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Governor’s message

26 October 2013

MESSAGE

A direct correlation exists between biodiversity and sustainable future. Biodiversity is the essence of life. Every living being around us has a unique place, purpose and reason for existence in nature. Upsetting the balance can have disastrous implications for mankind and nature. Preserving biodiversity is necessary also for the sake of our own curiosity and aesthetic appreciation.

Maharashtra is one of the richest States in the country in terms of plant, animal and marine diversity. However growing population, rapid urbanization and industrial development is causing adverse impact on the biodiversity. We need a massive campaign of the people to send a message of biodiversity protection. It is gratifying to note that the MTDC is promoting eco-tourism in the State and bringing out a special issue of ‘Maharashtra Unlimited’ on the theme biodiversity.

I congratulate MTDC for its efforts in promoting eco-tourism and convey my best wishes for the success of the special issue.

(K. Sankaranarayanan)
Imagine yourself in the middle of endless rows of blooming flowers.

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Destination: Kaas Plateau, Satara, Maharashtra
Dear,
Dr. Jagdish Patil,
Managing Director, MTDC

At outset, I would like to congratulate you on capturing every small element of Maharashtra in such an amusing way. I must say the information provided by you is highly imperative and detailed to my surprise. I was not only mesmerized but also felt proud.

Writing is an art and you have done fair justice to this art. While reading the magazine, I was virtually witnessing everything and captivated by the amount of treasure this state has to offer.

The skill lies in editing the content and decorating it into reader's interest. I must complement on your understanding about the audience, you just know the reader’s secret. I never ever felt bored or lost interest because of the smart editing and keeping the information at an appropriate length.

You have successfully covered 360-degree aspects of Maharashtra and presented in a lucrative way for anyone to fall in love with. I must congratulate you on showing everyone what has not been witnessed earlier by most of us. Beautifully captured photographs are indeed a visual treat to the viewer’s eyes. Every piece of information is simplified brilliantly and decorated beautifully.

Indeed, I must say you have done exceptional work by exploring every little detail of the topic and your contribution is hard to ignore in this segment.

I wish you very best for the future and urge to keep up the good work.

D. S. Kulkarni
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In the buzz that is created around any new social, cultural or environmental development, the term ecotourism has come to acquire many hues, most of them meaningless. Ecotourism, for instance, does not mean taking off on a wild trail to experience a forest and its inhabitants while lodging in the comfort of a five-star resort. The bigger picture of ecotourism involves the evolution of a sustainable equation that benefits local communities, helps conserve forest land and provides the tourist a true ‘back-to-nature’ feeling. Anirudh Chaoji gives us a clearer perspective on what ecotourism is all about.
A few years ago, I travelled to Periyar to explore one of Kerala’s best and probably India’s finest national parks. I was on my way to study the famous Periyar Tiger Trails, a unique community-oriented and forest-centered ecotourism project. The speciality of this experiment was that the very same people who had earlier made a living by illegal means inside the forest were now its protectors. As forest guides and naturalists accompanying tourists on walking trails into the Periyar National Park, these local youth had now found a source of making a legitimate livelihood. While on the trail inside the forest, which these youth knew like the back of their hands, they served as forest guards, keeping an eye on poaching, illegal tree-felling, and other such activities. In the process, the forest department was successful in making these ‘converted’ ecotourism guides stakeholders in the conservation of Periyar National Park.

**Defining Ecotourism**

This ecotourism model had long fascinated me for it had passed the test of time and provided an innovative solution to the humongous problem faced by all our protected areas. Though the term ecotourism is not totally new to India, the true spirit of the word has widely been misrepresented. Most of the times, organisations and operators have marketed their wildlife, adventure or cultural packages as ecotourism products. These operators probably have at best satisfied just one of the requirements of ecotourism - of helping generate respect for our wilderness, mountains, forests or cultural heritage. However, the term ecotourism is not just this. Instead, as with Periyar Tiger Trails, it has a much more important purview – one which takes care to not disturb the integrity of the natural ecosystem and the ethnic culture, while creating economic opportunities that make conservation and protection advantageous to the local people. And it is as simple as that.

**A Personal Experience**

Excited by the learning from Periyar Tiger Trails, I drove into a resort called ‘Spice Village’ on the outskirts of this forest. The need for understanding and extrapolating this ecotourism model was being debated inside my
head when I entered my room, only to be surprised to find the ‘idiot box’ missing. Soon I realised that the air-conditioner too was missing and so was the customary fridge. I had paid a hefty sum to book a room and here I was staring at wooden beds, terracotta flooring and a very basic setting. But then, there was something very different about this room. Very soon it dawned upon me that the simplicity of the room gave it a very warm feel.

Soon, I was pleasantly exploring other biotic and abiotic components that made up this resort - the thatched roofs, simple furniture, very traditional Kerala decor, simple waste management scheme, and the lush green surroundings. Complementing this impressive setting were the smiling faces of the staff dressed in their traditional white attire - all of whom were from the neighbouring villages. Each smile on those faces was worth a million dollars. It was truly a ‘welcome home’ feel. The more I explored the resort and spoke to the personnel, the more I understood another concept of ecotourism practiced here.

Very commonly, resort owners equate providing satisfying experience with lavish paraphernalia: The race is on for branded ACs, higher resolution flat screen TVs, marble flooring, fully stuffed fridges and even jacuzzis in the bathrooms. On the contrary, what Spice Village had displayed was exactly the opposite – they chose to provide the client with an experience instead. In their own words: “We have only continued an ancient wisdom, a way of living that sustained itself from nature, yet respected it and left it uncorrupted.” And the best part is that this wisdom had created a tremendously successful business model. Little wonder that many of the neighbouring ‘well-equipped’ resorts are envious of the occupancy levels of Spice Village. Interestingly, more and more operators now understand the successful formula of this model. It probably also is an outcome of the increased demand from the ‘aware and eco-conscious’ traveller.

Ecotourism in Maharashtra

Interestingly, environmental fads like waste management, power saving, water recycling and conservation also make better economic sense. And, investing in the training of locals has also reduced the antagonism that many
neighbouring communities had towards these tourism projects. Equipped with this knowledge of ecotourism, I started to search for examples from near home. This is when I realised that Maharashtra was actually the home of this concept that has now become a mantra worldwide. Tourism in the Konkan belt – from Nagaon Bundar and Akshi, all the way to Ratnagiri and further south - had always been ecotourism in its purest form.

I remember staying at the homes of the locals and eating the same food as them, and not something that was exotic to the place. Instead of watching TV or searching for an amusement park, I would be fascinated by a small fishing village, an old temple, a beetle nut plantation and everything else that was totally local. Today, I realise that all the money from my stay went directly to the local community. The family in turn, by cooking ethnic cuisine, supported the local agriculture and businesses. One important learning was the fact that by using local material they had actually helped in reducing unnecessary transportation and thereby the environmental cost of the material. These are the foundations of ecotourism.

Even today, with the tremendous tourist influx, the local flavour of Konkan is vastly intact and the benefits of tourism remain in the community instead of adding to the kitty of good marketers and urban resort owners. Fortunately the travellers have also realised that there is more to a local experience than just watching soap operas inside a lavishly decorated room. The simple entrepreneurs of Konkan have disproved two major misconceptions that have hounded the tourism industry - that it would be unfeasible to run an ecotourism set-up and that only the inbound tourists would provide patronage.

The MTDC Model

Even as I was studying this unique tourism movement, a little known fact came as a pleasant realisation - our own MTDC has nurtured and created a very strong ecotourism initiative in Maharashtra. Unparalleled in the country, the state government body has managed to create a widespread network of small ecotourism initiatives thanks to its ‘bed and breakfast’ scheme, thereby helping many families to become entrepreneurs. These small operators too have always promoted local experiences, while taking care of other local business interests.

Here too, like in other examples, local people have found that tourism has provided them with sustainable livelihood options. And by running it around the local theme, they have indirectly supported a very large number of other local initiatives – the farmer in his fields; the trader in the small grocery shop; the fisherman who earlier only dreamt of sending his catch to Mumbai; the poultry owner with just a few dozen hens; the cobbler under the banyan tree; and even the car mechanic in his garage. This is the power of ecotourism.

Role of the MFD

The Maharashtra Forest Department (MFD), in the meanwhile, was not to be left far behind. Under the stewardship of Praveen Pardeshi, IAS, Principal Secretary–Forests, the MFD has initiated a programme to involve the forest and its neighbouring communities to benefit from local tourism and thereby become participating stakeholders in protecting their forests in a unique way. MFD has supported many such forest-neighbouring villages to form their own eco development committees (EDCs) and village development committees (VDCs). These committees have not been made dependent on government grants for their survival; instead they have been made self-sufficient by allowing them to officially ‘man and collect’ the gate money from the tourists at the entry points to the forests.

In the past there was very little collection...
from the tourists and whatever little was collected at the expense of the precious department manpower would go to the state treasury. Not anymore! The fund thus generated through the gate money is utilised jointly by the EDCs and the local forest office for local conservation activities. All the works implemented create employment in the village and thereby ensure local benefits. MFD on its part, without spending from its pocket, has created a much needed additional manpower. And more importantly, instead of a hostile neighbourhood, it has helped developed partners in conservation.

Grooming Local Talent
Taking the participation of the local communities further, many girls and boys are being trained as naturalists and adventure experts. Most of these skills are already deeply ingrained in them. Efforts are being made at helping the naturalists in them to communicate better, and educating them to providing interesting inputs to all facets of the forests – well beyond just the tiger. At many locations, local boys, who at best were herding cattle or ploughing subsistence-yielding fields, are today taking tourists into wilderness areas or conducting trekking, rappelling, rock climbing, and other adventure activities. They are also being trained in safety norms and standard operating procedures to ensure accident-free experiences.

A few people from these remote villages have also taken one of the biggest steps of their lives – of starting home-stay arrangements for urban tourists.

This community-based model of ecotourism serves a very important benefit for the local administration. It has been found to be successful in weaning away a number of local youth from unproductive or harmful activities that they would be tempted to adopt in the absence of any worthwhile occupation. It is not too difficult to notice that terrorism, poaching, naxalism, and smuggling are most deeply rooted in areas where employment opportunities for the youth are the least. And importantly, there is the growing realisation that no sector other than ecotourism can provide a lasting solution to the problems in these areas.

Tourists Benefit Too
By developing multi-disciplinary ecotourism activities in these areas, we will be able to disperse large crowds of tourists from our glamorous national parks and also provide the incoming tourists with more options to explore. Presently, wildlife tourism only involves driving in a safari vehicle in search of the glamorous cat. Instead, a walking trail with a trained local guide can help a tourist experience a forest in its true form. Tourists will also take home a rich experience from the local communities who find immense happiness even in the most gadget and technology-free lifestyles.

The author has been training local youth in Wildlife and Adventure skills, enabling them to earn a livelihood locally, instead of migrating to cities. The aim has been to make them stakeholders in conservation of their wilderness areas.

Anirudh can be reached on anirudh@pugmarksholidays.com

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Praveen Pardeshi, IAS, Principal Secretary – Forests & Revenue, Government of Maharashtra, in discussion with Anirudh Chaoji, elaborates on why tourism is not a dirty word anymore and how it has actually started supporting many communities to participate in the conservation of their wilderness areas, thus making it an ecotourism initiative in the real sense.

While speaking to the forest guards in the Melghat forest, one name that cropped up quite often was that of Praveen Pardeshi, IAS, who was then the divisional commissioner of Amravati. Despite being from the revenue department, Pardeshi was reported to have spent many hours and even nights inside Melghat. He would be all ears to suggestions and problems of the field staff and local villagers, who found in him an accessible and amenable government official. Later, as Principal Secretary for Forests & Revenue, many of his earlier experiences and his inherent passion for wildlife helped in formulating some of the most effective conservation strategies.

Praveen Pardeshi in a discussion with locals at Yalavali Homestay.

Even today, conservation in most parts of our country still revolves around creating infrastructures and tourist facilities. Pardeshi, on the other hand, has been one of the staunchest proponents of a healthy rehabilitation of populations to outside the forests and then partnering with the forest neighbouring communities for implementing successful conservation. This bureaucrat, to achieve his grand vision, has been moving across the state, travelling like a man on a mission - creating systems and even gazette notifications when required. And all the while, he has been motivating the forest department to work along with the local communities to take up the protection of their forests. This is in the light of the fact that in the past there was a very
strong mistrust between the department and the local communities. This had to change to make a beginning.

**Taking Up a Challenge**

It was easier said than done. To begin with, funding such a dream project was always going to be a problem for the cash-strapped forest department. Some rehabilitation funds were made available from the government kitty, but a major funding source was discovered in tourism that was here to stay. Pardeeshi then initiated the process to incorporate the local community as stakeholders in tourism in their own areas. Soon the gate money generated from tourists at many places like Chikhaldara in Melghat or Sinhagad near Pune or the Kaas Plateau near Satara or even a few sites at the Mahabaleshwar hill-station started building a corpus for the members of the local eco-development committees and thereby going directly to the village fund.

This had never happened in the past. Local communities had never seen tourism as being beneficial to them. Instead, tourists were always looked upon with a frown – for being noisy, noisy and polluting. But in the changed scenario, local youth started getting salaries from the tourism money, which was also now funding projects for community benefit - like building check-dams for improving ground water levels at Sinhagad or preparing fire-lines to protect crops and fodder grasses.

**Examples of Transformation**

Amzari, close to the hill station of Chikhaldara, is a shining example. A year ago, the local forest department introduced the local youth to adventure activities like rappelling, rock climbing and flying fox. The ‘born tough’ youth took to these adrenaline-pumping activities like fish take to water. Soon, they started providing a great and safe experience to a large number of tourists and students coming to Chikhaldara. Now there is no looking back. Tourists can stay in tents or on ‘machans’ or in rooms next to the village and undertake the adventure activities with the local youth.

Bhimashankar is yet another role model. It was once one of the biggest headaches for the forest department because of the huge piles of garbage and filth generated by the ‘pilgrimage’ tourists. Employing people for collection and management of this waste was out of question. This is when ecotourism chipped in. From the gate money generated, local youth have been provided employment not only to collect the waste but also to monitor the tourists to ensure that they do not add to garbage or disturb animals or vandalize the forest.

Many local youth started finding employment in their own villages without having to migrate into hostile urban centres. Some have even undergone capacity-building to become trained guides and naturalists. In the Sahayadri mountain ranges around Radhnagri, Koyna and Bhimashankar, these youngsters are successfully chaperoning urban tourists on trekking expeditions and in Amzari in the Melghat buffer zone they are conducting thrilling adventure activities like rappelling, rock climbing and flying fox.

The homestay at Yalavali is another instance of the community staking a claim in the tour-
ism industry. The stay will not match the luxuries of the resorts elsewhere but the experiences gathered by the tourists while staying in raw wilderness more than compensate for the small inconveniences. Tourists are motivated to take part in adventures that the Sahayadri mountains can offer. The trek to the Kalavantin Point is absolutely challenging and so are the forest trails or adventures that one can participate in. But then, staying next to a forest and waking up in a tent high up on the mountains and listening to the calls of innumerable birds and alarm calls of the barking deer is not what you can do in your day-to-day life.

At Pitezari outside Nagzira, the locals have learnt to manage the tourist facility. At many locations like Moharli outside Tadoba and Phansad in Konkan, women self-help groups are generating revenue by providing catering services at the campsites. And elsewhere, community-based initiatives like Sahayadri Nisarg Mitra’s efforts in Konkan to conserve the sea turtles, sea eagles and edible nest swiftlets and even Dr. Abhay Bang’s model’s replication in Melghat to provide healthcare solutions in the malnutrition and poverty-stricken tribal populations, have found a partner in the government machinery.

The Larger Picture

Pardeshi and his motivated forest department officers and staff soon started extrapoloating the formula not just for the conservation of a turtle here and a tiger there but to the total wilderness landscape across Maharashtra. Many forests as a result now have forest-friendly neighbouring communities and additional local youth strength to manage tourist pressures, combat garbage problems, fight forest fires, and even help in patrol and protection duties - all this at no extra pinch to the small annual forest budget.

The department in the meanwhile has been able to carry out its mandate of conservation with a new zeal. Additional buffer areas have
meant reduction of direct pressures on many core areas like Tadoba, Melghat and Sahyadri Tiger Reserve; new forests have been brought under protection as in New Nagzira, Umred and Kola; villages from inside Tadoba and Melghat forests have been successfully relocated to outside where better living conditions are now available; the numbers of forest guards have significantly increased; secret funds are luring people to protection instead of helping the poachers, and as an obvious result of all these sustained efforts, the conservation of Maharashtra’s forests has been the main beneficiary.

Community-based conservation is not a new concept to India, nor the fact that it has been in practice in partnership with the forest departments to some extent elsewhere in the country. But what was absolutely unthought-of in the past was the local community empowerment to the extent that at Junona and Nagzari new wildlife safari routes have been started which are totally managed and operated by the local community. Payments are not collected by the forest department; instead go directly to the community, who organise to take tourists for jeep safaris into the buffer forests for wildlife viewing.

Collective Consciousness

However, what is still left to be implemented is probably the most important element in this ecotourism jigsaw and has to be played by us all - the nature-lovers. Instead of repeatedly visiting the same national parks that we have been travelling to for ages, we must start exploring newer, some unknown and many not so luxurious destinations to try out alternative field-based activities, instead of becoming armchair or rather Gypsy-seat naturalists. That is when this unique tourism model will truly succeed and conservation of wilderness areas travel beyond the discussions in our comfortable homes, offices and conference halls. Pardeshi has aptly demonstrated that when the local community becomes an active partner in protection, poaching reduces; forest fires come under control; grazing pressures reduce; and the overall conservation benefits. And when tourism funds the process, it becomes sustainable and permanent.
Protecting the Kaas Plateau

Prerna Agarwal
Photographs © Anirudh Chaoji, Manas Kulkarni

Home to more than 250 flowering species, the Kaas Plateau has become a hotspot for tourists who rush here during the blooming season and thereby unleash environmental havoc by literally trampling upon the fragile ecosystem and leaving behind a pile of garbage. As such, it is only a systematic implementation of the ecotourism model that can save the region, says researcher Prerna Agarwal.
“60.5 kg chips’ wrappers, 250 plastic bottles, 80 glass bottles.” I went on scribbling the numbers shouted out to me. This particular Monday morning, members from the four villages - Kaas, Ekiv, Kasaani and Atali - that comprise the Kaas Plateau Joint Forest Management Committee, along with the ground staff of the Satara Forest Department, were busy collecting, segregating and weighing the solid waste littered over the weekend by insensitive tourists on this UNESCO World Natural Heritage Site.

