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India to Conserve Biodiversity at Grassroots

By Keya Acharya



Stall at the COP 11 of the CBD in Hyderabad. Credit: Keya Acharya/IPS

HYDERABAD, India, Oct 17 2012 (IPS) - India's National Biodiversity Authority (NBA) is actively promoting decentralised grassroots livelihoods as the best way to conserve biodiversity as mandated by the Nagoya Protocol on access and benefit sharing (ABS).

On Tuesday, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had announced at the 11th Conference of Parties (COP 11) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) India's ratification of the Nagoya Protocol, and pledged 50 million dollars for national biodiversity conservation efforts.

At the 2010 meeting of the CBD in Nagoya, Japan, the parties had agreed to halve by 2020 the rate of habitat loss, restore degraded ecosystems and work to prevent the extinction of threatened species.

But, finding the hundreds of billions of dollars needed to achieve the 20 'Aichi Targets' of the protocol has proved

problematic and so far dominated the COP 11 deliberations running in this south Indian city from Oct. 8 to 19, with over 174 countries participating.

"We are discussing the issue of where to garner resources without taking into account local communities, unaware that they have the full answer," said the chairman of the NBA, Balakrishna Pisupati.

The NBA has initiated countrywide documentation of biodiversity conservation efforts as a means of better understanding that could lead to policy-making.

Invited to seek out efforts in this list is the Centre for Forest and Natural Resources Management Studies (CEFARM) of the forest department of Andhra Pradesh, the southern state playing host to COP 11.

CEFARM has identified 80 potential sites in the state where biodiversity conservation has encompassed livelihoods that use flora, fauna and traditional knowledge of local communities. Some 25 case studies are now being promoted for replication.

Livelihoods in these case studies entail the sustainable use of bamboo for handicrafts, harvesting of non-timber forest produce such as honey and gum, conservation of medicinal plants, mangroves and community-based ecotourism activities.

CEFARM's director-general P. Raghuvver gives credit to non-government organisations for doing 'significant' work in the field in Andhra Pradesh.

Mangrove conservation by Kobbari Chettupeta village, near the seacoast in East Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh, is now being helped by the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), an organisation which has helped put coastal and marine biodiversity back on the area's map.

MSSRF came in after 1996 when a severe cyclonic storm destroyed several villages in the area, and a seasoned 60-year-old villager, Mythu Sathya Rao, realised that villages without mangroves suffered the most damage.

Mythu Rao then got his village interested in mangrove conservation. The MSSRF has been helping conservation efforts by providing smokeless cook stoves so that mangrove twigs and branches are not used.

In the interior areas of East Godavari district, protection of the Akuru range of the Kakinada forests by surrounding villages through forest committees set up with the help of the forest department has revived native bamboo groves.

Bamboo, harvested judiciously to allow re-growth, is now providing an excellent source of livelihood for tribal communities in the region.

In 2010, bamboo sales netted nearly 200,000 Indian rupees (approximately 4,000 dollars), divided equally between the forest department and the village committee.

The money was enough to meet the needs of 14 tribal households. Araghathi Sanyasi, a widow, used her share of income from bamboo to build a house, educate her three children and pay for the weddings of a daughter and a son.

“These are examples of what The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) actually means,” Pisupati said. India has an ambitious plan under TEEB to value its natural resource wealth with the objective of efficient and sustainable use by 2015.

Other South Asian nations, such as Nepal and Bangladesh, have also shown interest in pursuing TEEB.

Developed by the G8 and developing country ministers to study the economics of biodiversity loss and thereby provide solutions to environmental degradation, TEEB also aims to connect policy makers, conservationists and private business.

Prime Minister Singh told his COP 11 audience that India had unique biodiversity conservation efforts, such as a traditional knowledge digital library which has documented over 34 million pages of local knowledge systems.

The library, said Singh, was a response to biopiracy of Indian systems, most notably the patenting of extracts of the ‘neem’ tree (*Azadirachta indica*) and also of turmeric as healing agents. Both have been known and used in India’s traditional medicine for centuries.

At a local level, TEEB has been raising angst among non-government organisations and experts who feel that private corporate interests will appropriate biodiversity for profits, leaving local communities out in the cold.

India is one of eight worldwide centres of intense biodiversity, holding eight percent of the world’s total species and home to three of the world’s biodiversity hotspots.
