

**NATIONAL BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN**

**Role of the Armed Forces  
in the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan<sup>1</sup>**

The Armed Forces over the years has had a critical impact on the biodiversity of India. The Forces have been active participants in national efforts at reclaiming degraded lands and undertaking ecorestoration. They also manage and control large amounts of land and water that contain significant biodiversity (as elaborated below). Defence related operations by the Forces also sometimes have unforeseen negative consequences, e.g. the clearing of vegetation such as mangroves, disturbance of wildlife, and others.

Given this, it is important that the Armed Forces play a significant role in the formulation of India's Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan. The Forces, by virtue of accessibility to some very remote biodiversity-rich areas and by being highly disciplined, motivated, responsive and trained can contribute significantly to this effort. Their active participation along with other sectors of society would also help to sensitise them, along with the general public, on the need for biodiversity conservation. Article 51A(g) of the Indian Constitution stipulates. "It shall be the duty of every citizen of India to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife and to have compassion for living creatures". The task of promoting and conserving the biodiversity of India thus falls within the sphere of justified activities of the Armed Forces.

**The Role of the Indian Army and Air Force**

The Government of India has authorised landholdings to the Army and Airforce in several State and Union territories including island territories. These landholdings represent almost every biogeographic zone of the country. Only a limited amount of this land comes under construction. The remaining land is left with the original vegetation and provides some very important biological niches which are practically free of disturbance. The Armed Forces' real estate comprises of its cantonments, depots, training establishments, manoeuvre areas and military farms. The relevant units could make a conscious effort to conserve these areas. These areas could also be mapped in a systematic manner to document the biodiversity therein. NBSAP could facilitate the formulation of strategies and action plans to conserve these areas. The Airforce could also facilitate the carrying out of aerial surveys as an input into assessing the ecological status of a region.

Units of the Army have also been involved with regeneration of wastelands and afforestation, activities that could be further promoted through the NBSAP process. Also important is an assessment of the negative impact of the various operations of the armed forces, including those resulting from the siting of establishments, firing practice, and so on. Involvement in the NBSAP process would enable the armed forces to equip itself for such an assessment, and to plan out measures to minimise and avoid such negative impacts.

The armed forces in a number of other countries have taken such steps, and it would be useful to review what they have done. At the same time, progressive steps that the Indian armed forces take can guide other countries that want to undertake similar actions.

**The Role of the Indian Navy**

India has amongst the world's largest coastal and marine areas which are host to extremely rich biodiversity. Unfortunately, over the years there has been very little focus on these areas and as a result coastal and marine biodiversity has really suffered. It is hoped that through the NBSAP process, these areas get more focussed attention before it is too late. The Indian Navy could play a significant role in achieving

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<sup>1</sup> This note was prepared by Seema Bhatt, Member, TPCG, with inputs from other TPCG members.

this goal. The Indian Navy has access to many coastal and marine areas in India, which would otherwise be inaccessible.

The Navy could play a significant role in providing information on the ecological condition of marine habitats which would further help in formulating strategies and action plans for these areas. If the Navy plays a significant role in the formulation of these plans, it could also be an important player in the implementation of these plans. In the long run, the Navy could help in the surveillance of the ecological conditions of these areas (as part of routine operations) and provide regular alerts. Naval personnel would have to be pre-briefed by trained ecologists about what to look for. Naval establishments, themselves are repositories of rich biodiversity. Under the NBSAP, the Navy could consider the formulating and action plan and strategy for long term management of these areas.

### **The Role of Coast Guard**

This wing of the defense forces has a high level of interaction with processes that affect biodiversity in coastal waters, thanks to its sphere of operation and nature of duties. Coast guard operations are more varied, ranging from surveillance through pollution control to prevention of poaching, and are generally carried out closer to the continental shores where biodiversity and the threats to its sustainability are highest. Besides, Coast Guard also is concerned with surveillance of critical coastal marine ecosystems and the Exclusive Economic Zone. They therefore have a great role to play in monitoring and evaluation of the state of marine biodiversity, complementing that of the Navy.

It is therefore proposed that the Armed Forces be requested to participate, at least in the following ways:

1. Being part of the action plan processes of those parts of the Action Plan process where the Forces have a significant presence (e.g. border states and the island Union Territories; Western Himalaya, North-East, West Coast, and East Coast ecoregions, in some thematic areas like Natural Aquatic Ecosystems or Natural Terrestrial Ecosystems);
2. Carrying the message of the NBSAP in relevant periodicals or publications that reach out to different components of the Forces.
3. Organising workshops with relevant officers wherein the impact of the armed forces' activities on biodiversity can be analysed, and programmes and priorities be analysed in light of the impacts on biodiversity.
4. Making plans to conserve biodiversity in areas and bases available with the armed forces, or areas where the armed forces have significant presence and influence.