The rocky plateau of Kaas is a unique place. It is home to around 250 flowering plant species, many of which are rare, endemic and threatened. Here, one can find a whole plethora of plant behaviour, ranging from the carnivorous to those displaying desiccation tolerance and parasitic aptitude, not to forget species that flower only once in seven years! However, due to the ever-increasing popularity of the mass blooming phenomenon, millions of visitors flock this terrain every year, posing a serious threat to the precious natural beauty and biodiversity of Kaas. Posed with the big question of managing an even bigger crowd in the years to come, the state’s forest department, local communities, environmental NGOs and researchers are working collectively or individually towards finding sustainable solutions for managing tourism at Kaas.

**A Research Drive**

To bridge the knowledge gap, it is important to regularly monitor the ecological impact of tourist activities such as high levels of vegetation trampling and littering. With this in mind, I started a research project funded by Rufford Small Grants, UK, in 2012, which would help in developing ecotourism guidelines for the Kaas plateau. The study focused on three levels of assessments: ecological, social, and management. Quantitative ecological surveys included vegetation plots in trampled and non-trampled sites to assess the impact of tourist trampling. Stakeholder interviews; tourist density mapping; solid waste quantification; capacity building workshops for locals and forest personnel; and awareness drives were part of the social and management objectives.

One can find small villages dotting the slopes of the plateau. Low agricultural yield, lack of alternative job opportunities and difficult living conditions has forced most village youth to migrate to cities such as Mumbai or Pune in search of jobs. Till recently, Kaas was only a rocky grazing pasture for them. However, with the sudden boom in tourism, the plateau is being viewed as an alternative income source, and the locals are now more active in conserving it. They have gradually started realising that it is important to protect the plant diversity so that the tourism inflow keeps increasing.

**Finding a Solution**

To mould them further as ecotourism guides, the Satara Forest Department has so far organised a series of training sessions so that the local youth are able to identify the plant species; develop their communication skills; and be sensitive to the importance of preserving the native plant populations. Some locals have also built structures to serve as home-stays that help urban folk experience the local village life. All such activities, along with the collection of entry fee by the JFMC, are aimed to raise funds for the local communities and in turn protect the plateau. When we achieve the dual objective of minimal negative impact of nature tourism on Kaas and simultaneously support the local economy through tourism, only then can we say we are successful in building Kaas as a wild flower ecotourism model.
The heritage lake at Lonar has unique alkaline properties which are getting disturbed due to the flow of various pollutants. While one man from the local community has taken it upon himself to create awareness about this issue, what is required is the impact of ecotourism to save it, says Anirudh Chaoji.
Case Study 2

Formation of the Lake
For long it was believed that this lake was formed inside the mouth of a volcanic crater. However, Bugdane was convinced otherwise. Patiently he kept collecting evidence and interacted with the various visiting researchers from Smithsonian Institute, the United States Geological Survey and the Geological Survey of India, among others, who came to Lonar to study the lake and its surroundings. A detailed study revealed the presence of maskelynite in the lake periphery, indicating that only a hypervelocity impact could have created such metamorphism, thereby converting plagioclase into maskelynite or planar deformation features.

Thus after much research and a study of many other features, it was accepted that the lake was actually formed by the huge impact of a meteorite that must have collided with our planet around 52,000 years ago. However, a new study has further predated the collision to around 5,70,000 years ago. Armed with all the new research, Bugdane has kept convincing tourists and locals alike of the need to preserve the ecosystem of the lake. The water is highly alkaline, owing to the fact that the lake has no overflow for the water while salts and nutrients keep getting added to it. This has created a unique ecosystem wherein life exists even in such inhospitable salinity.

Environmental Concerns
However, in the recent past, increased agricultural activity has meant that toxic pesticides and strong doses of fertilizers have made their way into the lake, not to forget the continuous flow of the residue of powerful detergents and soaps. Both of these can drastically affect the delicate balance of this fragile alkaline ecosystem, where only few specialised organism species can survive. “If Taj Mahal were to get destroyed, one could always rebuild it. But if Lonar is destroyed, it would be impossible to construct it again,” Bugdane points out.

Given this concern for what may happen in the near future, this enterprising teacher has been engaging the local school students to participate in the protection of the lake. He has also trained six local youths to work as guides to educate and inspire the tourists. But he is now banking on ecotourism to wave its magical wand to involve the local community in the protection of this spectacular natural heritage that was once believed to have played host to Lord Rama on his journey to Rameshwaram.
One of the most recent examples of how ecotourism has changed the face of a village is that of Shiswad in Maharashtra which has now earned a place in the books of those travellers yearning for a truly local experience.

Under the Government Biological Diversity Act (BDA) 2002, Section 41, a biodiversity management committee (BMC) has been set up at Shiswad to facilitate conservation and livelihoods in the village. The secretary of this committee is a government-appointed forest official. Members of this committee have been involved as key stakeholders and drivers of ecotourism in the village. As such, the BMC’s task is to approach tourism as a livelihood activity which will provide benefits to multiple parties in the community while facilitating conservation practices over a long-term period.

**Sowing the Seeds**

Located at the foothills of Harishchandragad Fort, Shiswad village is the latest hotspot among campers and other travellers seeking community-based tourism. An online description of this village states that on the first day of the tour, you and your child can explore the village, interact with the locals, go trekking to the sunset point, swim in crystal clear waters and watch the live performance of ‘Bharud’ the local Adivasi musicians. The second day starts early with a guided bird-watching tour through the nearby forest followed by practical learning sessions on sowing seeds, reaping crops, cultivating paddy, milking goats, weaving baskets or doing any other activity that awakens your rustic senses, it further states.

But how is it that a relatively unknown village is now finding a mention in many circles? It’s all because of the powerful tool of ecotourism. A climate change adaptation (CCA) project covers 25 villages across Sangamner and Akole of Ahmednagar district. This project is supported by NABARD with Pune-based Watershed Organisation Trust as the implementing agency. Promotion of community-based ecotourism and livelihood activities are the important components of the project and Purushwadi village of Akole has successfully been operating tourism activities for over five years. Now, Shiswad has taken off on the same lines too, attracting visitors for community-based responsible tourism over the last year.

**Reaping the Benefits**

The direct outcomes of this form of tourism include creating a supplementary and dynamic livelihood managed professionally by the community; improving local money flow; practicing conversation methods on the local level; creating potential for women to earn an income; and contributing locally to the impacts of climate change. There are many indirect outcomes too such as a revival of traditional herbal remedies; increased focus and sustainable use of ecosystem-based services; improved food security in the village through increased cash flow within the household; better health and hygiene in households due to adherence to tourist standards for sanitation and safety, especially for women and children; reduced outward migration due to increasing employment opportunities within the village; and development of businesses for niche products such as straw hats and mats, indigenous grains, wild honey, organic foods, etc.

This form of ecotourism at Shiswad is implemented by ‘Finding Footpaths’ and involves about 30 community members directly and about 60 indirectly on a seasonal basis. Some of the facilities that are offered to the tourists include private campsites located near the village; tented accommodation for a total of 20 persons; solar lighting; availability of purified water; home-cooked meals out of locally grown produce; and a dormitory system with attached washrooms for larger groups. Some of the activities that the tourists can indulge in generally cover basket weaving, fishing, swimming, rain trekking, farming, paddy cultivation, cooking on a ‘chullah’, bird watching, nature walks, rock climbing, star gazing, exploring medicinal plants, and participating in local festivals and events.
Just 100 kilometres from Pune, but a world away, is a beautiful village called Yalavali. Nestled in the verdant forests of the Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary, the village lies on a plateau surrounded by the Sahyadri hills. What makes this village special is that the forest department of Maharashtra has chosen this village for a community-based ecotourism project. The 15-odd families with about 80 people who stay in the village have pooled in labour and resources and with the help of an NGO called ‘Kalpavriksh’ and the Maharashtra State Forest Department, built a two room eco-lodge that serves as your base for exploring the lovely surroundings of the village.

Besides the cottage, there are tent facilities in the open ground next to it where you can pitch your own tents, or if you are not carrying one, you can use the one that is available there. If you want to get a feel of living in a typical village home, there is the home-stay option also. I was there on the first day of this year and was among one of the first people to stay in the village. It happened because I was in the vicinity of Bhimashankar and it prompted me to call up Subhash to find out if it was okay for me to come at such short notice. Subhash is one of the main guides at Yalavali, and spent minutes with the visitors and also guided them from the nearest road head, Bhorgiri. That day he sent his brother to accompany me on the approximate two-kilometer trail that takes one to Yalavali.

Discovering Village Life

Subhash met me later in the evening, and as there was still some daylight available for us to explore the surroundings, we set off for a walk around the village. Subhash recommended that we go to the sun-set point and the Konkan point from where we would have a vantage view of the surroundings. These points are a short 20 minutes walk from the centre of the village. From the Konkan point, I could just about make out the sea and the plains of Konkan. The sunset point lived up to its name and we lingered on to absorb the magical effect of the silence that accompanied the setting sun. The walk had worked up my appetite and by the time we were back into the village we settled for an early dinner.

This was a simple and tasty affair at Subhash’s home. We sat around the kitchen hearth that doubles up as the dining area. The food was cooked on a ‘chullah’ that lent it a distinct flavour and lightness and I ended up having more than my usual fare. In hindsight that served me well for the night trials that we went around the village. Before setting for the night trial, Subhash asked me if I wanted to attend a meeting he was having with the other villagers to give final shape to an excursion trip of a group of school children arriving the next day. This was the first big group they were going to host. Since the Yalavali ecotourism facility is designed to be run as a truly community-led initiative, the idea is to have every family benefit from the inflow of visitors to the village.

The responsibilities of hosting the group, providing them food, acting as guides and taking them around the village were doled out with mutual agreement and allocated in such a way that almost everyone was involved in the activity. In my opinion, this cooperative pattern, if sustained in the right spirit, would ensure the viability of the project; provide alternate means of livelihood to the villagers; and make sure that the jungles of this region are preserved. It will also give the visitors a true flavour of what ecotourism really is.

Having done with the meeting, we packed our torches and water bottles and set out for the night trail. Another person, who Subhash was training to act as a guide, also joined us. The jungle was alive with the sounds of insects and animals and the full moon in all its glory made it all the more beautiful. We walked to the many water bodies and waited for a leopard or a hyena to pay us a visit. Just when I thought we were really far from the village, and it would take us a lot of time to return to the cottage, Subhash took a short-cut and within a few minutes we were there. I realised then that we had not really strayed out too far from the village. We pitched our tent just outside the cottage and went into deep slumber under the stars, even as the sounds of the woods made their own music in the night.

Options Aplenty

Next morning, after a quick breakfast of tea and poha, I made my way back to Bhorgiri village. This time my guide was a bird specialist who pointed out the numerous birds that are found in the vicinity and told me of the others that we could not see. Whether you are a bird watcher, nature enthusiast or interested in village culture and life, there is something for everyone here. Your typical day could include treks within the sanctuary, interactions with villagers and school children, informative discussions about the cultural, historical and ecological aspects of the sanctuary, and a possible chat with the forest department officials too.

You could also request the villagers for a session on local medicines, which is one of the main livelihood options for them, apart from the sale of milk and milk products in the Bhimashankar temple complex. The traditional honey hunters of this region have for generations employed unique methods in their trade, and the itinerary offers a chance to move with them as they hunt, and ultimately, understand their lifestyles better. There are numerous walks around the camping site and many streams close by, though mostly during the monsoon and winter seasons. For trekking enthusiasts there is a two-hour trail from the village to the Bhimashankar sacred grove and temple, which I think you should definitely plan for during your trip there.

Black Swan Journeys, a Pune based experiential travel outfit, has designed itineraries which help you better understand the unique social, economic and cultural fabric of the region as a whole. They are also working on designing itineraries based on Yalavali’s farming seasons, and festivals that will present urban travelers unconventional experiences of rural life.

A new ecotourism project started at Yalavali village in the vicinity of Bhimashankar offers visitors an enchanting break from the stress of urban living besides offering valuable tips on the benefits of nature conservation, says Ankit Agarwal.

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At Velas, the Sea Turtles Have No Fear

Anirudh Chaoji | Photographs © Sahayadri Nisarga Mitra, Samir Madhani

In this example of how a natural phenomenon of sea turtles laying their eggs on the beach can be turned into an ecotourism project, Anirudh Chaoji and Gaurang Govande in discussion with Bhau Katdare provide insights of the tremendous work done by an individual who has given a fresh lease of life to these marine species while providing the villagers with an enhanced source of revenue.

Travel Tips
Discover Maharashtra through homestays and Bed & Breakfast.
It took over two more years for the locals to be convinced that the visitors had actually brought a business proposition for them. Today, many years later, over 25 families from this small village are providing ethnic Konkani lifestyle home-stays to the increasing number of nature lovers reaching here. The tourists stay in simple rooms and eat homely and tasty Konkani food that the families cook for them. Coconut milk, sol kadhi and sweet dumplings called ‘ukdiche modak’ have now become important ingredients of the tourists’ dictionaries.

This kind of nature-related tourism has been able to generate a livelihood for the local host families and other service providers. But to ensure a regular inflow of tourism income, the sea turtles must keep coming to Velas for nesting, and the nests and hatchlings must be provided the community’s protection. As a result, the local community has on its own become a stakeholder in the conservation of sea turtles. They willingly even started incorporating a 10 per cent turtle conservation fund into their costing. The money thus generated started funding the activities of the local youth group, Kasav Mitra Mandal, whose volunteers have been implementing conservation efforts for the turtles of Velas and other coastlines. In the years to come, many of the females that hatched out of the Velas’ nests will mature and return to the same beaches to ensure that their babies too get the same protection that the community of Velas provided them.

Now, More than Turtles

Over the years, some more villages have learnt from Katdare’s Velas’ model. However, his dream is to have all the coastal villages take up conservation of their rich diversity on their own. There are the spectacular white-bellied sea eagles ruling the Konkan skies; playful dolphins chasing each other in the sea; the unique edible nest swiftlets whose nests are robbed to garnish soups in Southeast Asia; and the rich marine life close to the shore – all with tremendous potential of attracting nature-loving tourists. Katdare has now started an initiative of Sahayadri home-stays all along the coast. The need is for the local community to identify the ‘natural’ USP of their village to attract the tourists, and become partners in the protection of that natural heritage. What better model of community-based conservation could the forest department have asked for?

It is indeed ironical that in a country like India where the fear of displeasing the gods is so strong, an important mythological animal such as the turtle has been waging a battle for its survival. The same animal that has been believed to bear the load of our planet on its back has today been pushed to the brink of extermination. Every year, large numbers of the turtle species die after getting caught in the fishing nets. A few of these are thrown back into the sea, while many make way to the markets to be scooped out with knives for consumption. When the females come on the beaches to lay eggs, they become even more vulnerable, caught as they are by people, dogs, and jackals. But what is worse is that the eggs that would ensure the survival of the species are stolen in large numbers to be sold and eaten.

For years, many a legislation has been passed and rules formulated – but all with very little conservation impact in terms of ground realities. But what has helped is the effort of some individuals and NGOs. As for instance, a group of young bird-watchers and naturalists who accidentally noticed large-scale nesting of sea turtles at a small seaside village of Velas, close to Dapoli on the western coast of India. Led by a youth called Bhau Katdare, they almost immediately realised the threat to the turtles and took up a conservation project on a small stretch of the beach. In their first effort in 2002, they managed to safely release 2,734 Olive Ridley turtle hatchlings from 50 nests into the sea. Over the years, the Maharashtra State Forest Department has also joined hands with such groups to help ensure that a large number of sea turtle hatchlings make their way to the sea.

No Easy Task

However, one of the biggest challenges for Katdare and his group called ‘Sahayadri Nisarg Mitra’ (SNM) was always the long-term sustainability and replicability of this small initiative so that it would spread across the coastline of Maharashtra. This is when they decided to organise the ‘Kasav Mahotsav’, a turtle festival that invites nature lovers from different parts of the country to watch the hatchlings break out of their eggs and crawl their way into the sea. Katdare had hoped that the local community would see this inflow of tourists as a commercial opportunity. However, the entire load had to be borne by the SNM team to organise lodging and boarding facilities for the large number of people reaching Velas.
Some of the chief objectives of the body are to:

- Help develop policies and codes of conduct for the promotion of sustainable tourism
- Encourage low pollution-generating practices and minimise ecological carbon footprint
- Encourage energy saving practices, water harvesting, use of solar and other natural energy sources
- To work extensively with service providers to enhance the quality of their products and services to a level so they can be sustainable and eco-friendly.

THE TRAVELLER’S CODE OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AND CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY

“Travel is a passage through other people’s lives and other people’s places”

BE FLEXIBLE
Are you prepared to accept cultures and practices that are different from your own?

CHOOSE RESPONSIBLY
Have you selected to support businesses that clearly and actively address the cultural and environmental concerns of the locale you are visiting?

DO YOUR HOMEWORK
Have you done research about the people and places you plan to visit so you may avoid what may innocently offend them or harm their environment? Have you learned the basic manners, and polite phrases in the language of the place you plan to visit?

BE AWARE
Are you informed of the holidays, holy days, and general religious and social customs of the places you will visit?

SUPPORT LOCAL ENTERPRISE
Have you made a commitment to contribute to the local economy by purchasing from local run hotels, tour operators, restaurants, shops and buying from local artisan crafts?

