

KALPAVRIKSH ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION GROUP

Community-Led Conservation at
Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary
2007 – 2026

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August 2026

Conservation and Livelihoods Programme | Kalpavriksh, Pune

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This document is a narrative account of Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group's long-term engagement in the Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary (BWLS), Maharashtra and draws on programme reports, funder submissions, field updates, and project proposals spanning nearly two decades. It tells the story of a sanctuary, its communities, and the slow, patient work of building justice and stewardship from the ground up.

The overall goal was to help facilitate inclusive conservation governance and management in these 7 villages by supporting local people's rights over and responsibilities towards surrounding forests and biodiversity..

THE PROGRAMME AT A GLANCE

18+

Years of continuous engagement

2 core + 5 fringe villages

Villages engaged

2

Community Forest Rights titles secured

1,000+

persons participated in Wild Food and Honey festival(s)

90+

Honey bee nesting habitats revived

5+

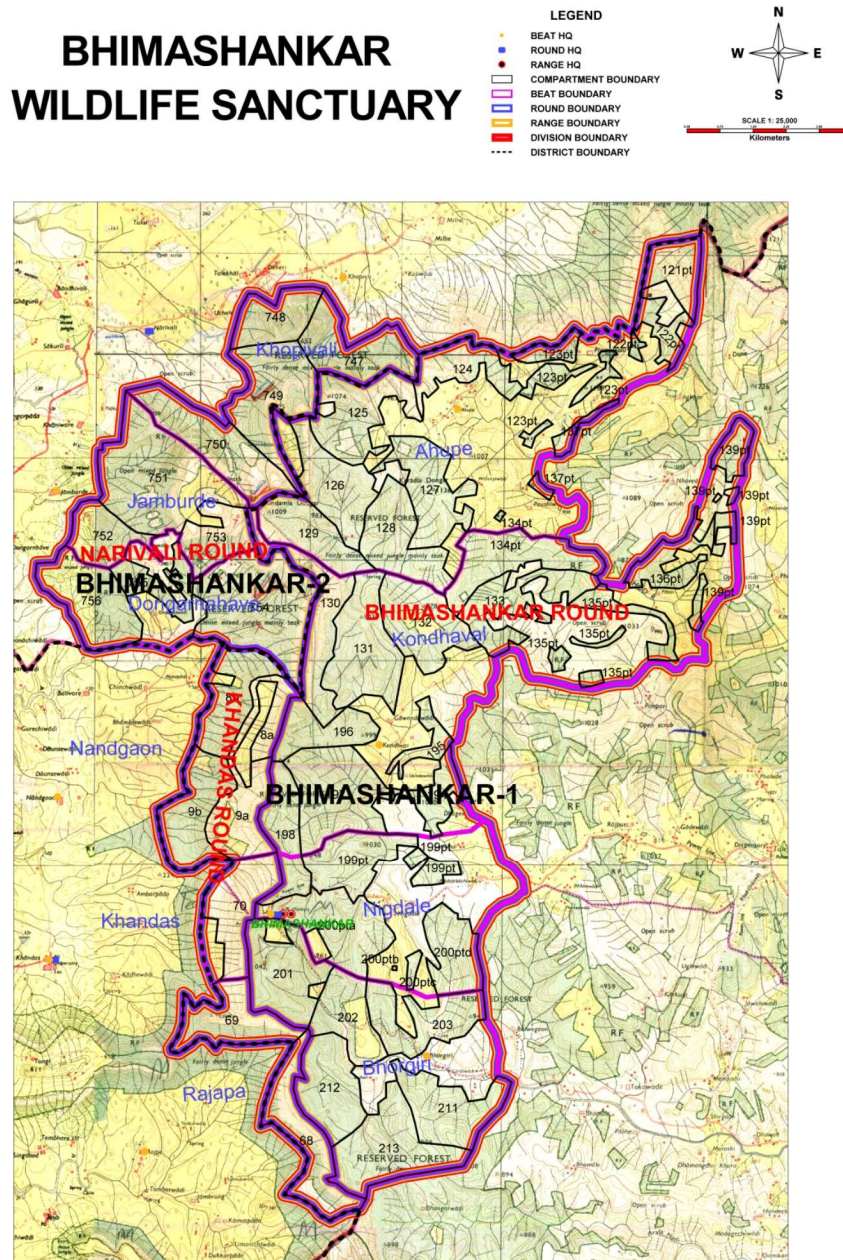
Youth & women's livelihood enterprises launched

**300
+**

Youth trained in governance, ecology & livelihoods

1. The Landscape We Entered: Bhimashankar in 2007

Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary occupies 130.78 sq. km in the Western Ghats, one of the world's 36 biodiversity hotspots. Notified in 1985, it shelters the endangered Indian Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa indica*), the world's only known nocturnal bee (*Xylocopa tranquebarica*), fourteen sacred groves and the headwaters of the Bheema and Ghod rivers. Yet in the decade before Kalpavriksh's arrival, this ecological treasure was under threat from multiple directions at once.



