

Integrating science and management of biodiversity in the Western Ghats*

The Western Ghats is ranked amongst the 25 biodiversity hotspots that have been globally identified. The ancient lineage and the resultant diversity of species and endemism, especially in plants and cold-blooded animals, have attracted the attention of national and international scientists, naturalists and managers for over 100 years. However, initiatives to evolve a sound system of holistic management of the Western Ghats and their biological diversity have gained momentum only during the past 30 years or so. In an effort to sustain the momentum and bring together the large number of institutions that are involved in research, education, advocacy and management of the biodiversity wealth of the Western Ghats and as a direct follow-up of the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, the Western Ghats Forum was launched in the year 2003.

In September 2003, the First Conference of the Western Ghats Forum was held in Bangalore under the theme 'Western Ghats: Conservation and Human Welfare'. The Second National Conference of the Western Ghats Forum was 'Integrating Science and Management of Biodiversity in the Western Ghats'.

The inaugural address by C. A. Lakshmana (a forester and former Secretary; Environment and Forests to the Government of Karnataka) and the two keynote speeches by V. S. Vijayan and Satis Chandra Nair focused on the research needs and policy imperatives of the Western

Ghats. The proceedings of the entire conference was organized into seven specific symposia, viz. Species recovery and restoration; Invertebrates and conservation management; Ecosystem services; Water and forests; Conservation and livelihoods; Conservation education and Forest management.

The two-day conference was well attended and highlighted a number of important issues such as the need for holistic management protocols for species recovery, the highly threatened freshwater swamp communities that are dominated by wild nutmeg trees (family Myristicaceae), high rainfall zones and their unique hydrological cycles and integrating the conservation of invertebrates (and their ecological services) with 'wildlife', that are directly relevant to the long-term conservation and management of biodiversity in the Western Ghats. It also demonstrated the effectiveness of sensitizing people through innovative education that begins at the level of schools.

Since the Western Ghats is spread over six south Indian states, sound management has always been a problem due to lack of coordination among the states. In fact, even the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, the first in the country and recognized by UNESCO, has felt the need for better coordination among the three states – Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka that jointly manage it. The conference stressed the need to establish a 'Western Ghats Authority' with representatives from the states, scientific institutions and NGOs for better integration of science and management in the Western Ghats.

The conference concluded with a panel discussion led by J. R. B. Alfred (Director, Zoological Survey of India). The key issues identified for the discussion were (i) building taxonomic capacity and (ii) permitting field collections within reserve forests and protected areas in the

Western Ghats. The need for publishing field guides to more groups of animals was highlighted by the discussants. Alfred responded by inviting experts to contribute by developing field guides to lesser known groups of animals, which he said his institution is committed to publish. On the issue of training more taxonomists in universities and colleges, he drew attention to All India Coordinated Project for Taxonomic Capacity Building by the Government of India as the best source of funding and support for the purpose. Further, responding to the concern of taxonomists about access to type specimens and the poor condition of some type collections in Indian museums, Alfred reiterated the need to have type specimens deposited in Indian museums and assured that better infrastructure would be developed (in the lines of the national gene banks) to preserve the same and develop a congenial atmosphere for all taxonomists to have access to the material.

The issue of permitting collections within reserve forests and protected areas is not an easily resolved one. As the two Conservators of Forests present on the panel highlighted the various procedures involved in issuing collection permits, it was apparent that delays are inevitable. While it was felt that the State Biodiversity Boards that are being set up involved taxonomists as advisers, it was also agreed by those present at the conference that a lot of 'killing' for the sake of identification can be avoided if taxonomists developed a 'Code of Ethics' for field collection in the Western Ghats. The code is the first and immediate mandate of the forum in the effort to integrate science and management in the Western Ghats.

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