BE RESPECTFUL AND OBSERVANT
Are you willing to respect local laws that may include restrictions on purchases, usage of or access to places and things that may harm or otherwise erode the environment, or alter the culture of the places you visit?
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- No. of baggage reclaim carousels 14
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The Western Ghats have been tagged as a World Natural Heritage Site and this has helped preserve and protect its amazing variety of flora, fauna and indigenous communities and their practices; but the question is how long will it continue to withstand the pressure of the rising demand for land to develop infrastructure for human habitats.

Archana Godbole, Director, AERF Pune, focuses on the status and the dilemmas of this mountain chain.

Maintaining a Fragile Eco-Balance

The Western Ghats

Archana Godbole
Photographs © Archana Godbole, Umesh Hiremath, Jayant Sarnaik, AERF
World Natural Heritage Site

Privately owned forests, North Western Ghats

© Jayant Sarnaik, AERF

© Archana Godbole, AERF

Kokan - Paradise

© Udayan Sardaik, AERF

Presbygy owns forests, North Western Ghats
The vast mountain chain known as the Western Ghats is one of the 34 global biodiversity hotspots recognised by Conservation International for its high conservation value and for the fact that it has been under continuous pressure to make way for development. The Western Ghats were accorded the status of a World Natural Heritage (WNH) site by UNESCO in 2012 for the reason that they are home to a wide variety of geological, cultural and aesthetic linkages. This region, with its unique geography and climate patterns, supports an immense amount of biodiversity that includes 1,700 plant species and up to 350 animals endemic to its landscape. It is also home to many different communities, including nomadic tribes, pastoralists, farmers and coastal fishermen, each practicing its own unique traditional way of living.

The recognition of the Western Ghats by UNESCO has been the result of seven years of research and documentation by the Wildlife Institute of India and enthusiastic scientists like Dr. V B Mathur. In terms of location, the Western Ghats are a chain of mountains running parallel to India’s western coast, approximately 30-50 km inland. They traverse the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra and Gujarat. These mountains cover an area of around 140,000 square kilometres in a 1,600-kilometre long stretch that is interrupted only by the 30-kilometre Palghat gap in Kerala. So how does the tag of being a WNH site help? More than just words on paper, it is a useful instrument to initiate concrete action for the preservation of such threatened sites and endangered species. By recognising the outstanding universal value of a site, the concerned authorities commit to its preservation and strive to find solutions for its protection. It can also lead to restorations. The World Heritage Convention is also a very powerful tool to rally international attention and actions through various global safeguarding campaigns.

The Topography
Older than the great Himalayan mountain chain, the Western Ghats of India are a geomorphic feature of immense importance. The outstanding universal value of the Western Ghats is manifested in the region’s unique and fascinating influence on large-scale biophysical and ecological processes over the entire Indian peninsula. The mountains of the Western Ghats and their characteristic montane forest ecosystems influence the Indian monsoon patterns that mediate the warm tropical climate of the region. The Ghats also act as a key barrier, intercepting the rainladen monsoon winds that sweep in from the southwest during late summer.

The forests of the Western Ghats include some of the best representatives of non-equatorial tropical evergreen forests in the world. At least 325 globally threatened (IUCN’s red data list) species are found in this region. The globally threatened flora and fauna in the Western Ghats are represented by 229 plant species, 31 mammal species, 15 bird species, 43 amphibian species, five reptile species and one fish species. Of the total 325 globally threatened species in the Western Ghats, 129 are classified as vulnerable, 145 as endangered and 51 as critically endangered.

Though the entire Western Ghats have been recognised as a World Heritage Site, a serial approach has been followed while encrypting the actual sites. Therefore the total area of 73,95,315 hectares of protected areas has been classified into 39 sites. This is justified in principle from a biodiversity perspective because all these 39 components belong to the same bio-geographic province but are
isolated remnants of a previous contiguous forest. The justification for developing a serial approach rather than just identifying one large protected area to represent the biodiversity of the Western Ghats is due to the high degree of endemism, meaning that the species' composition from the very north of the mountains to 1,600 kilometres south varies greatly, and no single site could tell the story of the richness of these mountains. The formulation of this complex serial nomination has evolved through a consultative process drawing on scientific analysis from various sources.
Management & Protection

The 39 component parts of this serial property fall under a number of protection regimes, ranging from tiger reserves, national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and reserved forests. All these components are owned by the state governments and are subject to stringent protection under various laws, including the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, the Indian Forest Act of 1927, and the Forest Conservation Act of 1980. Up to 40 per cent of the property lies outside the formal protected area system - mostly in reserved forests - which is legally protected and thus effectively managed. The Forest Conservation Act provides the regulatory framework to protect them from infrastructure development.

Integrating the management of 39 components across four states is a challenge, for which a three-tier governance mechanism is required that operates at the central, state and site levels to provide effective coordination. A Western Ghats Natural Heritage Management Committee (WGNHMC) under the auspices of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), Government of India to deal with coordination and integration issues is already functional. All the 39 components in the seven sub-clusters are thus managed under specific management and working plans duly approved by the state or central governments. The sub-clusters include Agasthyamalai, Periyar, Annamalai, Nilgiri, Talkaveri, Kudremukh and Sahyadri. In each cluster there are about six to seven carefully picked protected areas that fulfill the criteria of selection. In Maharashtra we have the Kaas Plateau, the wildlife sanctuaries of Koyna and Radhanagari, and the Chandoli National Park as a part of the Sahyadri cluster.

Challenges Ahead

In any debate pertaining to WNH sites there is always a comment on their existing protected area status. However we must appreciate the fact that legally protected areas also need investments for long-term protection and the well-being of the communities residing within and around such protected areas. Similarly, in this case, there is a constant need to deal with the increasing demand for land for development considering that it is a hot-spot with very high human intervention. The World Natural Heritage status often helps to demarcate the area of high importance and therefore can be saved from development activities like mining. The status might attract more funding for management as the forest department works with meagre funds and the MoEF has got the lowest outlay from among all the other ministries. On the other hand, the status also has provided many opportunities for communities in terms of tourism development in lieu of participatory protection of these sites. The case of Kaas plateau is an example where the number of tourists visiting during the flowering season has shot up by 200 per cent. Long-lasting partnerships for sustainable management is therefore the call of the hour. Natural heritage is difficult to maintain and the WNH committee has specific indicators to check the status every year. If the indicators are not positive, the site can get into the danger list or it could even lead to the removal of its status. The Western Ghats therefore need effective implementation of all the environmental rules so as to continue to remain protected.

Dr. Archana Godbole is leading the process of civil society networking in the Western Ghats since last 5 years and is a champion of conservation on the ground in the north Western Ghats.

Dr. Archana Godbole can be reached at godboleaj@gmail.com

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The Forests That Feed Him Also Freed Him

Manohar Sare

Asavari Sharma | Photographs © Sangeeta Mahajan

An artist of great renown, Manohar Sare has a very special relationship with forests. They give him the raw material that he moulds painstakingly into unique works of art, surrealist and sometimes utilitarian. They serve him as a muse, providing inspiration to his creative soul. And most importantly they were the force behind his freedom from the mundane world, to live his life liberated, as an artist. Long before recycling waste material and using it for aesthetic purposes was in fashion, Sare was creating exquisite pieces of art from wood, stones and plastic waste.

Fame did not come easy to Sare, now an accomplished artist, author and cartoonist. At thirty, he was working as a lecturer at a university in a small town in Maharashtra, struggling to make ends meet and was very lonely. It was then, exactly five decades ago, that he discovered what would become his lifelong passion, that would enable him to live the pace and quality of life that he pined for. “It was my son who first picked up a piece of wood during one of our walks in the woods,” says a reminiscent Sare. “I was intrigued by its resemblance to a mother and her child in an embrace which I played on to create my first work of art.” This ‘mother and child’ remained a recurring theme in the next few decades of his work.

Creative Pursuits

Sare began spending his free time walking the nearby forests, collecting wood, stones and roots to transform and find some mean-
ing in his otherwise dreary life. His first works were purely his own; never in his wildest dreams did he think he could sell them, let alone make a living out of them. His very first piece to be sold brought him a little over a hundred rupees, a respectable sum for artwork in the 1960s. It was a local politician who noticed his work and offered to buy it, and this motivated him to create more. Sapre remembers that time as crucial, as he spent hours and hours in the forest collecting a stock of material for his creations in the years that followed.

Although they were a lot more satisfying, the next two decades did not bring him any respite from his financial problems. He had a family to feed and care for, and he supplemented his income by working as a cartoonist for the Marathi daily ‘Loksatta’. Success came to Sapre in the 1980s, after he was invited to exhibit in France, where his work was quite well received. This was followed by an exhibit in America which was sold out, and the golden years of Manohar Sapre had begun. His galleries back home were frequented by the rich and famous of Mumbai, including business tycoons, film stars and writers. He got huge orders for industrial houses and his work adorned their walls and coffee tables.

Sapre was finally rid of the poverty that had plagued him and was able to buy a house in Chandrapur with a workshop that gave him

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**The story of “The Horse”**

Some twenty five years hence during my usual daily visits to the heaps of teak scrap in a saw mill I once accidentally located a life size head shape of a horse. My imagination could immediately conceive a full horse head with a neck and the overhead mane. But this all made me worried because it was near impossible to find these objective co-relatives in exact size and shape. And also in an equally natural condition in teak. To my shock and surprise the very next day I found the neck as in the picture at the very same place in the scrap heap. Now there was a big challenge to locate the missing link of the mane in a suitable flow form, and that needed to be available only in a teak root. In my maddening efforts for two years or so, I trampled literally hundreds of kilometers of remote dense forests, and ultimately on a shadowy evening I stumbled across the very piece that I had longed for with the result that a very rare and quite a celebrated piece of my art was born in a destined manner.
the space and facilities he needed to nurture his art, where he also trained a couple of local craftsmen who helped him with his work. A number of students and enthusiasts of art came and assisted him as well, to learn from him and gain experience. This was Sapre’s studio, where he spent the most productive years of his life, rummaging through his collection of waste material, transforming discarded things using his fertile imagination.

**Bonding with Nature**

Interestingly, Sapre draws a parallel between the role he plays in transforming forest waste into works of art and the role the forests played in giving him a new and respectable life, one with freedom and satisfaction. He recalls the time when he got news of a nearby forest being cleared for agriculture. He rushed to the spot and saw that trees in the entire area had been felled and the stumps were being bulldozed out to be burnt or dumped. “What was useless and nothing more than a nuisance to the world was a treasure for me. I spent the next two days there with my team and collected enough material to last me decades. These pieces of wood, root, dry seeds or bamboo would have otherwise been burnt or dumped and left to decay, just as my life would have without my art. So our union is a symbiotic one, where both nature and I are reborn in each other’s company,” he narrates.

“The Japanese have a term ‘Mottinai’, which means that nothing nature or god produces is useless, or a waste,” he says. “It is such an inspiring word, and it reflects in their success...
as a nation. Despite having almost no raw material, the Japanese have created powerful industries through hard work and recycling almost all their waste.” Sapre believes India has a lot to learn from this. “In a country like ours, nature is so bountiful; recognising its worth and utilising it well will greatly benefit us, besides cleansing the land of its enormous waste and providing much needed employment to creative young people.”

Abnormalities and deformities, disliked by the rest of the world, are what catch his attention. A tumour that forms a strange bulge; an insect invasion that leaves the surface discoloured; a parasitic creeper that scars its host – these are elements that his keen eye spots out and he incorporates beautifully into his work. Although he does use some artificial colour, he likes to keep it to a minimum, relying on nature’s subtle hues and patterns.

In Search of Perfection

The search for the right material is not always easy. Sapre recalls the days when he was working on the piece which is most special to him, a horse’s head made of three components. “I had found two components, and the only part missing was the horse’s mane. For this I had visualised something which depicted motion and by adding this I wanted the horse to look wild and free,” he says. For months he found nothing and the piece lay incomplete in his workshop. Late one evening, while he was driving home he spotted a part of a broken root jutting out of the ground. Even though he got just a glimpse, his heart skipped a beat, knowing that he had found something. “It was exactly what I needed, just the right size, and twirled in a way that made the horse’s mane look like it was flying in the wind.” This piece of art Sapre has not

Books published by Mr. Sapre

1. Rudrakshi: Collection of my letters.
2. Dahivar: Collection of letters received by me.
5. Alas Kalas: Collection of my articles.
7. Vyanga Vinod: Collection of my articles on cartooning and humour.
8. Farsan: Collection of my articles on cartooning and humour.
9. Hasa Ki!: Collection of jokes, gags and cartoons.
parted with since, despite being offered large sums of money for it by many, including the late Bollywood actress Nargis.

Despite having not had it easy early in life, it is not money that drives Sapre. A Gandhi-an at heart, he confesses to have very basic needs and which give him the freedom to choose only the kind of work that he wishes to. It is the satisfaction of having lived his life the way he has on the less beaten path that is most rewarding to Manohar Sapre. Not a man of the city, he yearns to return to his workshop in Chandrapur whenever he is away. The simple and earthy themes that he uses are an extension of his personality.

**An Inspiring Philosophy**

Incidentally, Sapre has been greatly inspired by Van Gogh’s letter written to his brother Theo in August 1883, and has imbibed it in his work: “One thing I know, within a few years I must bring a certain work to completion...I am concerned with the world only in so far as

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The author is a media professional who switched fields to work on wildlife and environmental issues. She is currently a student of climate change and sustainability at the TISS.
A Human Charger

"I have always thought of Shri Sapre as a ‘human charger’. In my association with him of 25 years I have seen him mould, motivate, recharge many men and women, young and old, passionately urging them on in life. He is quick to understand the mental state, aptitude and potential of any person and even quicker in deciding if that person is his ‘blood-type’. This phrase he applies to all the people who want to be different in life and want to live on their own terms. Once identified, such a person is a regular beneficiary of his positive and power-packed dialogue, company and relevantly recommended books.

In my own experiment with artisans, there were many occasions when I felt disheartened. At each such time, he re-ignited the dwindling fire and ensured the logical and successful completion of my experiment of 12 long years. I know that I am not the only lucky one. I know that many, maybe hundreds, will understand and agree with my emotions. There may not be another Manohar Sapre and the least we can do is to try to understand his ideology and not follow but form our own! My sincere gratitude and love to this great human being."

Anil Agarwala

Mr. Anil Agarwala has been a pioneer founder partner of "FORMS", a first ever huge crafts village in Maharashtra, established near Nagpur. He is a connoisseur of Art and a designer himself.

According to Mr. Sapre, “Every artist may not be a unique person but every person is a unique artist; and in the pursuit of one’s creativity lies real happiness.”

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A Human Charger

Manohar Sapre is a humanist, fluent in Marathi and English.

He is also a philosopher, and a man with multiple skills : artist, cartoonist, writer and psychologist, and with a great heart to help people around him.

I have been very lucky to know him.

Jean Hesse, France
Most tourists will head for the deep woods in their search for glimpses of wild animals and exotic birds. But the grasslands - those wide and empty spaces with their vast green carpets hold as many wonders as the jungles. Their star attractions include wolves, foxes, blackbucks and the highly endangered Great Indian Bustard. Dr Pramod Patil, a medical practitioner and conservationist talks to us about the marvels of the grasslands and the efforts needed to save the Great Indian Bustard from extinction.
Though less popular, grasslands make for amazing ecosystems, harbouring as they do magnificent and rare creatures of the natural world. Yet, in spite of their exquisiteness, grasslands are quite neglected as compared to forests. But visit a grassland and there is sketched in our minds an unforgettable impression, especially so when it is undertaken during the peak season. Astonishing indeed it is to see herds of hundreds of blackbucks galloping over a sea of grass; enumerable harriers that migrate to grasslands to roost in congregations; tiny larks performing aerial displays with complex songs; partridges and quails that get perfectly camouflaged among grass; the enchanting Great Indian bustard (GIB) that performs a prolific display to attract females; and the smart Lesser Florican (also known as the Likh) that jumps more than 400 times in a day to seek the attention of females.

**Solapur’s Grasslands**

The grasslands of Solapur are among the most exquisite places to catch sight of some of these birds and animals in their natural habitat. These huge tracts of land have attracted the attention of many and records can be traced back to accounts written by several British authors and travellers during the pre-independence days. Even though much of the grasslands in the region have degraded due to various reasons, we may consider it fortunate that a few pockets of pristine grasslands have now come under protection.

More so, to protect and conserve the GIB, a grassland ecosystem in the form of a GIB sanctuary was established in Solapur and Ahmednagar districts during 1969. And even though absolute protection may not be possible since some of the land lies with private owners, those around Nannaj and Mardi can be counted as good patches of grasslands in this part of Maharashtra. Now considered home to the GIB, the grasslands also play host to a wide variety of other birds, a fact that is at times neglected because the GIB in itself is what draws the bird-watchers and the tourists.
Wonders of Wilderness

Grasslands with blackbucks are considered as sacred lands in the ‘Manusmriti’. The occupants of short-grass areas, the males of this species have a strikingly contrasting black and white colours, where the darkness of the fur indicates a hierarchy for sexual selection by female blackbucks. Blackbucks are always on alert because of their chief predators - wolves. However, they can be approached at close distance in a vehicle. Chinkara, also known as the Indian Gazelle is one of the swiftest animals in India. These generally inhabit rocky, grassy slopes of low-heightened hills around the scrublands. As soon as it perceives a threat, a chinkara will run with astonishing speed. And the most dramatic sight is when males fight among themselves to gain mating rights during the breeding season.

Wolves in grasslands are as rare as tigers. In the absence of the Indian cheetah, wolves carry the crown of apex predators with an equal grace. A pack of wolves will keep scouring the grasslands for blackbucks and their method of ambush makes for an interesting study. Of late though, the loss of secure habitat and the reduced prey base has resulted in a decline of the wolf population. However, the Indian fox is a regular on the grasslands, feeding as it does on insects, rodents and lizards, which are found here in plenty.