The sanctuary's primary Scheduled Tribe communities of Mahadeo Koli, Katkari and Dhangar had lived here for generations. Their customary access to forest resources, however, had been

systematically curtailed since the sanctuary's notification. What emerged was a landscape of fear: fear of eviction, fear of the Forest Department, and fear of losing the only home they had known. With no legal recognition of their relationship to the forest, communities had little incentive and no framework to invest in forest conservation. The sanctuary also faced a different kind of pressure from its most famous resident: the ancient Bhimashankar temple, which draws hundreds of thousands of pilgrims annually. Plastic pollution blanketed trails and water bodies. Illegal construction crept into the sanctuary's fringe. Wildlife was also being disturbed. The economic benefits of this pilgrimage economy flowed almost entirely to non-local actors like hoteliers, transport operators, middlemen while bypassing the resident communities entirely. Local governance was fragmented and weak. Gram Sabhas met infrequently. Further, they were poorly attended and captured by dominant individuals and political interests. There were almost no non-governmental organisations working in the area. The communities in Kalpavriksh's focus villages of Yelavali, Bhorgiri, Bhivegaon, Bhomale (Upper and Lower), Kharpud and Mhasewadi had received little or no external support.

Into this situation of ecological richness shadowed by institutional neglect, Kalpavriksh arrived in 2007. An exploratory study, funded by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), set the tone for future endeavours: listen first, understand the people, the pressures and the possibilities before presuming to act.

2. PUTTING DOWN ROOTS: HOW THE PROGRAMME BEGAN

The formal programme commenced in September 2008, with funding from the Association for India's Development (AID), Bay Area. Kalpavriksh began their work in two villages: Yelavali and Bhorgiri. The choice was made as both communities had received minimal external support and their forests were ecologically contiguous, making a landscape-level approach logical. The early years were governed by a philosophy that has since defined the entire programme: do not rush and do not impose. The team focused on building trust, understanding local dynamics, and co-identifying priorities with communities rather than arriving with a fixed agenda.

FACILITATING THE FOREST RIGHTS ACT

The Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006, a landmark legislation that attempted to recognise the rights of tribal and forest-dependent communities, offered a legal framework around which Kalpavriksh chose to anchor much of its work here. But the FRA's existence on paper and its realisation on the ground are two very different things, as the team quickly discovered. In Bhorgiri, community members were initially hesitant to file claims. They feared that documenting their forest use would be weaponised by the Forest Department to accuse the villagers of causing forest damage, ultimately leading to eviction. Through patient dialogue, meeting after meeting, Kalpavriksh helped shift this fear to cautious confidence. In Yelavali, the community responded more readily. A Forest Rights Committee was formed, claim forms were filled and a Gram Sabha was organised. This marked the beginning of a process to strengthen local governance institutions for the implementation of the FRA in BWLS.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND LEGAL AWARENESS

The team also recognised early that a programme focused solely on formal rights processes would miss critical ground realities. Youth in both villages were disconnected from traditional knowledge and drifting toward precarious urban wage labour. Local governance institutions were barely functioning. Kalpavriksh therefore braided FRA facilitation with broader civic education: awareness sessions on the Wildlife Protection Act, the Biodiversity Act, and the NREGA (later, VB-G RAM G) (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act); support for youth groups to register as formal societies; and facilitation of dialogue between communities and government officials.

