

# **COMMUNITIES DO CONSERVE! LEARNING FROM COMMUNITY CONSERVED AREAS IN INDIA AND ELSEWHERE**

*by Neema Pathak*

Local communities play a central role in a large number of conservation initiatives in India. Those span from the continuing traditional strict protection of sacred groves to the renewed interest and engagement of local communities in protecting their natural resource catchments and saving natural habitats from the penetration of destructive commercial and industrial forces. Some efforts are self-initiated by the communities. Others are supported or facilitated by government or non-government external agencies.

The mentioned initiatives appear to conserve a large amount of biodiversity, both 'wild' and 'domesticated'. A preliminary country-wide assessment of the extent, kind, and efficacy of such efforts is currently being conducted in India. The results of the study will be important to assess the community contribution to overall conservation in the country, to identify policy and legal measures to facilitate such initiatives, and to learn lessons relevant also for official conservation efforts

## ***Community Conserved Areas (CCAs)***

CCAs are here defined as areas with significant biodiversity, which are being conserved by or with the substantial involvement of communities. Some such examples in India include:

- protection of 1800 hectares of forest by Mendha (Lekha) village in Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra, by the Gond tribal community;
- regeneration and protection of 600-700 hectares of forest and revival of several hundred varieties of agricultural crops by Jardhargaon village in Uttaranchal state;
- protection of sea turtle eggs, hatchlings and nesting sites by a fisherfolk community NGO in Kolavipalam, Kerala;
- traditional conservation of Painted Stork and globally threatened Spot-billed Pelican nesting sites by residents of Kokkare Bellur village, Karnataka;
- community-based monitoring and enterprise by the Soliga tribals at the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Sanctuary, Karnataka;
- Villages such as Lapanga, Khudamundha, and Patrapali are among thousands of community forestry initiatives in Orissa. Forest under community protection and management is believed to be nearly 30 % of the total forest area in the state.
- 600 ha. of regenerated village forest in the Loktak Lake catchment by Ronmei tribe in Tokpa Kabui village, Churachandpur district, Manipur;

- continued protection of sacred forests (*Orans*) by local communities in the desert region of Rajasthan, including Barmer district.

### ***Understandings and issues***

Some of the major understandings and issues emerging from the analysis of Indian examples such as the ones listed above include the following:

- centralised, uniform models of development and conservation adapted by successive governments are undermining the diverse, site-specific traditions and initiatives by local communities;
- there is inadequate understanding and recognition of CCA initiatives, and of their beneficial impacts to biodiversity, livelihoods, and social security;
- lack of decision-making powers in the hands of the communities, lack of legal backing to CCAs, and insecurity of tenure and control over the natural resources on which communities depend are hampering community conservation;
- outside agencies have a role to play to support CCAs, but too often bring in inappropriate types of support (including financial), which end up undermining the sustainability of local practices;
- many donor-driven or official initiatives promoting community participation in conservation have failed due to lack of transparency and accountability, inadequate transfer of powers and capacity, and lack of actual devolution of power and involvement of communities in the planning stage;
- there often are serious inequities within communities, including between men and women and different classes and castes, which undermine community conservation initiatives and their sustainability, and/or deny the benefits of such initiatives to disadvantaged groups;
- CCAs face serious threats from the larger context within which they exist, including party politics, centralised control over natural resources, national and global markets, privatisation of common property resources, mass tourism, insensitivity of decision makers, inappropriate education, consumerist lifestyles, population dynamics and perceived security threats.

Environment and Action Group Kalpavriksh, and The Indian Institute of Forest Management, organised a National Workshop on Community Conserved Biodiverse Areas at Bhopal (in the central state of Madhya Pradesh, India) on 21-23<sup>rd</sup> November 2001. . The workshop concluded that local communities have been a strong force in the conservation of biodiversity. Enabling conditions and support, however, are now required to sustain their potential in the face of many types of change in the environment and society. The major recommendations of the workshop included the following:

- CCAs need to be better understood and documented, clearly demarcated, and highlighted at all levels, including by the mass media (but communities need the capacity to deal appropriately with masses of tourists and researchers descending upon them);
- ecological, social and economic impacts of CCAs need to be assessed at local, regional and national levels; simple monitoring and assessment techniques can be developed to include community perspectives and parameters;
- existing community institutions, practices and knowledge systems, and the great diversity therein, should be recognised and built upon and, where necessary, modified on the basis of lessons learned, rather than displaced by new institutions set up by external projects;
- conservation and development initiatives should be seen as long-term, dynamic processes rather than short-term, target-oriented projects;
- such initiatives must provide special opportunities for the under-privileged sectors of society (women, the landless, tribal peoples, children, the aged, the disabled) including separate discussion and decision-making forums wherever appropriate;
- national and state laws and policies need to recognise the diversity of CCAs and take into account the local and/or customary laws and regulations that sustain them;
- the capacity of communities and facilitating institutions needs to be built to handle the complex issues facing CCAs in changing local, national and global contexts;
- official protected areas should take on CCAs as a special focus of interest and concern.

Community-based conservation (CBC) initiatives including CCAs can strongly complement the official network of protected areas providing habitats for wildlife and other biodiversity conservation measures in India. Hopefully, the result of the above-mentioned study will help to make a strong and convincing case for it, and thus enhance the conservation of biodiversity and wildlife envisaged for India under the Convention on Biological Diversity.

### ***Learning from community conservation experiences***

Though the examples and analysis presented above are from India, there are umpteen documented and undocumented similar examples in other countries. The World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) and Commission on Economic, Ecological and Social Policy (CEESP) joint Theme on Indigenous and Local Communities, Equity, and Protected Areas (TILCEPA) is working to consolidate the available information on local and indigenous communities'

efforts at biodiversity conservation across the globe. This is to be done with the help of a network of individuals and organisations involved with CCAs. An effort will be made to draw lessons for more equitable policies for biodiversity conservation, including for official protected areas. The documented experiences and lessons learned would feed into a set of guidelines, currently being prepared by TILCEPA. Lessons drawn from such efforts will also feed into the World Parks Congress at Durban (September 2003). CCAs are likely to get considerable attention during the Congress as several sessions and sub-sessions are expected to focus on the kind of understandings and issues mentioned above and on the results of the studies currently on-going.

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