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## ENVIRONMENT-INDIA: Call To Save Major Biodiversity Hotspot

By Keya Acharya



**BANGALORE, Feb 8 (IPS) - Environmentalists are reviving a plan to conserve the vast hilly, forested region running parallel to the west coast of peninsular India (western ghats), recognised as a global biodiversity hotspot.**

"We have to get together again to stop the ecological degradation that is now taking place in the western ghats," says Pandurang Hegde, leader of the 'appiko' (hug the trees) movement of the 1980s, which forced the government to ban tree-felling inside the protected area.

The 'Save Western Ghats' movement of the 1980s involved over 20 local and regional people's movements who got together to march the length of the sector between November 1987 and February 1988, in an awareness-building protest against the construction of dams and power stations that destroy one of the world's richest habitats.

Movements under this banner influenced government policy to stop the felling of trees in Karnataka and cancel plans for a dam in the Silent Valley which was declared a patch of undisturbed tropical forest and converted into a national park in 1984.

The Indian government also set up the Western Ghats Development Programme in 1981 to ensure policies maintained ecological balance, preserved genetic diversity and created awareness for eco-restoration for the damage already done. But those successful environmental movements of the 1980s had, in subsequent decades, died down.

The western ghats cover 159,000 sq.km, traverse 1,600 km through six west coast states -- Gujarat, Goa, Maharashtra, Kerala, Karnataka and Tamilnadu -- and house an incredible diversity of species and some of the finest examples of moist deciduous and tropical forests.

The ghats in Maharashtra alone have 5,000 species of flowering plants, 139 mammal species, 508 bird species and 179 amphibian species. At least 325 of these are globally threatened.

Its complex network of 22 rivers provides nearly 40 percent of India's water-catchment systems.

New Delhi-based environmental writer Sudhirendar Sharma likens the western ghats to the Amazon forests in its environmental importance.

"The stakes for saving the western ghats are much higher than previously envisaged and the scope much higher", says Sharma, "The entire region stands to gain as it is the gateway to life-saving monsoons that provide water-security in the subcontinent."

But, in recent years, a fresh spate of construction activity encouraged by the government has re-appeared in these hills.

Currently the best stretch of wilderness exists in the Nagarahole-Bandipur--Mudumalai national park belt of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu states and the adjoining Wynad region of North Kerala, holding India's largest protected population of 1,500 elephants.

But the entire protected area faces great pressure from all sides.

In 2006, Prakruthi, a non-government organisation (NGO) founded by Pandurang Hegde and dealing with sustainable harvesting of non timber forest produce, undertook a journey through the ghats to assess the situation and found 'mindless development' taking place.

In Maharashtra, private urban townships, steel and power plants are posing a fresh set of threats to this biodiversity. Mining, diversion of rivers, wildlife tourism and monoculture plantations in Goa have conservationists worried.

Dams, power plants, mining and violent left wing guerillas threaten the ghats in Karnataka. Encroachments from agricultural plantations, urbanisation and pollution threaten the forests in Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

"The very ethos of the Western Ghats Development Program appears to have been laid to rest by the government," complains Hegde.

Sharma, who accompanied the Prakruthi team on their assessment journey and wrote a travelogue report on the situation, believes that the concept of the ghat's forests providing oxygen needs to



Credit:S.D. Biju

**The Purple Frog, discovered in the Western Ghats in 2003, is testimony to the area's rich biodiversity**



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commodified in the new market economy that has taken hold in India.

"If we can sell carbon offsets, why can we not sell oxygen outright?", he declares. " We need to set up a system wherein those in the ghats who conserve their forests and thereby help maintain atmospheric oxygen for the entire country and subcontinent should be paid by their governments for doing so."

The group meanwhile has decided to set up a summit later in the year where all the stakeholders in the western ghats can meet and decide upon a course of action.

A website will be set up in March to gather people's opinions, intensify the Save Western Ghats campaign worldwide and attract international attention, says Sharma.

" This new movement cannot be on the lines of yesteryears because today's reality is market-driven," explains Hegde. "We need to involve even marketing people in this venture."

(END/2008)

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