

Nurturing Ecologically Sensitive Areas on the Western Ghats

The great mountain chain of Western Ghats is the source of all the major rivers of India's southern peninsula; Godavari, Krishna, Tungbhadra, Kaveri, Tamraparni, and myriads of smaller one, Vaitarana, Kali, Netravati, Chazhiyar. On its ecological health depend the livelihoods of millions of people, not only in the six Western Ghats states of Gujarath, Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka, Tamilnadu and Kerala, but of Andhra Pradesh as well. Besides, it is one of the world's treasure troves of plant and animal life, with a great wealth of unique plant and animal species. The mountains also harbour a number of wild relatives of cultivated plants, including pepper, cardamom, mango, jackfruit and plantain. This biological wealth has paid rich dividends over the years, including, of course, the dubious dividend of attracting Romans and later other Europeans to trade in pepper, cardamom, sandal and ivory. The health of this precious eco-region has been on continual decline over the last couple of centuries with many ecosystem types almost totally eliminated. Recent decades have however seen serious measures being initiated to conserve some of this fast vanishing biological diversity with the constitution of wild life sanctuaries, national parks, tiger reserves, and biosphere reserves. More recently a significant new initiative has been added to these conservation efforts in the form of 'Ecologically Sensitive Areas' (ESAs), such as Dahanu taluka, Matheran and Mahabaleshwar- Panchagani.

As these examples indicate, the concept of 'Ecologically Sensitive Areas' is very different from that a protected area like a national park which is supposed to be entirely free from human interference, though in reality many management interventions such as creation of water holes and tourism related activities do continue even in the national parks. 'Ecologically Sensitive Areas' are areas under human use, sometimes quite intense human use such as generation of thermal power and cultivation of chikoo in Dahanu taluka. Hence, ESAs are to be viewed as areas where human activities will continue, but be prudently regulated under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986. ESAs are not at all meant to stop development in ways that would hurt local people, but to ensure that development is environment friendly and people oriented, as well as serves to preserve the ecological heritage on a long term basis. There are no set regulations, such as ban on all new industries, or on conversion of agricultural into commercial land, that would prevail in every ESA; instead, the regulations will be worked out with due respect to local context. Thus, the total ban on use of plastics at Ooty could be thought of as a specific regulation appropriate for a busy hill station like Ooty-although Ooty has not been declared an Ecologically Sensitive Area.

More importantly, Ecologically Sensitive Areas are not just about regulation, but about positive promotion of environment-friendly development as well. Thus areas that opt for the status of an Ecologically Sensitive Area could benefit from special programmes such as promotion of development of enterprises based on local plant resources like *Garcinia indica*- kokam, ratambi, muragalu, punampuzhi; whose fruit has been traditionally used in very many ways, and is now known to be an important source of hydroxycitric acid, or establishment of a green technology team of youth trained in setting up and maintaining solar panels, biogas plants, rain water harvesting devices, and so on. Gram panchayats in Ecologically Sensitive Areas could also receive special

facilities to add to their incomes through taking advantage of new legal provisions such as charging 'collection fees' for biodiversity resources to which they are entitled under the Biological Diversity Act. They may also be paid specially for maintenance of traditional crop cultivars from the National Gene Fund, or for sequestration of soil carbon on farmlands under organic agriculture as a part of Indian plans for combating climate change.

How would we judge ecological sensitivity? Scientists view an ecologically sensitive area as an area whose ecological balance, once disturbed, is very hard to restore. Thus, steep western slopes of Western Ghats, subject to heavy rains and winds, if deforested, are likely to be quickly stripped of soil cover and for ever lose their pristine vegetation. We do have a scientific understanding of the environmental attributes that render areas more sensitive; we also have insights into processes that have resulted in irreversible ecological damage. A Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel, constituted by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India is currently engaged in carefully compiling all available information in this context and preparing maps of levels of ecological sensitivity on the Western Ghats tract. This exercise is being conducted in a transparent manner, and all information relating to this task is being posted on the website: www.westernghatsindia.org.

However, we fully realize that ecological sensitivity is not merely a scientific, but very much a human concern. In particular, a great deal of locality specific understanding of what has been happening and what is desirable is simply not part of any scientific databases and resides with local communities. The Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India would therefore like to invite all concerned people to share their own perceptions as to what areas on the Western Ghats should be identified as being 'Ecologically Sensitive Areas', why they feel so, and what set of regulations tailored to the needs of the locality should be put in place if the area were to be formally declared as being ecologically sensitive. Alternatively, people might also like to state that some areas on the Western Ghats should not be identified as being 'Ecologically Sensitive Areas', and explain why they feel so.

We, of course, hope that opinion leaders, including members of local bodies like ZPs, MLAs and MPs and journalists and social workers would also respond to this appeal. We would welcome submissions, not only in English, but in Hindi, Gujarathi, Marathi, Konkani, Kannada, Tamil and Malayalam as well. If possible these may be sent to the website: www.westernghatsindia.org / sv.godavarthi@nic.in. We hope to upload the results of scientific analysis as well as all submissions from the public as they become available on this website and promote a vigorous public debate as a prelude to taking any final decisions in an open, transparent fashion.