

Saving biodiversity

Seema Bhatt *in collaboration with Kalpavriksh National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan*

Our forests are being reduced, our water sources contaminated and our flora and fauna under threat. What can we do?

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Everything in nature is interdependent...

How would you like it if you had to eat only one kind of vegetable every day? Or, if there was only one kind of flower or bird around you? What do you think the world would be like if it had only one kind of scenery? The answer would surely be "boring".

All of us like variety. That's what makes life exciting and interesting. Moreover, it is important for the very survival of our planet. Life in its myriad forms is what the term "biodiversity" is all about, where "bio" means life and "diversity", the variety of life forms. So what is so special about biodiversity? You see, it has enormous value for us. Our water sources depend on it. There are millions of people who directly depend on biodiversity for their needs of food, firewood, housing, medicine and fodder. Many plants have contributed to life-saving drugs. For all of us who live in India, biodiversity has a special cultural meaning. Many plants and animals are considered sacred and we worship plants like the tulsi and the peepul tree. But despite this, things are not well. We are losing this precious biodiversity at an alarming rate. Forests are being reduced to small pockets because of the construction of roads, dams and other big developmental projects. There is an increase in hunting of animals. The pollution of water, soil and air has also been contributing to the loss of biodiversity.

Concern over the alarming loss of biodiversity induced many countries of the world to get together and formulate what is called the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1992. This Convention urges all countries to:

- Conserve biodiversity
- Use it wisely and sustainably
- Distribute equally the benefits from the use among the people who depend on it.

India signed this Convention in 1994. As a result, India was required to make a plan on how to conserve its biodiversity. This was called the National Biodiversity Strategy Action Plan (NBSAP). The formulation of NBSAP started in late 1999.

The Ministry of Environment and Forests entrusted a Non- Governmental Organisation Kalpavriksh to coordinate the formulation of the NBSAP.

Kalpavriksh, in turn, set up a group of 15 people from different parts of the country to guide the process. This was called the Technical and Policy Core Group. Instead of sitting in New Delhi and making one national plan for the whole country to follow, the TPCG decided that plans would be made at several levels. This was done especially keeping in mind that biodiversity, and the related cultural aspects. So, there would be 33 State and Union Territory plans. There would be 18 plans for local sites, such as a village or a district. These include areas such as the Kutch Desert; the Rathongchu Valley in Sikkim; the Uttara Kannada district in Karnataka and so on. Ten other plans were meant for biodiversity regions that cut across states. These plans were conceived with the idea that biodiversity does not look at state boundaries, but spreads wherever geographically appropriate, for example, the Western Ghats that traverses across six states. Thirteen plans would look at very specific themes such as health, livelihoods, culture, and so on.

Many people participated in the formulation of these plans. Special efforts were made to include the people who depend on biodiversity for survival. Participants included fisher folk, farmers, adivasis, scientists, government officials, teachers, students, traditional healers, army officers and many others. How was all this done? There were the meetings, seminars and workshops. But more interesting were the biodiversity festivals, melas, boat rallies and exhibitions. People displayed traditional biodiversity, e.g. different types of grain varieties, different types of native fruits and vegetables.

There was a lot of celebration and more importantly, meetings to discuss why they were losing their biodiversity and how to conserve it. A consolidated National Plan has now been prepared which takes into account all the plans at different levels. For once, there has been an attempt to really involve the people in whose name the government takes decisions, often without consulting them. Biodiversity is important for all of us and hence is everyone's concern. Let us hope that this truly unique plan is put into action and can help provide a road map to save India's biodiversity.

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What can you do to save biodiversity?

Form a group to learn more about and discuss biodiversity issues; create awareness through exhibitions, slide shows, film shows and lectures.

Find a local group or official to help you:

Take an inventory of the trees and shrubs found in your locality. Find out how many are local.

Prepare a list of animals in your area.

Gather information about local species of medicinal plants such as *tulsi*, and grow a small medicinal garden at home or in your school/college.

Try and see if you can start eating more native crop varieties at home.