Avian Delights

Grassland birds are unique in many ways. During the breeding season i.e. late summer and monsoon, the grasslands get crowded and busy with the mating activities of various birds. The sandgrouses, lapwings and larks lay their eggs in nests built on the ground. Their eggs, chicks, and even females are so camouflaged that you would not notice their presence till you are right upon them. Large flocks of the sandgrouse can be seen flying to nearby waterholes for drinking in the morning and evening hours and the rhythmic displays of the singing bush larks are particularly worth watching.

The peculiar “tweet-tweet’ call of the elusive Rain Quail is the only clue to its presence, while shrikes are characteristically found on grasslands. Shrikes are also known as ‘butcher birds’ for their habit of catching insects and lizards and impaling their bodies on thorns or the spikes of barbed wire fences. This helps them to tear the prey into smaller pieces.
morsels, convenient for feeding their chicks and also for the fact that they can return to the remains time and again. Lapwings are very clever birds and to distract potential predators of their eggs or chicks they feign injury. The Lesser Florican is high on the list of the endangered species. The male acquires a handsome black plumage during the breeding season and owing to tuft of spatula-shaped feather behind the head, it is also called as the ‘peacock of the grassland’.

**Great Indian Bustard**

The GIB is a tall handsome ostrich-like bird that roamed in huge numbers across pristine grasslands in India in the past. Currently it is classified as ‘critically endangered’, having reached this unfortunate state due to unchecked hunting and habitat loss arising out of agro-infrastructural development and mismanagement. Fewer than 250 birds are making a final attempt to survive in the states of Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh. The GIB is vagrant in nature, moving through huge landscapes. The best time to get a close glimpse of the bird is during its breeding season in the monsoon, when birds congregate at traditional sites. The males can then be seen performing a stunning breeding display to attract females. The female GIB lays only one egg on the ground and rears the chick for almost a year.

Dr. Pramod Patil has done MBBS and MD. Amateur bird watcher who got involved into conservation after his first interaction with Critically Endangered Great Indian bustard at Nannaj. Dr. Pramod is keen on community and economic aspects of grasslands, dry-land farming and associated wildlife conservation in India through proper policies.

Dr. Pramod Patil can be reached at gibpramod@gmail.com
According to a recent news report, in Maharashtra, the Great Indian Bustard was seen across the state a few years ago. Now, it has been reduced to only three districts — Chandrapur, Nagpur and Solapur. The change of land use from grassland to farmland has been a major threat since it has shrunk the bird’s habitat. Poaching is another problem. Though the state has set up a massive 8,500 sq km bustard sanctuary, it has proved to be ineffective. It was much larger than required and blocked several projects, turning locals against the sanctuary. In Chandrapur, the government issued an order which prevented farmers from selling their land if the bustard was seen on it. However, instead of reporting the sighting of the bustard, some farmers chose to kill the bird.

Travel Tips
Prior communication with Pune Wildlife Division is needed if you want to visit GIB Sanctuary.
Guide and entry fee compulsory for all visitors entering the sanctuary.
Guest house can be booked at the office of the Pune Wildlife Division.
Good vegetarian food is available at the Forest Guest house.

Distance from Mumbai: 340 kms
How to reach:
By Air: Pune airport is a 3 hour drive from Nannaj.
By Rail: The nearest railway junction is at Solapur
By Road: Nannaj adjoining grasslands are just 25 Kms away from Solapur on Solapur-Barshi Road.

Where to stay:
You can book a dormitory at the Forest Rest House, or choose from the many hotels in Solapur.

Excursions:
The pilgrim town of Pandharpur is 117 km from Nannaj.
Tuljapur is another important site of pilgrimage in the area.
The sanctuary of Rehekuri, another impressive grassland is a couple of hours from Solapur.

Play time – Black Bucks

© Samir Madhani
Wildlife photography is one of the most evolving photography sectors in India. With social media sites providing easy gizmos to host pictures for public view, photography is gaining wide popularity among amateurs too. This kind of photography, on the positive side, has also supported conservation efforts, bringing as it does to the fore some of the serious issues of protection of both, wildlife and the environment. However, of late there has been growing concern over unethical photography that has been disturbing the Great Indian Bustards (GIB) in particular. Even though unintended, annoyance of any kind is a serious conservation problem. With less than 250 of these birds left in India’s wilderness, we need to think over the issue of dishonest photography of the bustards.

Eating into a Bustard’s Time

The GIB is a large handsome bird that lives on open short grass plains. Due to various factors, including human-induced disturbances, the number has fallen down to less than 250 birds, which is what makes it one of the rarest birds of India. In ideal conditions, the bustard tries its best to keep away from human habitats, using its height of 3.5 to 4 feet to perceive any threat from a long distance. It therefore requires perfected skills and an enormous amount of time and patience to reach close enough to a GIB to get its picture. Given the bustard’s habit of staying alert till the threat is not over and typically facing the intruder and doing nothing but observing the threat, the time that is so lost means foregoing a valuable period that otherwise would...
have been invested in foraging for food. If such interferences continue for a long time, the inability to spend time for food translates into a question of survival.

**Disrupting the Breeding Cycle**

The breeding season, especially so, imposes time constraints for the GIB. Along with its usual activities such as feeding, preening, dust bathing, etc., the male GIB has to perform various additional tasks related to breeding. Therefore, any loss of time leads to a stressful state since it impacts activities such as courtship display, territorial fights, etc. Since mating does not occur without the formal display, there is a chance that any disruption of procedure may even lead to failure of breeding.

The GIB moves over a vast landscape during the non-breeding season and birds congregate at traditional lek sites only during the breeding season. Many of the bustard’s lek sites are well known and famous for tourism and photography. However, these sites are few and scattered, becoming more so because of the expansion of human habitats. Given the fact that the lek sites offer an opportunity for excellent photography, human trespassing poses a severe problem. Moreover, the number of birds at a particular site may just be eight to ten, except in Rajasthan, and the chances of breeding failure thereby increase.

**Putting Chicks in Danger**

Nest photography makes nesting birds, eggs and chicks vulnerable in many ways. It has been principally discouraged and has led to some encouraging results so far. The total nesting season of a GIB is just about a month. It doesn’t build any nest as such and therefore there is no way to guess whether a particular picture of a female GIB has been taken during the nesting season, unless it also shows the chick. The female GIB lays only one egg and it takes on the entire responsibility of rearing the chick for up to a year. Any disturbance during this period of grooming makes the chick vulnerable to natural enemies. It also reduces the feeding time available to both mother and chick and there is always the probability that a chick may wander far from the mother and be pounced upon by predators.

**Save the Bird**

We all know what unethical photography means, and those who indulge in it indiscriminately trample or drive over an animal’s habitat, persistently following it despite its nervousness to the photographer’s presence, and trying to flush it out of cover or bait it for a shot. The GIB is vanishing at an alarming rate and protection for all its breeding sites from such unwelcome human visitors has now become extremely important. The species has the power to flourish; all it needs are inviolate places to breed. A mass movement for creating awareness on unethical practices and their impact is therefore the need of the hour. This requires lot of efforts in terms of manpower for spreading this message and can become a reality only if individuals and organisations come together to support the movement.

There is now an urgent need to define ethical photography practices and publicize the ‘dos and don’ts’. Local NGOs need to come together to keep a watch on unethical behaviour in wildlife areas. Guides and guards appointed by the state governments need to be more vigilant and free of corruption. Wildlife lovers can become watchdogs, reporting every case of unethical photography to authorities and to fellow photographers. Various wildlife magazines and photography websites should also take a firm stand on these issues. They, in fact, can be the biggest change-makers. One good example is of Hesarghatta in Bangalore. Earlier, many images were posted from this area’s scrubland but have reduced drastically in recent months due to awareness messages on Facebook and photography forums.

As part of a species recovery programme for the Great Indian Bustard, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) has reportedly banned photography of the bird during its breeding season from April to October in Gujarat. The reason cited is: “Unethical photography during the breeding season often acts as a constant source of disturbance to the bustards and disturbs their breeding patterns.” There can be legislative aspects for action against unethical photography under the Wildlife Protection Act (1972), but ultimately it is the implementation that counts.
Generally ignored by conventional tourists and maverick explorers equally, the Gondwana lies unexplored in the heartland of India. Its dense forests and rivers have been the home of the Gonds for centuries, whose unique lifestyle is in tune with their ecosystem. Writes Vijay Paranjpye
In the central heartland of the Indian subcontinent lies a huge tract of luxuriant forests, a segment of which is known as the ‘Gondwana’, literally meaning the forest of the Gonds. A glance at the map shows a prominent river system bounded by the rivers Wardha, Pranahita and Godavari on the west and the Indravati on the southeastern parts. But the most striking and beautiful of them all is the river Wainganga, which enters at the centre of the northern border of Gondwana and slices it into two unequal halves, the eastern half being the smaller one, currently known as Gondia and Gadchiroli districts, and the western part known as Bhandara and Chandrapur districts.

The Gondwana is primarily constituted by two natural ecosystems - the river ecosystem and the forest ecosystem. Both are relatively intact and have supported large agrarian, fishing and forest communities. In order to save the ecosystems, the communities which have used these natural resources in a sustainable manner will need to be protected. And if the communities are to survive and prosper, then the techniques developed by them for harnessing these resources will need to be protected. Tourists and travelers visiting this area therefore need to respect the local lifestyle and approach the villagers with caution and humility.

In brief, ecotourism should give pleasure not only to the tourists but also contribute to the livelihood of forest dwellers and the efforts being made to preserve the natural ecosystem. A visit to Gondwana is thrilling and challenging, as also revealing and educating, but it is mainly recommended for ex-
experienced tourists who are willing to explore the risks and uncertainties of the jungles and hills. Travelers willing to move out of their urban comfort zone and rough it out can look forward to being richly rewarded.

The Antecedents

The pre-historic antecedents of Gondwana are not just unique but awe-inspiring. This is the only river basin in Maharashtra which has uplifted rock strata from the Achaean period and the carboniferous Jurassic period. Evidence of this was found by the British ge-

ologist Reverend A Hislop in the Bhamraghar area in the form of fossil bones of large dinosaurs which can now be seen either at Somnath within the campus of late Baba Amte’s ashram or at the Nagpur Geological Museum.

Another unique feature witnessed after the advent of man was the creation of megalithic structures which can be found at Saori, Hirapur and Nagbhid. One such structure commonly known as ‘menhir’, or a tall upright megalithic stone, is found at Bhilam village in the Nagbhid taluka. Such stones taper towards the top and are sometimes carved in the form of figurines. At Hirapur one can also see a ‘dolmen’ or a small square room built with thick huge slabs of amazing proportions.

Historically, the earliest rulers of Gondwana were the Vakataka whose dynasty reigned from the 3rd to 6th century CE, and from the 7th century it was ruled by Buddhist kings right up to the 9th century. And although the inscriptions of Bhandak and Markanda have not been fully convincingly deciphered, it is believed that their reign lasted till the
10th century. Next were the Haiyaha kings of Kosala who ruled Wairagarh, Lanji and Bhandara for a few generations, followed by the Nagvanshi kings till the end of the 11th century. The Nagvanshi, also called ‘Mana’, were defeated by Kol Bhil – a Gond king with great strength and wisdom who brought together the scattered tribes of Gonds into one nation – the Gondwana Kingdom.

The region of Gondwana was largely left alone by the Mughals and the Marathas, barring a few short interludes by the Marathas during the 18th and early 19th century. What is remarkable is the long and continuous succession of Gond kings which was practically unbroken from 1142 CE, starting with Raja Ram Singh, followed by Shah Ballal Shah, and succeeded by ten rulers, ending with the reign of Nilkanth Shah (1735 to 1751 CE) – a dynastic period of 609 years!

Though well known in the region of Vidarbha, this phenomenal kingdom ruled by a tribal dynasty was brought to light, or ‘rediscovered’ by the British for the rest of India through copious documentation in the district gazettes of erstwhile Chanda and Bhandara districts. Unfortunately, today Gondwana is unjustly and infamously known for being the most backward, the least administered, and probably the most disturbed region in Maharashtra due to Naxalite insurgency. However, the reality of current politics notwithstanding, it is still by far the most beautiful region that harbours one of the richest forest cultures (aranyasanskriti) existing in India today.

The modern spillway on the traditional Navegaon Bandh

Waters of Wainganga
The unsung beauty of ‘Uttara-Wahini-Wainganga’, a segment of the river lying 40 km south of Gadchiroli town needs to be seen to be believed. The relative ignorance about this river is due to the fact that it was not really a part of mainstream Maharashtra or the erstwhile Bombay Presidency until the reconstitution of states in 1960. Wainganga, which literally means ‘an arrow of water’, originates at Pratappur near Seoni town in Madhya Pradesh, but then flows north-south practically during its entire course.

A local legend states that Wainganga initially started flowing north towards the Ganga, but lost its way in valleys and was driven southwards by fate, and so it turns and winds, ever seeking to flow northwards and ever failing. However, at Markanda near Chamurshi it gathers itself once again for a last effort and swings northward for several kilometers. But fate (and the geomorphology perhaps) is
too strong for it, and so it hurries away once more to the south.

At Markanda stands a complex of 24 temples, of which about 18 are standing and only four are in a good condition. Since these temples are on the left bank, you expect the sun to set on the opposite bank of the river when you stand facing it. However, because the river flows northward in this segment, the sun sets behind the temple complex. This peculiar visual illusion created by the Uttara-Wahini is amazing to visitors, unless they work out the locations and directions carefully. There are many other temples and antiquarian remains of Buddhist and Hindu origin. One finds prehistoric megalithic structures in 15 villages in the vicinity of the town Mul and at Chamursi village, which denote the presence of Iranian invaders around the 1st century CE.

The buildings which mark the ascendancy of the Gonds are mainly forts and tombs as temples were not within the sphere of their religion or philosophy. The tombs within the erstwhile district of Chanda - recently divided into Chandrapur and Gadchiroli - are unique in form and architectural conception. The distinctive masonry at Tipagarh Fort is quite different and does not resemble the forts of the Mughals or Marathas. The ruins of the palace within the circuit of walls at Tipagarh stand at the edge of a lake and are an indelible memorial to a style of construction of
trees found anywhere in India. Similarly, ‘bijasad’, often known as bastard teak (*Pterocarpus marsupium*) and ‘shisham’ or rosewood (*Dalbergia lotifolia*) are also valuable. Normally all wood floats in water, but bijasad is so dense and heavy that it sinks in water and so its logs can be transported along the rivers only if they are lashed to logs of lighter species as a support. The queen of the Gondwana is of course ‘mahua’ or ‘moha’ (*Bassia latifolia*) or the ‘kalpavriksha’ of eastern Vidarbha. Mahua blossoms profusely and the flowers are either dried and ground to make flour for making *rotis* or fermented to make liquor. The succulent fleshy corolla is eaten green or dried. The fruit yields oil which is used either for cooking or for lighting purposes.

For ardent wildlife tourists, there are four national parks and sanctuaries: Nagzira, Navegaon (Bandh) National Park, Tadoba Tiger Reserve and Chaprala, each with a rich composition of plants, animals, birds, reptiles, etc. Though the Tadoba and Nagzira are best known as tiger reserves, it the lesser-known species which form the important links within the forest ecosystem. Besides the Royal Bengal Tiger, one can see the elusive leopard, the ‘besra’ sparrow hawk, sloth bear, black-napped blue fly-catcher, jungle fowl, emerald dove, praying mantis, ruddy mongoose, the Indian monitor lizard (*ghorpad*), and hundreds of other interesting species.

Additionally, the Navegaon (Bandh) National Park is a composite ecological site having an 18th century Malguzari Tala as its centerpiece, and a tropical dry deciduous forest all around it. The park boasts of being a habitat for 60 per cent of all species of birds in Maharashtra and hence is also called the Dr. Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary. The area covered by these protected areas along with corridors is over 1,200 square km and is easily accessible to all tourists.
The greatest contribution of the Gond rulers to this region was the construction of over 40,000 Talav and bodee, now known commonly as the Malguzari tanks. The Gond rulers commissioned the Kohlis to construct tanks and then gifted them with lands which they could cultivate under each tank. The Kohlis are said to have been brought by the kings from Benaras as they were noted for their skills in tank-building and irrigation. They still take great pride in their work and their status is determined by the size of the tank or the length of its embankment. The water so collected and stored is used for cultivating sugar and rice, which explains why they are the chief manufacturers of ‘gur’ (jaggery) in eastern Vidarbha. Some of the larger tanks like Asola Medha and Navegaon Bandh have been strengthened and their height increased for augmenting larger storages. The ponds at Ghot, Rajgarh and Aamgaon are still intact and worth a visit.

The Malguzari tanks were constructed by closing the outlets of small valleys having streams. The dams were short in length and not exposed to any sudden rush of water. Invariably, there is a channel in the firm rocky parts from where flood water can escape harmlessly. The sites have been so chosen that a fair amount of good cultivable land is located downstream of the ‘bandh’ or embankment. Water is released through a device in the embankment known as a ‘tudum’ or a sluice gate, having a simple but effective arrangement for vertical ducts arranged in a series of descending steps, and leading at the lower ends into a horizontal channel which is pierced through the embankment. Built during the period from the 14th to the 17th century, most of them have stood the test of time, as they are still providing water for irrigating well over 1.5 lakh hectares of land.

A Unique Fishing Community

Besides the agriculturists who are fully dependent on the Malguzari tanks, there is a large community of fisherfolks known as ‘Dhiwars’ who have inhabited hundreds of villages along the Wainganga and other tributaries. Practically every Malguzari tank has one or more Dhiwar village adjacent to it. Unlike the fisherfolk inhabiting the sea coast, the Dhiwars have developed special techniques for preserving the natural diversity of fish species. When the rivers recede in summer hundreds of small ponds known as ‘doha’ are left behind and large shoals of fish congregate at these ponds. The Dhiwars then use special nets wrapped around thorny thickets, and harvest them through the summer months.