THE PHASES

Phase	Period	Funder	Key Focus
Exploratory	2007	RSPB	Field scoping, community consultations
Phase 1	2008–09	AID, Bay Area	FRA, youth groups, legal awareness
Phase 2	2010	Ruffords SGP	CFR claims, forest management planning, NREGA
Phase 3	2013–15	Duleep Matthai / Janssens	Apis cerana research, expanded to 7 villages
Phase 4	2016–17	KNA Foundation	Honey conservation plan, Women's SHG enterprise
Phase 5	2019–21	Duleep Matthai	COVID period, Honey Harvesters' Forum constituted
Phase 6	2022–23	Paul Hamlyn Foundation (bridge)	NREGA facilitation, Wild Food Festival
Phase 7	2023–24	Kalpavriksh , Terres des hommes	Youth, eco-tourism, governance, livelihood enterprises
Phase 8	2025–26	Terres des hommes; Misereor; Paul Hamlyn Foundation	FRA advocacy, CFRMC strengthening, youth governance, livelihood enterprises, biodiversity documentation, cultural revival, visioning for the team.

3. A LIVING PROGRAMME: HOW KALPAVRIKSH EVOLVED

Few programmes of this duration remain static, and Kalpavriksh's Bhimashankar work is no exception. What began as a focused FRA facilitation and community eco-tourism initiative in two villages has, over seventeen years, grown into a multi-dimensional programme spanning governance, ecology, livelihoods, culture and child rights. The evolution has been driven by what communities actually needed at each stage.

FROM TWO VILLAGES TO SEVEN

Phase 3 (2013–15) marked a significant geographical expansion. As trust deepened and the FRA process in Yelavali and Bhorgiri advanced, the team extended its presence to five additional villages: Bhivegaon, Bhomale, Kharpud, and Mhasewadi. Two more villages - Wandre and Padharwadi, were incorporated in Phase 7. The choice of villages was based on ecological contiguity, absence of NGO support and the potential for a landscape-level conservation approach.

FROM RIGHTS TO LIVELIHOODS

The FRA framework opened a door, but communities needed more than rights on paper. They needed reasons to stay and ways to survive. Phase 3 introduced a dimension that would become central to the programme's identity: Apis cerana honey bee conservation. Through participatory research, the team documented declining bee populations, identified unsustainable harvesting practices, and worked with communities to revive nesting habitats. Over 90 old nesting sites have since been rehabilitated. From this ecological work grew the 'Bhimashankar Honey' brand and a women's Self Help Group enterprise that has marketed honey in Pune city, earned over ₹91,000 in a single year, and secured a ₹2,00,000 grant from the State Tribal Development Department.



FROM LIVELIHOODS TO ENTERPRISE

Phases 7 and 8 have seen the livelihood dimension deepen further. Multiple youth and women's groups now run active enterprises: the Arala Valley Forest Camping Site (run by Katkari youth, earning ₹85,000 with additional Forest Department support of ₹10 lakh); the Warsubai Women's SHG in Bhorgiri (providing food to over 600 tourists, earning ₹1,03,000 in its first full season); a food processing enterprise making nachni sweets and karvanda pickle; and poultry farming groups. These community-owned enterprises were born out of training, exposure visits and the team's patient handholding.



FROM INDIVIDUALS TO COLLECTIVES

Perhaps the most significant institutional evolution has been the formation of collective bodies: the Honey Harvesters' Forum (constituted in 2021, with 56 harvesters from all seven villages endorsing 13 sustainable practices); Forest Rights Committees and Community Forest Resource Management Committees (CFRMCs) in all villages; women's Self Help Groups; and, most recently, a network of FRCs and CFRMCs from eight villages across two blocks, collectively raising their voice for FRA implementation. What began as individual household-level conversations has matured into a web of community institutions capable of negotiating with the state.

FROM CONSERVATION TO ALTERNATIVE VISIONS

In the current phase, the programme is beginning to explore a deeper question: what does development mean for these communities? Visioning workshops using the 'Flower of Transformation' framework developed by Kalpavriksh's Alternatives team are inviting the Bhimashankar team and communities to articulate what they want to protect and what kind of future they want to build.

4. IMPACTS: WHAT EIGHTEEN YEARS HAVE PRODUCED

Key Outcomes at a Glance

Area	Metric	Detail
Forest Rights	7 villages	<i>FRA claims filed, CFR Management Plans submitted; CFR recognition nearing for 3 villages by 2026</i>
Honey Bee Habitats	100+ sites	<i>Nesting habitats cleaned and revived across 7 villages since 2014; 30+ occupied after 2016 revival cycle alone</i>
Honey Harvesters' Forum	56 members	<i>Formal Forum constituted August 2021; 13 sustainable harvesting practices collectively endorsed</i>
Youth Engaged	126 active	<i>62 women, 64 men in governance-related activities ; 7 youth groups formed</i>
Wild Food Festivals	300+ women	<i>37+ varieties of wild food documented and celebrated; festivals now self-organised by women's collectives</i>
Eco-tourism Turnover	Rs. 6+ lakh	<i>Arala Valley Campsite (Katkari youth) generated ~Rs. 6,00,000 turnover within first year; Bhorgiri SHG Rs. 1,03,000</i>
Government Funds Secured	Rs. 50+ lakh	<i>Kharpud-Mhasewadi and Wandre-Padharwadi CFRMCs each secured Rs. 25 lakh under Jan Van Scheme</i>
Children Reached	351+	<i>UNCRC Week activities across 7 villages; seed banks in 5 villages; children's library started</i>

