centre and Former Director UNEP, who moderated the discussions. “It is heartening to see how the villagers work together with nature even though they have difference of opinion. In a way, they are mini-democratic community-parliament. There is a need to establish networks of 39 sites of Western Ghats starting with 4 sites in Maharashtra - Kaas, Koyna, Chandoli and Radhanagari to share the information and experiences”, Mr. Shende added.

Dr. Bharat Singh Hada, DCF Satara stated, “Annual Community Dialogue is a platform for exchanging ideas on conservation of forest-biodiversity and plan for the sustainable tourism”. He offered help of the forest department to encourage scientific research on wildflowers.

Dr. Deepak Harne, Regional Manager MTDC Pune in his letter to JFMC on the occasion wrote, “MTDC will proactively support local people for running home stays and participate in Mahabhraman schemes”. The scheme provides a unique experience to all the visitors coming from different walks of life.

Mr. Shrikant Katre, Resident Editor of Prabhat and the Chief Guest for the meeting suggested early identification threats to the wildflowers. Dr Sandeep Shrotri, an avid conservationist and nature-author said, “There is an urgent need to take action in establishing a world-class interpretation center and research facility”. END

**Note to the editors:**

TERRE Policy Centre publishes the Annual Report Cards (ARC) voluntarily right from the year 2013. The 2018 report recognizing the cumulative efforts of the Joint Forest Management Committee (JFMC), Forest Division of district Satara of State Government, local community, researchers, experts and journalists will be published soon in the month of November. The Annual Report Card is an important document that tracks the progress of the management of the site and provides recommendation to conserve the site in the coming year.

**TERRE Policy Centre** is a non-profit, non-partisan and independent organization dedicated to sustainable solutions to our developmental imperatives. TERRE also is the abbreviation for ‘Technology, Education, Research and Rehabilitation for the Environment.’ TERRE strives to reach all strata of society, particularly the young generation and people at the bottom of the pyramid with
capacity building tools on energy and food security. Its motto is: "To think is good but to act is better".

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