Tourists who wish to visit and experience the life of Dhiwars can visit the Aashti village in Bhandara district. It has an amazing 56 tanks which form a cascade along two natural streams. One could also visit Jambhali village in the Arjuni Morgaon taluka of Gondia district. Similarly, village Mendha in Pauni taluka would also enable visitors to observe traditional fishing techniques and enjoy the local food of this community. The Gondwana beckons you to come and enjoy its natural beauty but also to support and sustain its unique ‘aranyasanskriti’ for future generations.

The author is Professionally an economist and special area – planner; Mr. Vijay Paranjpye has been an avid nature lover and mountaineer. Currently he is leading a team of experts of the Gomukh Trust for preparing an Integrated Water Resource Development Plan for the Wainganga sub-basin in Vidarbha for the Government of Maharashtra.
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NEAR KHALAPUR TOLL PLAZA, OFF MUMBAI PUNE EXPRESSWAY
It’s a world within a world. One that includes golden sands, plovers, dolphins, writes Sarang Kulkarni about Maharashtra’s famous Konkan coast. But what is equally important is the fact that environmental destruction of this pristine landscape and waterscape could be within striking distance unless the right measures are enforced to ensure that local communities become the guardians of these cherished places.

Magical Marine Haven
Coastal Maharashtra
Text and Photographs © Sarang Kulkarni
Blessed with the best that nature has to offer, the Konkan supports an exciting array of flora and fauna with more than 400 species of exotic marine life, Sargassum forests, algae, corals, pinnacles (underwater mountains), and more. My association with Sindhudurg is almost ‘karmic’. It goes back to 1992 when I visited Tarkarli for the first time as a college student. Coming from a remote village near Solapur district, the vast expanse of the sea was thrilling. The seas off Malvan inspired me to study underwater marine life and I went on to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to do my doctorate and became a PADI (Professional Association of Diving Instructors) scuba diving instructor. Later, in 2002, I visited Tarkarli again with my friend Homi Adajania (director of movies ‘Being Cyrus’ and ‘Cocktail’) and again, the sea captivated me. For all the years I spent away from Malvan, this incredible part of Maharashtra had never left me. I was back at the seascape that started it all.

A ‘Malvanic’ Paradise

Around then, the Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC) approached me to come up with a tourism plan for Sindhudurg. I had been diving for many years in the best locations in the world, including California, the Great Barrier Reef, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Lakshadweep, and South Africa. I was apprehensive about Malvan, considering the fact that Sindhudurg was in the middle of heavy human habitation, and prone to over-exploitation and pollution. And yet, every moment of every underwater dive I did off the coast of Malvan was up there in breathtaking experiences. The Andamans, Great Barrier Reef and Lakshadweep are all spectacular, but there is something about the Sindhudurg coastline that has a unique flavour of its own.
To begin with, the geology of the coast has created underwater rock structures and caves that support some of the most diverse and abundant marine life forms found anywhere in India. When I first began diving here, I was taken aback to see corals and Sargassum forests around the Sindhudurg fort and along the coast of Malvan. The coral reefs here are stocked with butterfly fish, snappers, yellow-striped fusiliers, lobsters, groupers, and even cobia! Several areas have stunning mangrove forests that offer shelter to endangered and migratory birds and saltwater crocodiles. Just as California’s kelp forests are believed to be amongst the richest underwater ecosystems, the Sindhudurg coastal bed too boasts thick, biodiversity-rich forests of Sargassum - a fact that remains unknown to most. Yet, in an act of farsightedness, the Government of Maharashtra declared Sindhudurg India’s first marine tourism district.

This amazing marine diversity, together with the warmth of the people of the Konkan, provides an unbeatable combination. Never once was I made to feel like an outsider in Malvan. The people are laidback and hospitable. Without a shadow of doubt, this is going to be the destination of tomorrow. Dotted with quaint villages, populated by simple fisher folk content with their daily catch, the landscape presents a centuries-old visage. In my wanderings, I actually discovered a tiger temple here and heard stories from old-timers of how the striped cat is revered by all Konkanis.

Tapping Local Talent

Encouraged by what I saw of the Konkan’s plentiful biodiversity, I introduced locals and select visitors to the joys of snorkeling. Some have even learned to scuba dive. Many young men and women have negotiated a smooth transition from fishing to marine protection as a way to make a living. This is not some kind of tokenism. Between snorkeling and scuba diving, as many as 400 individuals now make a living as guides. Was it easy to train them? Yes, it was. To begin with, they take naturally to water. All I had to do was to introduce them to the finer aspects of diving and understanding of marine life, which they picked up like a fish taking to water!

What of Tomorrow?

The Konkan plain, with its pristine shores and mangroves, is not adequately represented in the Indian Protected Area Network (IPAN). The Malvan Marine National Park is the only one we have but even for this, there is no long-term management plan. The total area notified for protection is hopelessly small - a mere 29.122 square km. This comprises a core zone of 3.182 square km and a buffer of 25.940 square km.
The core skirts the Sindhudurg fort where one can find most of the coral formations and the buffer extends on to land in Malvan town to a distance of 50 metres (500 metres elsewhere). It was a lack of proper communication with locals that initially soured the pitch, leading them to resist allowing a ‘protected area’ as they thought this would restrict their access to traditional fishing grounds. In reality, the restrictions were only limited to the minuscule core, which acted as a production factory to stock the waters where they were free to fish.

In recent days, Malvan has witnessed some baby and sub-adult whale sharks on its shores. Till the time this happened, no one even realised that these, the largest fish in the world, were feeding off Malvan’s waters. Mercifully, no chemical industries have been set up in and around this region and contaminants and toxins are almost non-existent. If we are able to put conservation policies in place that are in consonance with the people’s aspirations, making communities the prime beneficiaries of such plans, there is no reason why Malvan should not become one of the world’s finest diving destinations. Needless to add, controlled tourism and sustainable livelihoods are critical to such ambitions. Put another way, we must not, under any circumstance, allow the pristine Konkan coast to go the Goa and Kerala way, where construction chaos and overcrowding has edged out biodiversity and environmental concerns.

Malvan Promises Potential

To a very large extent, it is the visitors from urban areas who are guilty of the most destructive attitudes. They are the ones who foist decisions on locals who, left to their own devices, would probably find a good balance...
between tradition and modernisation. One thing is clear: unbridled development will seriously impact the livelihoods of the fishing communities, even as it would surely kill any tourism potential. Having spent the last few years in the region, interacting not only with locals but with decision-makers too, I believe that Malvan can become one of India’s most visible examples of how local participation in tourism can end up promoting biodiversity.

This is by no means a sure thing, but if we can keep out the heavy duty hotels and replace them with less intrusive facilities involving modern, comfortable, low-impact facilities owned by locals, yet run by tourism professionals through intimate ‘bed and breakfast’ lodges, home-stays, and high-end tents, we will see Malvan quickly marked on the global and national tourism map.
The Garden of Memories

Smrutivan

Ashok D. Patil
Photographs © Ram Jeurkar, Ashok D. Patil

In what can be described as the creation of a beautiful link between the memory of a dear one or an incident and nature, Smrutivan in Solapur is unique in many ways. It not only promotes tree plantation through sponsorship but also attracts visitors to its park with many themes that include a huge nursery of medicinal plants, an amphitheatre, a library, and much more. And above all, it has been designed in the most eco-friendly manner possible.
Imagine being able to plant a memory and watch it grow surrounded by nature. Your memory, consecrated in the form of a tree, gives back to the earth and eventually blooms and reaches for the sky amidst a tranquil garden. And then many such memories come together to create a small haven. This is the concept behind Smrutivan, a garden in Solapur, where people can plant trees to honour a memory: some trees are planted to remember people; others to signify events; and in one case, a person even planted a tree in memory of a tree from his childhood, which had been cut down.

The Smrutivan in Solapur has 17 ‘upavanas’, including a mango orchard or ‘amravan’, an ‘ashokavan’ and ‘atithivan’. The Smrutivan itself has 1,176 trees planted thanks to the contribution of 968 people. Each donation of Rs 1,000 entitles the donor to a tree of his or her choice as well as a small information board placed on the tree. While the basic idea is to let people honour their memories through nature, Smrutivan also functions as an educational centre. Covering an area of 10.12 hectares, it is divided into several smaller gardens or upavanas, each organised around a particular theme.

**Beyond the Trees**

Smrutivan also aims at providing information about local biodiversity and plant species in particular. To fulfill this purpose, a special garden dedicated to traditional medicinal herbs and herbs that have mythological importance has been created. At present, the medicinal herb garden has 6,500 plants belonging to over 300 varieties. Another key feature of the Smrutivan is its environmental awareness centre. While one could say that merely walking through the gardens is a learning experience in itself, Smrutivan...
also caters to those who wish to study nature further. It houses a library with over 1,500 books on nature, geology, geography and astronomy amongst other things, accessible to everyone at all levels, right from children to researchers.

To further the educational objectives of Smrutivan, a planetarium has been constructed on the premises, which was inaugurated in the presence of Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, former president of India, on March 2, 2012. Lush green and tranquil, Smrutivan also offers a
perfect setting to promote the performing arts. An open-air amphitheatre capable of accommodating close to 300 people has thus been constructed in one part of the garden. Great works of literature often take inspiration from nature and thus it is only fitting to find poetry amidst the serene gardens. As such, one part of the garden is dedicated to poetry, with excerpts from famous poems carved into stones, bringing together nature and literature.

**An Ecological Role Model**

True to its purpose, the park itself aims to be as eco-friendly as possible. Solar panels ensure that all the lights and pumps, buildings, and nurseries are powered by the cleanest energy source possible – the sun. As one walks through the park, one can spot solar panels placed on lamp posts as well as on the walls of the building of the Social Forestry Department located on its premises. Similarly, a compost pit turns waste into rich fertiliser essential for the plants and a biogas plant generates electricity from bio-waste.

Additionally, the rooftops of the buildings located within the park are adapted to harvest rainwater that is stored and used for the park. In other words, the park attempts to practice what it preaches. Given the success and popularity of Smrutivan in Solapur, plans are afoot to extend it to all the districts in Maharashtra. In the first phase, gardens will be developed in Kolhapur, Sindhudurg, Nanded, Thane, Sangli, Pune and Yavatmal. Guidelines for all the gardens are being drawn up, and soon every district will have a little green oasis where people can come and be at peace with their memories.

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**Distance from Mumbai: 340 kms**

**How to reach:**

**By Air:** Pune is the nearest airport.

**By Rail:** The nearest railway junction is at Solapur.

**Where to stay:**

Many hotels for all budgets are available in Solapur.

**Excursions:**

The pilgrim towns of Pandharpur and Tuljapur are important sites of pilgrimage in the area. The sanctuary of Rehekuri, another impressive grassland is a couple of hours from Solapur.
Vanashree Awards: Rewarding Green Activists

Shri Arun Patil, Publicity Officer, PCCF & DG, Social Forestry, Pune,

The Chhatrapati Shivaji Vanashree Awards are awards annually given by the Maharashtra State Government to reward exceptional contributions in the field of afforestation and wasteland development. The awards are granted on the basis of five categories, i.e. individuals, gram panchayats, educational institutes, institutes working in social services and government organisations working at different levels of panchayats.

The prizes are bestowed upon people who make a difference to the environment whether by establishing nurseries of local plant species, particularly those that provide fuel and fodder or by bringing waste or fallow land into use through afforestation. People are also rewarded on the basis of how they manage to involve the more downtrodden segments of society in this work, especially if they can generate employment and bring wasteland into communal use.

The national forest policy of India mandates that 33% of the total land mass should be forested land. In reality though, the percentage of afforested land is much lower. About 20% of the total landmass of the state is owned by the government, out of which 14% is forested. Thus the government decided to reward efforts made by individuals and organisations to plant trees on empty and fallow land.

As of 2011, 365 individuals and organisations have been honoured with the Vanashree Awards by the Maharashtra government. In addition, the government also hands out the “Vrikshamitra Award” to deserving candidates. From 2011 onwards, the winners of the Vanashree Award at the state level receive cash prizes of one lakh rupees, seventy-five thousand rupees and fifty thousand rupees respectively, while the Vriksha Mitra award is a cash prize of twenty-five thousand rupees. 29 Vanashree award recipients and 2 Vriksha Mitra winners were announced in 2011.
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Thousands of tourists make their way to the Konkan coast to enjoy its golden sands, fabulous cuisine and the warmth and hospitality of the people. Beyond the coast, lies an underwater world full of amazing ecological wonders waiting to be discovered. This marine haven, though, is under threat from unchecked development and pollution. N Vasudevan, Chief Conservator of Forests talks to us about efforts to keep the Konkan seas pristine.
Mangroves

Mangroves of Achra Sindhudurg
From the Tapi river in the north to Terekhol in the south, the Konkan coast stretches like a beautiful gold chain for a good 720 km. Many river mouths, creeks, small bays, cliffs and beaches, interspersed with historic forts, lend an alluring charm to this landscape. Better known for its mouth-watering seafood cuisine and the wonderful hospitality of its people, Konkan is also rich in coastal and marine biodiversity. Mangrove forests, coral reefs, charismatic marine species like dolphins, porpoises, whales, sea turtles etc., many species of coastal birds and other fauna make the Konkan coast a veritable treasure trove biological diversity.

**Mangroves: Green Warriors of the Coast**

Mangroves are a group of trees and shrubs found in the coastal areas, fringing the creeks, bays and river mouths. Being constantly exposed to the cycle of the ebb and flow of tides, only a few very well adapted plants can thrive in this volatile environment. Considered to be one of the most productive ecosystems on earth, mangroves are home to an incredible variety of birds, crabs, fish and other fauna. The unique habitat acts as nursery grounds for many species of fish and shell fish and offer them protection during juvenile stages against predators. They also act as natural barriers against sea intrusion, as demonstrated well during the tsunami that hit our coasts in 2004. Scientific studies prove that the ability of mangrove forests to absorb carbon dioxide from atmosphere and bury it in the soil is six times that of Amazon Rain forests. Needless to say, they are one of our best tools in our battle against climate change and sea level rise.
Over 30,000 hectares of mangrove forests adorn the coast of Maharashtra, with the metropolitan region of Mumbai alone contributing to nearly one-third of this precious wealth. As many as 20 species of mangroves are found here, in combination with many associate species of plants. Some of them are so rare, they are seldom found in any other part of the country. Unfortunately, the mangrove ecosystem is under severe stress due to several factors. Land in the coastal areas is in great demand, especially in the urban areas, for the expansion of real estate, setting up of industries and public utilities. A lot of construction debris gets dumped in these lands and tons of pollutants are released here, choking the mangroves to death. Many mangrove areas have been converted into salt pans and aquaculture ponds in the past. The loss of mangrove cover is a matter of great concern and the alarm bells are loud and clear.

The Mangrove Cell of Maharashtra

In order to protect, conserve and manage the mangroves of the State, a “Mangrove Cell” was created by the Government of Maharashtra in January 2012. The primary mandate of the Cell is to conserve and manage mangroves all along the coast of Maharashtra, but it has also been given the additional responsibility of conservation of coastal biodiversity of the state. The Mangrove Cell is the Nodal agency for implementation of the UNDP-GEF-Govt. of India Project on “Mainstreaming Coastal and Marine Biodiversity into Production Sectors in Sindhudurg District, Maharashtra” and the Indo-German (GIZ) Project on “Conservation and Sustainable Management of Existing and Potential Marine Protected Areas”.

Since its inception, the Mangrove Cell has launched several initiatives to conserve the mangroves of the Maharashtra coast. Nearly 4,000 hectares of mangroves in Mumbai have now been declared as Reserve Forests. More than a million plants of different species of mangroves have been raised in the nurseries established by Mangrove Cell. Regeneration efforts are in full swing in different parts of Mumbai, Sindhudurg and Ratnagiri. But what could prove to be most crucial is its battle against land sharks who threaten to systematically polish off the mangrove lands of Mumbai and convert them to shanties, hutments and other illegal structures. The Cell will also be focusing on linking mangrove conservation with the livelihood of coastal communities by promoting activities like crab culture, apiculture, ecotourism etc.

Dolphins, Whales and other marine mammals

Marine mammals like whales, dolphins and porpoises are a group of wonderful creatures inhabiting the seas. Many of them, especially whales are oceanic and are rarely spotted by normal tourists. Dolphins are the ones that are found more in the coastal waters, becoming a regular source of tourist delight in places like Ratnagiri and Malvan. The most common among these are the Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin with a characteristic hump. All the species of marine mammals are placed under Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, which means that their capture, use and trade are punishable offences. However, incidental catch of dolphins in fishing nets, collisions with powered vessels and their vulnerability to coastal pollution are areas of major concern. There is enormous scope to promote benign ecotourism of marine mammals with carefully managed codes of conduct. Capacity building for identification of beached and stranded animals, development of an SOP in case of such beaching or stranding and a community led conservation initiative are other priorities.
Sea Turtles

In Indian mythology, the turtle is considered as the second incarnation of Lord Vishnu and is worshipped in many places as the Kurma Avatar. True to their splendid reputation, turtles lead remarkable lives, which make them fascinating subjects for wildlife enthusiasts. A female turtle may take up to 30 years to become reproductively mature, but she makes it a point to return to the same beach where she was born, to lay eggs. In between, most sea turtles migrate vast distances, sometimes in excess of 12,000 km. The eggs are quietly laid by the females on the beach, above the high tide mark. The hatchlings that come out after 45-50 days slowly crawl towards water, but once they reach the sea, they display a great swimming frenzy, as if to prove that they are no less proficient than any of their other aquatic brethren.

Five species of turtles are found in Indian waters, but the most common among them are the Olive Ridleys. Many of their traditional nesting habits have been destroyed due to human intervention, which make their pre-
ferred nesting places inaccessible for nesting. In those few beaches, where they still manage to lay eggs, the eggs and hatchlings are objects of desire for dogs, birds of prey and even human beings. Efforts are now being made to bring a strong community involvement in the conservation of turtle nests and the safe release of hatchlings to the sea. As a result of such efforts, the number of nesting sites protected and the hatchlings released have increased by four fold.