I. LEGAL RIGHTS AND TENURE SECURITY

The three villages of Kharpud-Mhasewadi, Bhomale, and Wandre-Padharwadi have received Community Forest Resource titles under the FRA. Community Forest Resource Management Committees have been constituted and are active in all three. CFR management plans for Kharpud-Mhasewadi and Wandre-Padharwadi have been submitted to the Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP). CFR claims in four more villages (Yelavali, Bhorgiri, Bhivegaon, and Bhomale Lower) rejected on not-so-rational grounds by the District Level Committee are now the subject of sustained advocacy, with the support of the local MLA who raised the issue in the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly in 2025.

II. ECOLOGICAL CONSERVATION

The participatory research on *Apis cerana*, begun in Phase 3, has produced one of the programme's most tangible ecological outcomes: over 90 old bee nesting habitats have been revived across Yelavali and Bhorgiri forest patches, with colony occupancy rates of 40–60% following revival. Harvesters now follow 13 agreed sustainable practices, including leaving brood combs, not using fire during harvest, and actively reviving old nesting sites. Ecological monitoring plots have been established in Yelavali forest to track population dynamics over time.

III. LIVELIHOOD SECURITY

Eight livelihood enterprises are now operational across the programme villages, generating income for previously economically marginalised groups - Katkari women, tribal youth, women's SHGs. Government funds totalling over ₹60 lakh (including ₹25 lakh under the Dr Shyamaprasad Mukherjee Scheme for Kharpud-Mhasewadi and another ₹25 lakh approved for Wandre-Padharwadi) have been mobilised for community development and conservation. The ITDP's Block Convergence Committee, convened for the first time due to Kalpavriksh's advocacy, has committed to channelling resources to villages with approved CFR management plans.

IV. GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

Gram Sabhas are becoming more active and meaningful in programme villages. Youth from all seven villages have begun attending, questioning and demanding in Gram Sabhas. RTI applications have been filed to seek accountability from the Forest Department. Women's Gram Sabhas have been organised in Bhomale (Upper). Two community members from Bhomale and Kharpud have been appointed to the Rajgurunagar Block Level Convergence Committee under FRA. In Wandre-Padharwadi, the CFRMC halted Forest Department works undertaken without Gram Sabha consent in a remarkable assertion of rights by communities that once feared the uniform.

V. CULTURAL REVIVAL AND IDENTITY

Wild Food Festivals that begun as modest village events in 2009 have now become landmark cultural occasions. The festival at Bhorgiri in 2022 drew 190 women presenting 37 varieties of wild food to 230 tourists. The festival at Kharpud in 2024 attracted over 300 people. Traditional festivals of Holi, Waghbaras and Nag Panchami are being celebrated in their authentic forms, documented by youth on mobile phones and shared on social media. Children across all seven villages are learning about seed banks, biodiversity, sacred groves and the names of wild plants their grandparents knew. The Bhalar instrument of the Mahadeo Koli community has been performed publicly for the first time in years.

VI. YOUTH AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

Over 300 youth have been trained in governance, ecology, livelihoods, and biodiversity documentation across the programme period. Five male youth groups (64 members) and two female/mixed groups (30 members) have been formed in Phase 7 alone. Young women from Bhomale forced the completion of a stalled water pipeline through collective action. Young men from Kharpud have used the Gramswaraj app to track government fund utilisation. The governance facilitator appointed under the programme (Ms Seema Kakade) has trained youth across three villages on FRA, MGNREGA, and RTI. Girls constituted 60% of participants in inter-village sports tournaments, a visible signal of shifting norms.