**Conservation of Corals**

Hundreds of thousands of tourists visit the coral reefs of Malvan every year to see the beautiful underwater garden, which houses an amazing array of colourful fishes. To preserve the corals in their pristine state and to discourage tourists from causing irreversible damage to them, a major initiative has been launched as part of the UNDP Project. The snorkelling guides of Malvan are offered appropriate training programmes to inculcate in them the spirit of conservation. Efforts are also underway to reduce the plastic load reaching the coastal environment and to establish suitable anchoring sites for boats away from the corals. A coral transplantation programme is also on the anvil for restoration of disappearing diversity.

**Angria Bank—the Untold Story**

Angria Bank is a submerged, sunken plateau at the edge of the continental shelf, approximately 60 nautical miles off the coast of Sindhudurg. Named after Kanhoji Angre, the great Admiral of the Maratha Navy, Angria Bank is an area roughly the size of Mumbai. It has an average depth of 20 metres, which is unusually shallow for a place so far away from the coast. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the sunken plateau is rich in the diversity of corals and reef ecosystem. It is also believed to be a congregation site for Whale sharks, the largest species of fish in the world. Dr. Sarang Kulkarni, a marine biologist and one of the pioneers in unearthing the amazing richness of Angria bank calls it India’s Great Barrier Reef.

As a part of the UNDP Project in Sindhudurg, the Mangrove Cell has commissioned an expedition to Angria Bank to explore and document its rich biological wealth. The National Institute of Oceanography, Goa will be leading this pioneering expedition, which will last about a fortnight. The first systematic exploration of Angria Bank from a biological point of view will thus begin, which is likely to reveal many mysteries of the water world.

**Conclusion**

A new chapter in coastal and biodiversity conservation is now unfolding in the coastal areas of Maharashtra, spearheaded by the Mangrove Cell. This is expected to lead to sustainable management of our biological wealth along the coasts, while securing the livelihood of the coastal people.
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Where Faith Keeps the Forest Alive

Sacred Groves

Archana Godbole
Photographs © Archana Godbole, Sanjay Pashte, Jayant Sarnaik, AERF

With the rapid stride of urbanisation threatening to swallow forest lands due to the need for infrastructure, the only hope for the green cover to continue to exist lies in the maintenance of the sacred groves by the local communities. As Dr. Archana Godbole, Director, Applied Environmental Research Foundation, points out that additional efforts need to be taken by individuals, communities, organisations and the government to ensure that such groves remain untouched by the monstrous hand of so-called development.
Human beings have been dependent on nature and have always feared nature’s forces. Across the world, people have perceived the wilderness to be filled with real as well as hidden forces controlled by spirits and deities. Sacred groves, as such, are relict forest patches traditionally protected by communities in reverence of a deity or ancestor. There are many theories about the origin of sacred forests across the world among hundreds and thousands of indigenous and local communities. The common thread is of fear and respect for nature and ancestors. People would cut the wood of the forest for their needs but keep a patch of it intact as a sacred grove in the name of a deity. This would also act as a refuge to the many animal species living there.

The tradition of maintaining such forests is common all over the world and we find sacred groves in different forms across South America, Africa, Southeast Asia, China and Japan. Amazonian people often speak of spirits in the forests. The Kukama people say that there are spirits in streams, lakes, trees and waterfalls and they guard these spaces. In Kenya the sacred forests of Kaya are believed to be the abode of ancestors and the core of the Kayas is forbidden to researchers. In China holy hills are protected for spirits and deities. The stories of formation of each sacred forest are also different and varied across cultures and geographies.
Sacred Groves in Western Ghats

A sacred grove is a traditional multipurpose religious centre of one or more villages and is managed by the communities and priests. India has well over 13,000 documented sacred groves. More than 1,000 such groves have been recorded in the Western Ghats biodiversity hotspot regions. These groves across India are important locally conserved wilderness areas and have been central to the residing communities’ understanding of conservation in a broader sense. They are also significant repositories of regional biodiversity and have been known to retain viable populations of rare and endangered plants in addition to serving as corridors in an otherwise ‘sterile’ landscape. Sacred groves are distributed over a wide variety of ecosystems like forests, mountains, lakes, estuaries and streams in India.

These sacred sites have provided an opportunity to maintain flora and fauna and habitats in near natural conditions. Since time immemorial the deities and the vegetation had equal importance and therefore many rare and endangered species have been protected in sacred groves though they have disappeared elsewhere. However, these sacred landscapes and sites have now been facing enormous challenges in today’s globalized world with the synergies between people and nature having been disturbed due to the processes of infrastructure development and market mechanisms of increasing urbanisation. It is a challenge for conservation researchers, thinkers, policy makers and practitioners to help protect these sites for posterity as also to protect the species therein, and to relate local communities to them through the revival of cultural norms.

The spiritual and cultural basis of sacred groves can be used for developing and implementing long-term biodiversity conservation programmes for the Western Ghats region of India. In Kerala they are known as ‘Kavu’; in Tamil Nadu they are called ‘Kovilkadu’; in Karnataka these are ‘Devarkadu’; and in Maharashtra they are ‘Devrahati’ or ‘Devrai’. Sacred groves are also an integral part of the rural social system in the Western Ghats. Nature worship is central to the belief systems here and therefore festivals, religious ceremonies, village meetings and decisions regarding the use and distribution of local natural resources are often made in the temple inside the grove. In fact, most of the festivals and fairs take place in the sacred grove and in its vicinity. In Ratnagiri district the two important festivals, Navratri and Holi, are closely linked to the sacred groves and have significant impact on the local traditions.

Many of the groves are relatively small but their high number and high quality as habitat for various groups of organisms and finally their role as stepping stones in the landscapes make them valuable for biodiversity conservation. Sacred groves are characterised by old trees, dating more than 100-150 years; buttresses of trees like Antiaris toxicarica and Tetrameles nudiflora are unique and can be observed only in well-preserved sacred groves. These groves in the Western Ghats also demonstrate the living links of culture and conservation. In sacred groves old growth trees like Terminalias and various...
Ficus (fig) species provide nesting cavities to magnificent birds like the Great Hornbill that are responsible for the dispersal of seeds.

Sacred groves or ‘devraigs’ from the North-western Ghats provide shelter to birds, bats, insects, pollinators like bees and butterflies, and even mammals like mouse deer. These groves often are the origin of rivulets and streams and old traditional water harvesting structures like step-wells and ‘bawdis’. The vegetation and trees in the grove are important to maintain the flows. Sacred groves are therefore important sites both for regional biodiversity and for providing vital ecosystem services to the local communities. Streams and rivers that originate from the sacred groves act as the supply source of water for an entire village.

**Sacred Groves in Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg**

Threats to sacred groves stem mainly from acculturation and globalisation. Many sacred groves have been destroyed, with only the temples remaining. These include the grove at Humbrat, destroyed due to the construction of a railway line and a grove at Dewle that is now non-existent due to the construction of a dam. Such small sacred groves are often considered as negligible patches of forests that hinder development work. Also, many sacred groves have succumbed to internal pressures within the communities, resulting from the modernised world forcing changes in indigenous culture and social norms. Therefore, the conservation significance of these groves has been on the decline.
From 1985 to 1990 about 35 per cent of the sacred groves in the Sindhudurg district were clear-felled and replaced with plantations of exotic species such as Australian Acacia (Acacia Auriculiformis). This practice contributed to widespread loss of species and habitats. Logging and forest conversions took place with the consent of local people, initiating a process of acculturation and weakening of religious beliefs throughout the region. In recent times the temple has often gained more importance than the vegetation of the sacred groves. It is therefore a challenge to rebuild the faith, culture and spirituality of traditional systems for reinforcing the values responsible for maintaining biodiversity and conservation.

Dr. Archana Godbole has been leading the process of civil society networking in the Western Ghats for the last 5 years and is a champion of conservation on the ground in the north Western Ghats.

The AERF Project

The Applied Environmental Research Foundation (AERF) has been working on sacred groves conservation in the Northwestern Ghats for over 18 years. The subject of sacred groves has been well-researched in India but there have been limited efforts in terms of reviving the traditions on the ground and supporting community-based restoration and protection of the groves. AERF's participatory conservation work is concentrated in the Sangameshwar block of Ratnagiri district where it has revived the tradition of sacred groves and involved local people in planning as well as implementation for long-term conservation of the sacred groves. With AERF's facilitation, the local people have become fully responsible for managing their sacred groves as they were in the past.

These community forests harbouring the region’s valuable biodiversity are under tremendous pressure. Threats include encroachment for agriculture, grazing, development of roads, dams, canals as well as urbanisation. The concentrated efforts of the AERF have ensured habitat protection through restoration of degraded sacred groves and the rejuvenation of rare and endangered plant species of the region. The experiences of involving local people and understanding perceptions underpinning the spirituality of these areas have provided clues for effective long-term conservation and the space for learning new lessons for practicing biodiversity conservation on the ground.
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Bombay Natural History Society

Text and Photographs © Isaac Kehimkar

Established in 1883, the members of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) were mainly drawn from the Indian nobility and also comprised British officers who had a love for the great outdoors and were also good sportsmen and naturalists. This was a time when hunting wild game was both a fashion and sport. Members often went out in the wild and a good number of them contributed their observations for publications in the ‘Journal of the BNHS’ which is being published since 1886. Members also undertook surveys of various kinds that resulted in documenting the biodiversity of India.

The post-independence era saw the sportsmen and naturalists replaced by biologists, conservationists, and nature enthusiasts. Around the mid-70s the participation of the members increased, with a majority from the middle-class segment of India. This resulted in sporadic members’ outings. And finally the first camp for BNHS members was held at the Gir National Park in 1974. This entire effort was to bring people closer to nature to help them realise the importance of wildlife and the need to conserve nature.

Then the demand for nature camps grew and some of the earliest camps BNHS conducted were at the Keoladeo National Park, Bharatpur (1976), Valley of Flowers (1978) and Point Calimere (1979). By the beginning of 1980s, BNHS soon felt the need to encourage this member-driven activity, and so a one-man department was established to conduct nature camps and trails for BNHS members. Nature camps soon became a popular activity among members and often people took up BNHS membership just to participate in the nature camps.

Crocodile at Guhagar, Konkan
A Professional Approach

Today, the BNHS Programmes Department has a full-fledged four-member team and it is connected to about 25,000 people through the social media, interacting regularly with about 4,000 – 5,000 nature enthusiasts on day outings and nature camps that spread environmental awareness. Every year this department plans and conducts over 20 national and international camps as also day outings on almost every weekend. This attempt to ‘bring people closer to nature’ has now transformed a service department for the members to one of the fund-raising departments. As such, members can contribute towards BNHS’ conservation activities while participating in nature camps. Their first-hand experiences and involvement in nature conservation activities has in turn attracted more members.

While the Programmes Department fine-tuned and designed specialised natural history-oriented camps, it was felt necessary to find ways through which local communities dwelling in and around forests would also benefit through these members’ nature camps. This way BNHS would be able to achieve its conservation objectives to the fullest. It was then that efforts were made to collaborate with local ecotourism cooperatives to encourage conservation-based tourism.

In Maharashtra, the first such attempt was made in the Konkan region in Guhagar during the mango season. During the first year, we could not stay with local people as there were no facilities available, but all the meals were arranged in homes where participants enjoyed the local flavour, relishing their meals sitting on the floor. Watching birds and crocodiles in Guhagar turned out to be quite exciting. And being there in the mango season, the BNHS participants delighted in the unlimited availability of Alphonso (Haapus)
mangoes. The great success of this camp has led to many such others and it has now been nicknamed the ‘Mango Camp’. Gradually, accommodation facilities attached to the homes of the local residents have come up and now members prefer to stay with the locals rather than in resorts or hotels in towns.

**Ecotourism Outside Maharashtra**

The best initiatives in local ecotourism cooperatives can be witnessed in the northeast region, especially in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, and Meghalaya. Besides cooperatives, homestays in Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh are truly heart-warming. One such success story is of Samrakshan, an NGO working in Meghalaya, to foster local people’s initiatives to serve as platforms for judicious land use activities in the Balpakram National Park and the Baghmara Reserve Forest (BBCCL). Drawing from the experiences of the integrated conservation development projects across the world, Samrakshan’s approach has been to safeguard the interests of wildlife while ensuring that the survival needs of people are adequately met.
Samrakshan’s team members are involved with the capacity building of people’s groups - called self-help groups or SHGs - in the target villages. Once these groups are sufficiently mature, they are assisted to undertake a variety of activities for consolidating and intensifying agriculture for improving the yield from land. SHGs fostered by Samrakshan have been able to access government funds for specific ecologically friendly livelihood-enhancing activities. That apart, Samrakshan’s strategy in the BBCCL also incorporates community-based monitoring of elephants and enhancing conservation consciousness among people. Impressed with such unique initiatives, BNHS has also conducted nature camps in resorts wholly owned and run by local people in Meghalaya. The Garo Hills Nature Camp is particularly famous for the amazing variety of butterflies, birds and plants that the visitors are exposed to.

A Role Model

Another success story is of the Bugun tribe with whose help Dr. Ramaana Athreya and his team not only saved the Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary from degradation but empowered the tribals cooperative to run an effective and popular tourist campsite. Today,
the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), a consortium of major international and regional organisations, has identified the Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary as part of the eastern Himalayan region around Arunachal Pradesh (Nepal, Bhutan and all of Northeast India) as a critical global biodiversity rich area deserving of conservation focus.

In 2003, Dr. Athreya started the Eaglenest Biodiversity Project to encourage the Buguns to help in conservation efforts and to develop ecotourism that could benefit the tribe. As the project progressed, the Buguns started looking at Eaglenest as not just something that was part of their natural heritage, but also a community economic resource. Soon they had plans for the community’s role in protecting the area from poachers; reducing dependence on the primary forest for firewood; and training members of the community to handle tourists. Today, the Bugun tribals are stakeholders in the conservation of the forest. They run the bird-watching camps, generating revenue for themselves as well as for the community. There are now plans to build traditional huts with attached toilets for tourists.

Currently, the tourists stay in tents with basic amenities. Every year during the tourist season of November to May, this cooperative makes around Rs 25 lakh, which is good enough for a small Bugun tribe. Apart from this, every visitor pays a separate community fee (Rs 100 for Indians and Rs 200 for others) that goes to the Bugun and Sherdukpen village council for community development.

Another example is of Help Tourism (P) Ltd., a West Bengal-based tour company that is well known for extending a helping hand to set up tourist destinations near wildlife areas. One of their projects has been to help the Bodo community establish wildlife tour-
ist facilities outside the Manas National Park in Assam. This was after the end of the Bodo struggle during which much of the national park was ravaged. However, after the establishment of the Bodo Territorial Region in 2003, local Bodo youth aimed to revive the lost glory of the Park, which was then on the list of ‘World Heritage in Danger’.

To heal the scars of this nature’s paradise, an ecotourism model was developed with assistance from Help Tourism. Thus, the Maozigendri Ecotourism Society was established under the aegis of which the Bodos were taught lessons in professional hospitality. They are now experts in providing a unique ecotourism experience to people who come to see the wildlife of the Park. Ironically, these very Bodos tribals once hunted wild animals and birds for food.

The Manas Maozigendri Jungle Camp is a small set-up with four cottages and a dining-cum-commons area built in ethnic-style architecture. In the nearby village two guest-houses can accommodate 20 guests and for those who want to live the Bodo way of life, home-stay facilities are available in their village. The project has a pool of 31 local people as staff (service, housekeeping, gardening, and maintenance) and guides. Whenever tourists visit, the members of this staff pool independently manage their schedule according to the need. This extended staff pool is an excellent model to guarantee best service quality to the customers.

During the first camp with the Maozigendri Ecotourism Society, BNHS conducted a members’ camp in three batches of 20 each. And since then, every year the Manas National Park has been a popular destination for the members. BNHS regularly holds camps at these locations where local cooperatives successfully manage tourist facilities. This approach to help such initiatives is very effective and appeals to people who readily participate, enjoy, and help conserve India’s natural heritage. It’s also the right message they pass on to the next generation.

Sham-E-Sarhad
The Hodka Endogenous Tourism seeks to promote Local Culture and Craft based Tourism for Sustainable Livelihoods and integrated rural development. Its aim is to improve the local people’s quality of life, by creating more livelihood options, while preserving and allowing the community to develop their unique culture and share it with you, the visitor.

The Village Tourism Committee of Hodka village invites you to experience our community managed endogenous tourism project in the beauty and hospitality of Hodka village. Hodka villagers and staff have worked to provide guests with an intimate cross culture experience – opening the door to understand and appreciate the land, livelihoods, and people of Kachchh. As a guest/visitor, we ask you engage with the community in respectful and responsible ways, and explore all that Kachchh has to offer. We hope your stay leaves you feeling relaxed and rejuvenated, as well as informed about the deep traditions and practices of culture. Together, we hope to preserve the heritage of Hodka through sustainable travel, and create unforgettable memories at Shaam-E-Sarhad Village Resort!

For more information:
1. Samrakshan
http://www.samrakshan.org/

2. HelpTourism

3. EagleNest
http://old-site.clsp.jhu.edu/people/zak/ramana/wapMiscEaglenestBP.htm

Contact:
Bombay Natural History Society, Hornbill House, Opposite Lion Gate, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Road, Mumbai 400 001, Maharashtra. Tel.: 022-22821811.
E-mail: info@bnhs.org.
http://www.bnhs.org/
MTDC Goes Green!

*Be the change that you wish to see in the world.*

- **Mahatma Gandhi**

The best tourist experiences are those where the infrastructure is in harmony with the site being visited. No one wants the silence and solitude of a vast forest marred by the sound of cars and engines. With this in mind, the MTDC has resolved to go greener in its management of resorts and heritage sites across Maharashtra.