VII. INSTITUTIONAL AND POLICY INFLUENCE

Kalpavriksh has gained recognition as a resource organisation on forest rights issues in Pune district. Its coordinator Pradeep Chavan has been appointed as the NGO representative on the Rajgurunagar Block Convergence Committee. The organisation has provided capacity-building support to NGOs and communities across Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir and Ladakh on FRA and community rights. Published policy briefs and peer-reviewed articles have contributed to national-level discourse on biodiversity governance, forest rights and the intersection of the Wildlife Protection Act and FRA.

5. CHALLENGES, HURDLES, AND WHAT WE LEARNED

An honest account of seventeen years of work cannot be told without reckoning with its difficulties. The Bhimashankar programme has faced structural, institutional, and community-level challenges and has adapted, learned, and persisted.

THE BUREAUCRATIC WALL

Implementation of the Forest Rights Act in Pune district has been obstinately slow. Government functionaries like District Collectors, Sub-Divisional Officers, Project Officers of ITDP have cycled through transfers at a pace that makes continuity almost impossible. During one two-year period, the Collector changed once, the PO changed thrice and the SDO changed four times. Each transfer required the team to rebuild relationships from scratch. CFR claims filed years ago have been rejected on spurious procedural grounds, with the Forest Department, legally a mere stakeholder in the process, wielding disproportionate influence over outcomes. The programme's response has been: identify pro-people officials when they appear; engage elected representatives (the local MLA raised the issue in the state Assembly in 2025); build public opinion through media; and develop solidarity across a growing collective of villages and districts.

COMMUNITY FRAGMENTATION AND FEAR

In Bhorgiri, political fragmentation was so deep in the early years that coordinated community action was nearly impossible. In several villages, fear of the Forest Department accumulated over decades of arbitrary enforcement made communities reluctant even to document their own land use. The programme's response was patience: years of relationship-building before programmatic action; the use of exposure visits to model villages (Hiware Bazar, Mendha Lekha) to demonstrate what was possible; and the slow cultivation of community institutions as trusted spaces for collective decision-making.

COVID-19 AND ECOLOGICAL PRESSURES

Phase 5 (2019–21) was profoundly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which coincided with honey harvesting seasons for two consecutive years. Despite lockdowns, local team members Subhash Dolas, Manda Kathe and Parvata Vanghare maintained individual-level contact with harvesters and continued habitat revival where possible. The pandemic also revealed a deeper ecological challenge: harvesters reported a 50–60% decline in occupied bee habitats, attributed to reduced flowering of major bee foraging plants. This finding has reoriented the programme's ecological strategy toward forest regeneration alongside habitat revival.

YOUTH MIGRATION

The proximity of programme villages to the Chakan MIDC industrial belt has created a persistent challenge: youth migrate to cities for wage work, reducing their availability for community processes. The programme has responded by timing events around festival seasons when migrants return, using mobile communication to maintain engagement with absent youth, and focusing on building livelihood options within the villages that make staying economically viable. Eco-tourism enterprises, honey marketing, poultry farming are now retention strategies.

POLICY HEADWINDS

The replacement of MGNREGA with the Vikasit Bharat Guarantee of Rojgar and Aajivika Mission (V-B-G-RAM-G) in 2025 has set back rural livelihood security in the programme area. The programme's advocacy work now includes navigating this new policy terrain and identifying spaces for community entitlements within the revised framework. Simultaneously, increasing state-led resource-extractive projects in ecologically sensitive areas pose a risk to the entire Bhimashankar region; a risk the programme is addressing through awareness-building and inter-village solidarity.

6. THE CURRENT SITUATION

As of early 2026, the BWLS programme is in its eighth formal phase, supported by a combination of three funders- TDH (Terres des hommes), Misereor, and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, under a grant titled “Democratization of Conservation Governance and Socio-ecological Transformation.” The field team of six, led by Programme Coordinator Pradeep Chavan, operates from a field office in Shirgaon and maintains active engagement in seven project villages and two additional hamlets (Padharawadi and Wandre).

In the domain of legal rights, three villages hold CFR titles and active CFRMCs. CFR management plans for two villages have been submitted to ITDP. Sacred grove development plans have been approved and funded. For the four villages whose claims remain pending Yelavali, Bhorgiri, Bhivegaon, and Bhomale Lower, the most recent development is encouraging: the District Collector forwarded claims to the Forest Department for verification, and the Forest Department has submitted recommendations for Bhorgiri and Yelavali to the range office. The momentum has shifted.