Reform begins at home, and so the MTDC is beginning its green initiative by lighting up its resorts with solar energy. The MTDC resorts at Ajanta (Fardapur, Dist. Aurangabad), Velneshwar (Dist. Ratnagiri), Tadoba (Dist. Chandrapur), Panshet (Dist. Pune), Harihareshwar (Dist. Raigad), Sakoli (Dist. Bhandara) and Kalagram (Aurangabad City) will all benefit from the installation of a solar water-heating device capable of heating up to 5000 litres of water per day. MTDC has also chosen to install a Wind-Solar Hybrid System, to generate electricity for the resorts. 100 Kilo Watt capacity generators are being set up to power the rooms and suites at these locations.

Further, in addition to making the resorts more eco-friendly, MTDC is also attempting to replace polluting diesel buses by battery-powered vehicles in certain tourist locations. Green buses will be provided at the Sanjay Gandhi National Park at Borivali. M/s Kinetic Green is providing eleven buses free of charge to the MTDC at the Sanjay Gandhi National Park and another four are being purchased. These buses will be operated and maintained by M/s Kinetic in return for a share of the income.

Battery powered vehicles will also come in to use at the UNESCO World Heritage Site Ajanta, in Aurangabad from the Ajanta T-point to the Ajanta Caves to replace the existing standard diesel buses.

Finally, an expert audit of all the MTDC resorts is under way and soon recommendations will be made to make all MTDC resorts go even greener.
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Butterflies, Birds and More

The Nagpur Raj Bhavan Biodiversity Park

Ulka Athale   |    Photographs © Rajesh Joshi

The Raj Bhavan in Nagpur is the site of a new bio-diversity park showcasing the rare plants of the Gondwana region. We take a walk through this pioneering initiative which shows that cities too can take a lead in conserving our fragile ecological balance.
Nagpur, literally the centre of India and home to the zero-mile stone, nestles amidst the Gondwana landscape. The Gondwana region could be said to consist of eastern Maharashtra and the adjacent areas of Madhya Pradesh to the north, western Chhattisgarh, northern Andhra Pradesh and extends as far as parts of Odisha and the southern end of Uttar Pradesh. Its location in the centre of India also means that it has a unique ecological confluence of northern and southern Indian botanical wealth. This area is known for its rich flora and fauna and has many dense forests. Some of the best-known national parks in India such as Melghat, Tadoba, Pench and Nagzira are situated here.

The Nagpur Biodiversity Park aims at showcasing the rich biodiversity of the Gondwana region of central India. Inaugurated by Maharashtra Governor K Sankaranarayanan and Chief Minister Prithviraj Chavan on 22nd December 2011, the park contains over 28,000 plants.

**The Raj Bhavan**

The Raj Bhavan in Nagpur has long been considered an architectural marvel. Built in 1891, as a residence for the Chief Commissioner of the Central Provinces, it is a grand structure that had both horse and elephant stables when it was originally constructed.

Over the years, the vast grounds of the Raj Bhavan faced the growing menace of the highly invasive subabul trees. These plants, among others, were spreading rapidly and threatening the species native to this region. Rather than merely remedy a problem, the Raj Bhavan decided to go a step further and create a garden that would allow native species to thrive. This in turn would support the
ecological balance of the area by providing a home for a variety of species of birds, butterflies and insects.

After studying the situation, a proposal was tabled in 2008, and after three years of planning and landscaping, the park was finally thrown open to the public. In 2011, a new addition was made to this sprawling complex, with the inauguration of the Nagpur Biodiversity Park. Created at a cost of Rs 139 lakhs funded by Manganese Ore India Ltd, Nagpur, the park covers 30 hectares out of the total 49 hectares of the Raj Bhavan complex.

**Exploring the Biodiversity Park**

Imagine being able to take in the botanical diversity of the Gondwana region in one simple walk. Find this hard to believe? Well, that
is exactly what the 1.7 km long Nature Trail allows you to do. The Nature Trail meanders through the 30 hectares of landscaped gardens displaying a variety of plants, birds and butterflies.

If you walk along the trail, chances are that you might spot a few of the fifty peacocks that call the biodiversity park their home. Further, nests have been built in trees to encourage the birds to roost. The peacocks are just one of the 139 species of birds that you might be able to spot in the park, thanks to the profusion of plants that support avian life, making the Trail a birdwatcher’s dream come true.

Also keep an eye out for butterflies as you walk through the specially created ‘Butterfly Gardens’ complete with a water pond to keep atmosphere wet and moist. Adjacent to the Butterfly Garden you will find the Cactus Garden having a collection of a variety of cacti. Cross the road, and you enter into a ‘Nakshtara Van’, a beautiful plantation of trees planted according to the 12 signs of zodiac.

Officials have identified an amazing 63 species of butterflies flitting in and around the park.

The Rose Garden is another highlight of the biodiversity park. Spread over an area of
4000 square metres, it has as many as 257 species of roses planted in 23 beds, each with distinctive colour patterns. These include 104 species of Floribundas, 106 species of Hybrid Tea roses, 42 species of Miniature roses and 5 species of Climber roses.

By the time a visitor is done with the Nature Trail, he or she will have had a unique opportunity to take in the breath-taking diversity of birds, plants and butterflies that a mere little corner of Nagpur can provide.

While there is a lot that remains to be done in the field of conservation, the Biodiversity Park at the Nagpur Raj Bhavan shows that even cities can take a lead in conserving our fragile ecological balance.

**Distance from Mumbai: 820 kms**

**How to reach:**

**By Air:** Major Indian airlines fly regularly to Nagpur.

**By Rail:** Nagpur railway station is a large junction connected to cities across India.

**By Road:** From Mumbai, the Maharashtra State Highway 30 takes you to Nagpur via Nashik and Aurangabad, over a distance of 820 km.

Nagpur is a shorter 353 km drive from Bhopal via NH 69 and a 284 km drive from Jabalpur.

**Excursions:**

The famous Ramtek temple, believed to be where Lord Ram rested when in exile is 55 km from Nagpur. There is also a historic Jain temple at Ramtek. Pench National Park, one of India's finest tiger reserves is 167 km or a 3 hour drive from Nagpur.

The little known Markandi group of temples at Markanda are about 180 km from Nagpur.

**Where to stay:**

Nagpur has a wide variety of hotels and guest houses to choose from, to suit a variety of budgets.

For more information, log on to http://bioparkrajbhavanagpur.in/

**What will you see at the Biopark?**

1. Ethnobotanical collection of 57 species with 1669 plants
2. Plantation of 24 aromatic species with 591 plants
3. Sacred species collection of 38 species with 924 plants
4. Environment friendly and air purifying species of 18 types with 323 plants
5. Ornamental species of 24 type with 596 plants
6. Bambusetum with 10 species with 228 plants
7. Plantation of 40 native species with 1790 plants
8. Nakshatra Rare, Dashamul and Bulbaceous species plantation of 56 species with 341 plants.

**Plants to attract Birds and Butterflies:**

9. Bird attracting species of 13 varieties with 230 plants
11. Cactii (Nivdung) and Succulent species of 38 varieties with 1250 plants
For those who have a streak of adventure in them combined with a passion for bonding with nature and exploring the historical evidences of Maharashtra’s glorious past, there are ecotourism trails aplenty which will open up new and wonderful vistas of nature in all its resplendent glory, wildlife in its raw form, and the architectural remains of rulers of the past whose kingdoms shaped and structured the land. Here then are some of the trails that you can step on to.

Sometimes it’s not enough to simply visit a particular city and return with a sampling of its sights and sounds. A city or a town, in fact, could well be a starting point to embark on an exploratory journey of the many places, some of which may have remained unknown, surrounding it. Ecotourism is something on those lines. As for example, Nagpur is a city that you may want to see but what lies beyond it is what could add a memorable chapter to your itinerary.

VIDARBHA
Vidarbha is literally the heartland of India, with the Zero Mile stone located in Nagpur. Dense forests full of prowling tigers, leopards, and hyenas have made Vidarbha famous, and its national parks are arguably amongst the finest in the country. Nagpur itself is a vibrant, growing city, well connected by road, rail and air to major Indian cities.

**Circuit 1**
Pench–Ramtek–Khindsey–Nagardhan

Pench was declared a national park in 1975, and sprawls across both Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. A tiger reserve, its forests are also home to other species. Ramtek, 58 kilometres from Nagpur, gets its name from the legendary Lord Ram apparently having rested there during his exile. It is famous for its 600-year-old temple complex on top of a hill as well as the Ram Mandir built by the ruler of Nagpur, Raghuji Bhonsale, to commemorate a victory. A serene getaway for those in search of solitude, Khindsey is set next to a scenic lake. There are plenty of watersports for adventure lovers while trekkers can benefit from camps set up for them. For history buffs, Nagardhan Fort, dating from the early 18th century under the rule of Raghuji Bhonsale, makes for an interesting day trip.

**Circuit 2**
Nawegaon–Nagzira–Itiadoh–Ambhora

The easternmost national park in Maharashtra, Navegaon covers an area of 133 square kilometres. When staying at the park, make sure to book into a tree-house with an amaz-
ing view of the park. Nagzira is a wildlife buff’s dream come true. Tigers, panthers, bears, jungle cats and pangolins roam its forests freely. The waters of Itiadoh Dam are a great place for watersports or simply to unwind on a houseboat. The scenic village of Ambhora located at the confluence of the rivers Wainganga, Kanhan and Amba and a temple on the hilltop provide a great panorama of this area.

**Circuit 3**
**Tadoba–Chaprala–Bhamragad**
This circuit is a dream getaway for anyone who loves wildlife, spanning three very rich forests and easy to cover in a span of five days. Located 45 kilometres from Chandrapur, Tadoba is referred to as the ‘Jewel of Vidarbha’. Stretching across 625 square kilometres, its mighty forests teem with nilgai, chital, sambars, barking deer, four-horned antelope, sloth bears, bison, wild dogs, wild boars, leopards and of course, the majestic tiger. Chaprala is a sanctuary further east of Tadoba, which is similarly rich in wildlife. Situated in the Gadchiroli district, Bhamragad is famous for its wildlife sanctuary as well as for being the site of confluence for three rivers – the Indravati being the chief among them. Its forests are supposed to be a part of the legendary Dandakaranya, the vast forested area that covered most of central India, and is referred to in the epic Ramayana.

**Circuit 4**
**Chikhaldara–Melghat–Narnala**
Being the only hill station in Vidarbha, as well as the only coffee growing region in Maharashtra, Chikhaldara is also famous for being the site of the legendary battle between Bheema of the Pandavas and the demon Keechaka in the Mahabharata. Opportunities abound for adventure-lovers as trekking and rock climbing are popular activities here. Chikhaldara is conveniently located right at the edge of Melghat, a tiger reserve, which is home to a variety of species including hyenas amongst others. For a little taste of the region’s history, visit the fort complex of Narnala, which consists of three smaller forts. Dating from the 10th century CE, the fort has witnessed the rise and fall of several dynasties over a span of a thousand years.

**AURANGABAD**
Literally meaning ‘built by the throne’, the present day city of Aurangabad started its ascent to glory under the reign of Malik Ambar in the 17th century. Its prominence grew once the Mughal emperor Abul Muzaffar Muhi-ud-Din Mohammad Aurangzeb, known simply as Aurangzeb, after whom the city is named, established his camp there. And then...
of course, the re-discovery of the long forgotten caves of Ajanta coupled with the magnificent temples of Ellora put Aurangabad firmly on the tourist map. Here then are some of the places that you must certainly visit.

Often referred to as the smaller version of the Taj Mahal, Bibi Ka Maqbara was built by Aurangzeb along with his son Prince Azam Shah in 1678 for his queen Rabia Durrani, also known as Dilras Banu Begum. A majestic structure in its own right, Bibi Ka Maqbara is a must-see when in Aurangabad. An ingenious water mill set up by Malik Ambar, Panchakki stands intact from the 17th century. It was used to pump water for the ‘Nehar-e-Ambari’ underground water system used in that period to bring water from the hills. Aurangabad is also well known for its fortifications.

The city was once surrounded by walls and had 52 gates to allow entry into it. Of these, only 13 city gates are still open and in use today as a testament to the military might of the city. One of the most famous gates, the Naqqarkhana, lies at the entrance to the town of Khultabad in Aurangabad district. Imposing and majestic, it gets its name from the ‘nagara’ or drum that it houses. Aurangzeb’s daughter, Bani Begum, was laid to rest in a beautiful tomb in Khultabad. In typical Mughal style, the tomb is surrounded by symmetrical gardens laid out in a square. Bani Begum’s tomb is a lesser-known sight, but one that is worth a visit all the same.

Arguably India’s best preserved mediaeval fort, Daulatabad Fort, is an impressive sight. With strong walls and cunning defenses built into it, this 12th century fortress is breathtaking. Taking inspiration from the Mughal style of gardens, the Rose Garden at Majnu Hill will soon be one of India’s largest, if not actually the largest rose garden. It aims to have
the greatest variety of species as well as many rare plants on its premises. Roughly 70 kilometres from Aurangabad, Devgad is famous for its Datta Mandir situated by the banks of the river Pravara. Thousands of devotees flock here to seek blessings at this temple and plans are afoot to beautify the ghat at the river bank. Aurangabad’s two UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Ajanta and Ellora, are probably the biggest tourist attractions in Maharashtra, known for their magnificent frescoes and carvings.

**BHANDARA-GONDIA**

Popularly referred to as the ‘district of lakes’, Bhandara is rich in minerals and forests. Bordering Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, Gondia is one of Maharashtra’s frontier districts. Together, the Bhandara-Gondia travel circuit has a lot to offer to nature lovers and history buffs alike. Explore then some of Maharashtra’s lesser known but equally amazing wonders.

**Circuit 1**

**Nagra–Nagzeera–Navegaon Bandh–Pratapgad**

The Shiva Mandir at Nagra is believed to have its origins in the time of the Vakataka dynasty i.e. 250 CE – 500 CE. Located a mere 5 kilometres from Gondia, the temple is visited by thousands of pilgrims, especially during festivals like Mahashivratri. All wildlife enthusiasts will have heard of the dense forests of Nagzira, rich in wildlife. You can spend a couple of days looking out for tigers, panthers, jungle cats, sloth bears, and more. The Navegaon Bandh National Park is full of low-lying hills and little rivulets that make it a haven for bird-watchers. There are plans to add adventure sports to the already amazing sights it has to offer. About 40 kilometres to the southeast of Bhandara, Pratapgad Fort has towered mightily over the regions at a height of 1,842 feet. Believed to have been constructed under the reign of the Gonds, it was subsequently held by Raj Khan under the rule of Bakht Buland, the ruler of Devgad. A trek up to the fort makes for a lovely excursion for both history and nature lovers.

**Circuit 2**

**Ramtek–Gaimukh–Chandpur**

With its 600-year-old temple, Ramtek is a part of the Vidarbha travel circuit through Pench and Khindsey as well as this one. The striking hill-top temple is a must-see when visiting this area. Roughly 50 kilometres from Ramtek, Gaimukh is a small village to the north of Bhandara district. It is famous for its cave temple, and its rocks, which are the source of a spring, hence lending it the title “cow’s mouth”. For a serene and rejuvenating getaway, make your way to Chandpur in the Tumsar taluka of Bhandara. Nestled amidst hillside plantations overlooking a tranquil reservoir, this is the place to refresh your-
Nanded Mega Circuit Development

Vishnupuri

Set along the Godavari river, Vishnupuri benefits from the barrage constructed on the river to create a massive back water reservoir called Shankar Sagar. The semi-circular reservoir, surrounded by greenery and flanked by an ancient Shiva temple, make this an ideal spot for tourists. The creation of the reservoir in fact, has led to the development of bird watching in the area.

As a part of the Nanded Mega Tourist Circuit development plan, the area has been earmarked to be host a tourist facilitation centre, observatory tower, eco village huts, an amphitheatre, a rural products gallery and much more. Activities such as boating are also planned for the tranquil backwaters.

When in Nanded, make sure to catch all the local sites such as:

The Sachkhand Gurudwara, one of the holiest sites of Sikhism in India. It is where the Guru Gobind Singh breathed his last.

Kandhar fort believed to be built by the Rashtrakuta ruler Krishna III still stands strong.

The hot springs at Unkeshwar with its famous tanks are always popular among tourists. The water in the tanks remains a constant 42 degrees Celsius thanks to the underground springs and is traditionally believed to have curative powers by locals.

The author is a writer and travel enthusiast who takes a keen interest in heritage tourism.
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Chaukul

Chinmaya Kulkarni

Photographs © Animesh Mathur, Chinmay Morgaonkar, Kokan Bhumi Pratishthan

Chinmaya Kulkarni finds in this village near Amboli a remarkable mix of tradition and innovation where pride and stewardship meet hospitality and warmth. And above all, it helps him unwind from the pressures of urban chaos as he tries his hand at fishing in the night, going for long treks, getting involved with harvesting a field, sharing a delectable meal, and taking time off to count the stars.
Located 10 km from Amboli, Chaukul sits right on the edge of the Deccan Plateau. It consists of a group of 13 settlements – 12 wadis, and the village proper. The terrain in the area is wonderfully diverse – flat plateau tops separated by gentle slopes, steep cliffs and valleys, with settlements strategically nestled within. With different types of terrain come different flora and fauna. The terrain also dictates aspects of local life – for example, much of the agriculture is organic since highly water-soluble chemical fertilisers would simply get washed downhill after a shower.

**The Visionary**

Listening to Sanjay Yadavrao, chairman of Kokan Bhumi Pratishthan, one senses a quiet determination as he talks about his vision for ecotourism and his passion for Kokan. “Ecotourism,” he says, “is only meaningful when it is inclusive; if the expansion of tourism leads to the exclusion of certain people from rights, resources, or profits, then it is counter-productive. Ecotourism must be carried out with an inherent sense of responsibility, with mutual respect and benefits for villagers and tourists.”