In the domain of livelihoods, active enterprises are generating real income for communities that historically had none. The Arala Valley Forest Camping Site, the Warsubai Women’s SHG, the Mhasewadi honey enterprise, and several smaller food processing and poultry ventures are all operational. A business development training, an entrepreneurship workshop, and an exposure visit to Vigyan Ashram and agro-tourism models were all conducted in 2025, building the technical and entrepreneurial capacity of the groups running these enterprises.

In the domain of governance, youth are more visible in Gram Sabhas than at any previous point. An eight-village solidarity collective has emerged, crossing block boundaries and creating new forms of collective pressure on the administration. The WhatsApp group of FRC and CFRMC members is a network that enables rapid coordination across the programme area.

In ecology and culture, wild food knowledge is being documented and celebrated, biodiversity registers are being initiated in two villages, and children are growing up with a reconnection to the forest that earlier generations were losing. The annual Wild Food Festival has become a fixture of the regional calendar, part market - part cultural assertion, part conservation statement.

7. LOOKING FORWARD: OUR STRATEGY FOR THE COMING YEARS

The programme's future strategy flows from an honest assessment of what has been achieved, what remains to be done, and what the rapidly shifting policy environment demands. It is built on five pillars.

PILLAR 1: COMPLETING THE FOREST RIGHTS AGENDA

The priority for the next phase is to secure CFR titles for the four villages with pending claims. Once titles are granted, the focus will shift rapidly to CFR management planning and the integration of plans with government schemes. Existing CFRMCs will be strengthened in financial management and they will be directly managing government funds (₹25 lakh each under the Shyamaprasad Mukherjee Scheme) and in coordination with eco-village development committees and biodiversity management committees.

PILLAR 2: BUILDING SUSTAINABLE ENTERPRISES

Livelihoods work will deepen. Existing enterprises will be supported to scale, professionalise, and access market linkages beyond the immediate area. Refresher training, digital marketing, and government scheme access will be the tools. New enterprises - particularly in eco-tourism, poultry farming, and value-added NTFP processing will be incubated with an emphasis on group ownership and ecological sustainability. The programme's aim is that at least a considerable amount of the active enterprise groups should be financially self-sustaining without direct financial support.

PILLAR 3: DEEPENING YOUTH AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP

The programme will invest in a new generation of local leaders as independent advocates capable of engaging with government, media, and the market on their own terms. This means: strengthening the youth groups already formed; ensuring that women's participation in governance processes reaches the levels achieved in livelihood processes; building documentation skills so that community voices reach wider audiences; and supporting youth to file RTI applications, demand convergence committee meetings, and engage with elected representatives directly.

PILLAR 4: ECOLOGY AS GOVERNANCE

People's Biodiversity Registers will be completed in at least two villages, with Biodiversity Management Committees constituted and linked to the Maharashtra State Biodiversity Board. Sacred grove development plans will be implemented. Long-term ecological monitoring of Apis cerana populations will be formalised. The aim is to make ecological knowledge, once the sole

province of Forest Department surveys, a community-owned resource that informs governance, shapes management plans, and strengthens land rights claims.

PILLAR 5: IMAGINING ALTERNATIVES

The Flower of Transformation framework, introduced in 2025 through visioning workshops with the Bhimashankar team, represents future visioning workshops will deepen this process, exploring questions of economic sovereignty, cultural identity, ecological interdependence, and democratic governance. The aim is to help communities articulate their own vision of a good life and to work alongside them as they pursue it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This programme has been sustained over seventeen years by the commitment of communities in the villages and by the trust they have extended to Kalpavriksh, sometimes against considerable odds.

The field team, anchored over many years by Pradeep Chavan (Programme Coordinator) from last two years Seema Kakade (Governance Catalyst and co-coordinator) and colleagues including Subhash Dolas, Parvata Vanghare, Suvarna Bhomale, Ganesh Madge, and Usha Bhokte has carried this work through multiple funding gaps, a pandemic, and the daily challenges of community engagement in a complex political environment.

Kalpavriksh is grateful to all funders who have supported the programme across its phases: the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB); the Association for India's Development (AID), Bay Area; the Ruffords Small Grants Programme; the Duleep Matthai Nature Conservation Trust; the Robert Janssens Foundation; the KNA Foundation; Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF); terre des hommes (TDH); and Misereor. Bridge funding from PHF has been particularly critical in sustaining field staff and community momentum across inter-project gaps.

We also acknowledge the contribution of research partners including IISER Pune, IISER Thiruvananthapuram, and individual researchers and activists who have brought ecological and legal expertise to the programme over the years.