Specifically, his vision is that tourists, instead of descending upon a few intensively developed high-density spots, be spread out across numerous locations, each with its own unique points. Apart from lowering the pressure on ecosystems and infrastructure, such lower-density patterns allow local villagers to own the tourism initiatives. Tourists, as per Yadavrao’s vision, will be welcomed in low-cost facilities that farmers can afford. What such facilities lack in opulence, they more than make up for in the culturally rich experience that they provide. Nuances of culture – food, music, sports – can be expressed. Additionally, since tourists come to enjoy natural and cultural heritage, local residents are encouraged to ensure its conservation.

Yadavrao takes great pride in relating how in Chaukul, Kokan Bhumi Pratishthan merely planted a concept, helped with publicity, and provided ad-hoc support along the way – the hard work was done by residents themselves.
His organisation has begun such work in five villages, and has received state government funding to begin work in 22 villages. Ambitious plans are already in place and Yadavrao is confident that local residents will continue to drive new models of tourism.

**The Doers**

One such local resident is Suresh Gawade. In contrast to Yadavrao’s quiet determination, he exudes ebullient enthusiasm. Gawade is a farmer, a pioneering advocate of tourism efforts in Chaukul, and our host. Residents like him have taken an active role in Chaukul’s tourism. They are visibly proud of the village and of their role as hosts. This pride was visible in three members of the Gawade family – Suresh, Sunil and Nitin – as they told us how an organisation was formed to oversee ecotourism in Chaukul. They told us how they decided that houses offered to tourists, while simple, must have Western toilets and running water (a pair of slippers outside our bathroom demonstrated the thought that had gone into this). They are proud of their fluency in Hindi and Marathi, in addition to Malvani.

There is also growing recognition that while they might take aspects of the village for granted, tourists might see the same aspects as revelations. Therefore, a hitherto anonymous plateau with many medicinal plants has been named Dhanvantari Point. A sunset point is being similarly rebranded, as is a vantage point from where most of Goa is visible on clear nights. In fact, the level of initiative is striking. Whether it is corresponding with bureaucrats and politicians like the district collector, tehsildar or the guardian minister about funds for the road from Amboli; negotiating terms with a bank to dispense with collateral for tourism-related loans; planning for facilities; involving ever more farmers; exploring all funding avenues to strengthen their projects; or establishing well-planned and constantly improving systems of management and record-keeping, the fact that residents have truly taken ownership of this initiative is evident.

At the same time, it is impossible to miss the humility in the sincere request for, and gracious acceptance of, suggestions; or in the copious gratitude expressed towards Kokan Bhumi Pratishthan and Lupin Foundation. It truly seems as though, despite the inevitable difficulties, big strides have been made towards common goals.

**The Tourists**

That’s all very nice but what does it add up to for tourists? To answer that, here is a brief chronicle of our Chaukul trip. I and my friend are both decidedly ‘urban’ people. One of us is a vegetarian, the other is not. Our Marathi is ‘iffy’ at best. We made the trip in a battered,
13-year old Maruti Esteem. In other words, if culture, cuisine, language, or bad roads were to prove problematic for anyone, they would prove problematic for us. As it turned out, we weren’t remotely bothered by any of these factors.

Practicalities first: the drive from Pune took just over six and a half hours excluding breaks (traffic was very light, though). The roads were very pleasant, with scattered exceptions. The worst road was the 10 km stretch from Amboli to Chaukul, but it merely forced us to slow down; the underbody of our low-slung car was never in danger. Slowing down was a good thing, because we got to witness a civet crossing the road not 15 meters ahead.

Reaching our destination just before dinner-time, we were immersed in soothing sensations – the freshness in the air, the roof shingles of a house in the glow of a light bulb, the moonlit silhouettes of surrounding hills, the cow dung flooring underfoot, the sounds of toads, tree frogs and crickets, a distant radio playing Akashvani, and so on. We were up early the next morning to peek at some of the trekking routes around the area. Some routes will appeal to enthusiasts of culture and history, with temples aplenty (devoted to locally revered deities as well as widely famous ones), a nearby fort and Shivaji-era water tanks – one of which, we were informed, is the origin of the river Ghataprabha. Other routes will appeal to nature lovers, with the mosaic of habitat types; and plenty will appeal to those just looking for an invigorating hike through picturesque areas.

One attraction is the waterfall at Kumbhavade. A short drive from Chaukul, a kilometre-and-a-half walk (which, in the monsoons, will take you past no less than 13 waterfalls), and one reaches a dramatic waterfall with an accessible cave naturally cut into the rock face behind it. Cool and dark, with swifts flying and chirping overhead, this cave would have been beautiful even without a curtain of water falling down its front. We can only imagine its splendour in the rainy season.

Another large cave was littered with old leopard scat, wild boar prints, and had two entrances that led to even deeper recesses. We could easily see why animals liked the spot. What took us by surprise was the information that as recently as 25 years ago, pastoralists used to stay in that very cave, along with their cattle. These little gems of information stand out, as does the willingness of people to share their knowledge, their history, and their lives. Want a tour of medicinal plants in the region? Or a vantage point for raptor-watching? Or, perhaps, learn about creative fishing techniques? Such tidbits come thick and fast, and are genuinely delightful.

Also delightful is the food. A sample: Bhakris made from either jowar or nachni, grown locally; red rice, also grown locally; fish, caught locally; a vegetable and a pickle, both made from bamboo, harvested locally; chicken or mutton for non-vegetarians; ghavan for breakfast, and frequent offers of rejuvenating cups of tea. Words do not do justice to the satisfying, wholesome flavours.
To get a sense of Chaukul’s cultural vibrance, consider visiting when a major cultural event is being celebrated – Holi, for instance, or Dussehra, or the annual Jatra in December/January. You might catch Dashavatari plays, Geet Ramayana performances, folk dances, and a generally festive atmosphere during such celebrations. If you cannot make it at these times, do not fret. Depending on performers’ availability, bhajans (in the Warkari style) or a traditional dance by the pastoral Dhangar community can be arranged.

Apart from local residents’ homes, there is a facility that can house a group of around five people. This is slightly away from the village itself, but it might be a good compromise if you want privacy and laidback family time, while being able to dine and interact with the host family. Visitors can also enjoy fishing, for which local equipment is provided; night safaris, for which a guide will accompany visitors, either in their own vehicle or one that can be provided; bullock cart rides; fishing or crab-catching by night, aided by a Petromax, etc. Gawade is also keen to involve tourists in everyday activities of farmers – sowing and harvesting in the fields, feeding and milking cattle, grinding masalas, and so on.

Above all, visitors to Chaukul will be treated with warmth that is pure and spontaneous. The hospitality never feels rehearsed, yet it is earnestly thoughtful. Chaukul is truly a promising embodiment of the ecotourism vision.

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The author is a Pune-based travel enthusiast. As a closet petrolhead and owner of a highly polluting motorcycle, he has tried to salvage his moral standing amongst fellow environmentalists by picking up an environmental science degree.
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Kolhapur celebrates its traditions with the Sahyadri Mahotsav 2014

Kolhapur conjures up with its name the essence of Maharashtrian traditions, a city where the traditional still walks in tandem with the modern. It comes as no surprise then, that Kolhapur has been chosen to host the ‘Sahyadri Mahotsav’, a grand three day cultural event on the 10th, 11th and 12th of January 2014. The MTDC hopes to draw the attention of tourists to the cultural richness of the area and showcase the local cuisine, arts and crafts and martial sports.

The main events for visitors to look forward to are the folk performances by artists and the traditional games (Mardani Khel). The traditional games will include mud wrestling (kusti) and swordplay (talwarbaji). Kolhapur is also famous for its chappals (sandals). Guests at the festival will get a demonstration of how these chappals are made in the traditional fashion as well as how the silver ornaments from Hupari are fashioned.

With finest of its arts and traditions on display, let Kolhapur charm you this January with the ‘Sahyadri Mahotsav’.

‘Greeny’ to feature in ‘Vatavaran’

Pune – ‘Greeny The Great’- a mascot of environment will be featured in this edition of CMS Vatavaran Film Festival. Animation films of ‘Greeny The Great’ have been selected in the Festival produced by Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC). MTDC has accepted ‘Greeny the Great’ as the mascot of sustainable tourism and have produced these films to create awareness about the subject.

Films on the pollution and littering at tourism spots, made in Pune, will be among the 86 documentary films to be screened at the 7th CMS Vatavaran Film Festival. The festival will be held from January 30 to February 3 at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi. It is a series of 6 films, directed by Dhananjay Bhopale. The festival received 541 entries from all over the world. The shortlisted films include 34 films from 16 countries and 52 from India.

Alka Thomar, Secretary of the ‘CMS Vatavaran’ said that ‘Greeny’s subjects are very different. The films are focused on the tourist’s behaviors at tourists spots, pollution and the intervention in the animal habitat. Thomar said, “The films have suggested very simple and easy solutions, which are quite different.”
Maharashtra Tourism signs MoU with Japan for cooperation in tourism

Within 20 days, soon after the cultural show at Times Square (New York) and signing of a MoU with Quebec (Canada), this is MTDC’s third major achievement in promoting tourism abroad

Mumbai, October 9, 2013: After winning hearts in the West, Maharashtra Tourism is now all set to woo tourists from the East. Continuing its focus on attracting foreign tourists to Maharashtra, the state tourism body, Maharashtra Tourism and Development Corporation (MTDC) has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Wakayama Prefecture of Japan.

Shri Chhagan Bhujbal, Minister of Tourism, Government of Maharashtra, said, “Japan has inspired the world through its culture and the strength of its people. It is also a major international tourist destination. Our association with the country will help promoting tourism in Maharashtra. This MoU will expand the mutual economic relationship in the fields of tourism and investment.”

Wakayama Prefecture is a prefecture or province of Japan located on the Kii Peninsula in the Kansai region on Honshu island. The MoU shall create cooperation between both states for expansion of tourism ties to enhance economic growth and job creation from expanded tourism ties. Both regions have agreed to promote agro and food processing between local enterprises through existing framework. Also present during the event, His Excellency Yoshinobu Nisaka – Governor, Wakayama Prefecture, Japan, Mr Sumit Mullick, Additional Chief Secretary (Tourism), GoM, and Mr Kiyoshi Asako, Consul General of Japan.

Within a short span of time, this is the third major achievement of Maharashtra Tourism on the front of promoting the state as a tourist destination to attract foreign tourists. MTDC had organized a mega cultural show at Times Square in New York on September 22. It was aimed at attracting foreign tourists and NRIs during Diwali festive season. The show was well received by over 3.5 lakh people who were mesmerised with the performances by Maharashtrian artists depicting culture and heritage of Maharashtra. Secondly, the tourism body had also visited Quebec (Canada) on September 28. MTDC entered into a MoU with its counterparts in Quebec to promote sustainable tourism and improving employment in the sector.

The delegation from Japan also got to see the glamour of the entertainment industry of India and participated in celebration of Indian Cinema’s Century with a theme of Cinema Tourism on October 10. Noted film director Mr Mukesh Bhatt who is also President of Film and TV Producers’ Guild of India spoke on what it takes for a successful collaboration with the film industry. A discussion by Mr Kulmeet Makkar, CEO, Film & TV Producers’ Guild of India included the points on promoting tourism through cinema.
Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh to join hands to promote tourism

Both States to sign MoU for mutual cooperation and joint efforts to encourage tourism in respective States

Hyderabad, June 21, 2013: In a major fillip to the tourism growth in Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, both States have agreed in principle to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for promotion of tourism in the respective States. The announcement was made during the inauguration of Tourism Information and Reservation Centre of MTDC at Tourism Plaza in Hyderabad. MTDC had also held a road show to attract the tour operators of Andhra Pradesh to offer tourist destinations of Maharashtra.

Shri Chhagan Bhujbal, Honorable Minister of Tourism, Government of Maharashtra, said, “It would be a win-win situation for both States which share many similarities and complement each other's culture. The tourists coming from other States can visit both States and that would be the core focus of this joint effort. Besides, we also would like to give message to the tourists and tour operators of Andhra Pradesh to explore the tourist destinations of Maharashtra which in itself is a wholesome experience.”

Ms Chandana khan, Special Chief Secretary to Government (Tourism, Cultural Affairs & Archeology), Government of Andhra Pradesh, said, “Sharing a border with Maharashtra provides several advantages. There are many tourists that come from Maharashtra and similarly many tourists from Andhra Pradesh visit Maharashtra. If we can work together on increasing the number of tourists visiting both States, it would be a great boost to the industry in both States.”

MTDC also kick started its national marketing campaign from Hyderabad. Dr. Jagdish Patil, Managing Director, MTDC, said, “This new office in Hyderabad is the second office of MTDC outside Maharashtra with the first being in Delhi. MTDC has been taking several progressive steps to encourage tourism in Maharashtra. Along with this new facility, we are also hosting a road-show for the tour operators to promote Maharashtra as a preferred tourist destination. It will be an interactive session with the tour operators about how best we can improve the number of tourists visiting from Andhra Pradesh to Maharashtra.”

Maharashtra to attract tourists from North India

Opens tourist information centre and conducts a road-show for tour operators in Delhi

New Delhi, September 6, 2013 - In a most aggressive marketing plan, Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC) has kick started its mission to attract tourists from North Indian states by opening its tourist information centre in this part of the country. Maharashtra Tourism aims to cover 10 prominent cities of India to promote tourist destinations of Maharashtra having already opened a tourist information centre in Hyderabad recently.

Starting with its marketing campaign in Delhi on Friday, Maharashtra Tourism is all set to attract the tourists from Delhi and surrounding states by setting up Tourist Information Centre at Hotel Janpath.

Shri Chhagan Bhujbal, Honorable Minister of Tourism, Government of Maharashtra, said, “We already attract maximum foreign tourists and now we are also focusing on attracting domestic tourists in large numbers. Maharashtra has everything in terms of tourist destinations. It is an unlimited resource for beach lovers, adventure sport lovers, honeymoon travelers, pilgrimages and sites of historical importance and for nature lovers. Maharashtra is one of the most developed States of India with a large class of educated and affluent society.”

Maharashtra is always known for its rich culture, art and festivals. The State is blessed with the world famous World Heritage Sites like the caves of Ajanta-Ellora, 720km long coastline, pilgrimages like Shirdi-Saibaba, Entertainment Capital - Mumbai, Buddhist Pagoda at Gorai (Mumbai), hill stations like Mahabaleshwar-Panchgani and Matheran, wildlife sanctuaries of Tadoba-Pench and India’s wine capital-Nashik.

Dr. Jagdish Patil, Managing Director, MTDC, said, “MTDC has been taking several progressive steps to encourage tourism in Maharashtra. Along with this facility in Delhi, we are also hosting a road-show for the tour operators to promote Maharashtra as a preferred tourist destination. It will be an interactive session with the tour operators about how best we can improve the number of tourists visiting Maharashtra from North India.” Apart from Delhi, MTDC is planning to unveil their tourist offices in Lucknow and Tirupati in the near future.

The information pertaining to all destinations and tourist information will be available at the new office of MTDC which will become one point source of information for the tourist enthusiasts from North India and tour operators.
MTDC and Quebec sign MoU for Sustainable Tourism Development

The Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC) recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Government of Quebec in Canada in order to develop a close tourism partnership and share best practices for development of Responsible and Sustainable Tourism. The MoU includes development of Ecotourism, especially in national parks and wildlife areas as well as promotion of MICE Tourism.

As part of the MoU, MTDC has also roped in a Canada-based management consulting organisation, SAJE Montreal - Centre of excellence in entrepreneurship, to provide MTDC with a solution for the Lonar crater's Sustainable Tourism development after surveying the spot and with a tourist diagnostic analysis. The Tourism Body will also use Quebec’s expertise in developing the Kaas Plateau as well, said officials. SAJE Montreal has taken up several such projects across the world in the past.

“The experts in the organisation explore the tourism opportunities and potential of a location and draft a plan on how a spot can be marketed. They also provide a solution for the spot's Sustainable Tourism development,” the official said.

As part of the project, experts from Quebec will get their team to Maharashtra, visit Lonar, undertake surveys of the destination’s inventory, and tourists’ diagnostic analysis, apart from having tourists fill questionnaires. “They have adopted close to 500 best practices, using which they provide a solution for a spot's development. They would later train various stakeholders involved in managing Lonar crater, including MTDC officials, hoteliers, guides. The organisation will also provide MTDC with a business model that can help the tourist spot run in a sustainable manner, financially and ecologically,” the official added.

A proposal on the same will soon be sent to the Canadian Consulate General in Mumbai.

Apart from this, the MoU will establish cooperation in facilitating promotion of travel and tourist visits between Maharashtra and Quebec province, apart from promoting close tourism partnership between the two. One of the objectives of the MoU is also to obtain mutual assistance in human resource development for the tourism sector.

Taking necessary steps for exploring avenues of cooperation and sharing of information in the tourism sector between the two is also on the cards. “Some areas of cooperation defined in the MoU include sharing resources and facilities in the field of tourism education and training for quality tourism development and hospitality, including exchange of experts between the state of Maharashtra and the Quebec province,” he said.
The Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation is making tremendous efforts to create a cultural calendar and celebrate traditional festivals like _holi_, _gokulashtami_ and _marbat_ on an international level. The efforts are also extended towards events like the Kala Ghoda festival and the Sawai Gandharva Bhimsen Mahotsav which have become seasonal destinations in Maharashtra for connoisseurs from across the globe. The MTDC is getting associated with the grandeur of these brands to acquaint the world with these events that Maharashtra is so proud of.

This year, MTDC was one of the sponsors for the Sawai Gandharva Mahotsav which is one of the largest and most popular Indian classical music festivals held in Pune since 1953. It is an annual event for music connoisseurs from the world over and emphasizes the modernity of Indian classical music.
music. The festival was started by Bharat Ratna Pt. Bhimsen Joshi to honour his guru Pt. Sawai Gandharva. Now renamed Sawai Gandharva Bhimsen Mahotsav after his death in 2011, the festival is normally held in early December and completed sixty years this year. It is organized by the Arya Sangeet Prasarak Mandal.

For more information, log on to: http://www.sawaigandharvabhimsenmahotsav.com
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