

BR Hills – sustainable use of forest resources as a conservation model

Regulated extraction of NTFPs like honey, lichen, amla and herbal medicines involving the resident Soligas and non-governmental organizations- VGKK, ATREE, TERI inside the BR Hills Wildlife Sanctuary

- (1) traditional practices of the Soligas – extraction of NTFP, jhum cultivation
 - traditional extraction and regulation regimes / how had these systems been worked out previously? Ecological considerations – how was regeneration ensured? How did the subsequent ban on “jhum” affect these regimes? Did it lead to more extraction or were these regulatory mechanisms altered? Population pressures? What were the salient features of these practices? Their system, in itself? What does the “forest” represent? What does “wildlife” represent? What is the world-view within which such practices have taken shape? What are present-day practices that reshape this world-view?

- (2) the Soliga model – intervention of organizations like VGKK, ATREE & TERI
 - the necessity and nature of intervention ? this enterprise demonstrates that intervention need not undermine the traditional wisdom base, rather if this traditional knowledge pool is modified and complemented with modern scientific methods,
 - (a) biodiversity/habitat can be protected & regenerated
 - (b) livelihood opportunities can be created thus securing the economic bases of people
 - (c) regularization can reduce the dangers of over-exploitation of resources

- (3) access to & regulation of markets
 - the setting up of cooperatives- Large-scale Adivasi Multipurpose Cooperative Societies (LAMPS)- through which NTFP processed products are marketed. This seems to serve three purposes –
 - (i) ensuring sustainable NTFP extraction
 - (ii) enable the fixing of fair prices for produce; middlemen who offer lower rates, thereby leading to over-extraction can be eliminated
 - (iii) profits through cooperatives can be channelised into developmental facilities for the community. As a consequence of this enterprise, the Soligas today have a primary healthcare centre, a secondary high school, a honey processing factory, employment through vocational activities.

(4) Components

The Honey Processing Unit is designed to process honey collected predominantly from wild rock bees (*Apis dorsata*). The unit has the capacity to process 30 tonnes of honey annually. It processed about 6 tonnes of honey in 1996 and about 15 tonnes in 1997, and made a net profit of Rs 340,000 in 1998.

The Food Processing Unit is intended to make pickles, jams, and other products. It became operational in 1996, processing 500 kg of pickle on a trial basis. Setting a target of 2000 kg of pickle in 1997, the unit aimed to generate a profit of about Rs 50,000.

The Herbal Medicines Protection Unit, located at Yelandur, about 24 km from the BR Hills, was originally conceived by the local NGO, VGKK to process ayurvedic drugs. It later received support and inputs from the TERI-ATREE project, especially on management, policy issues, and linkages to biodiversity conservation and profit distribution. It aimed to generate a profit of Rs. 200,000 in 1998.

Current rate of production and money generated? Any recent diversification?

(5) Monitoring

- methods and importance of such monitoring?
- Within this enterprise, initial monitoring of (a) the reliance of the Soligas on NTFPs (b) the prices obtained (c) the impacts of the enterprise (d) feedback from the Soligas on issues related to extraction, management and conservation of resources
- The socio-economic component of the project to ensure
 - full participation
 - equity of benefits
- How is long-term biological monitoring being done?
- Agencies that monitor? Soliga groups + VGKK (ATREE aiding in the setting up of a participatory self-monitoring mechanism – what are these mechanisms?

(6) How are new members accommodated within this cooperative? What are the implications of new members joining the group? Does this lead to a higher demand for forest produce? If there is, what is the system for establishing a ceiling on collection? Long-term sustainability?

(7) Ecological consequences – how is habitat change being monitored to keep extraction within sustainable limits?
(Siddapa Shetty's (ATREE) studies are significant in this context / ATREE monitors impact of extraction on forest health in BR Hills. Details.)

(8) As it seems, all of the above seems relevant before the amendment to the WPA Act, (Section 29 of WPA) which banned the collection of forest produce from Sanctuary areas except for “bonafide needs”. This led the PCCF of Karnataka to impose a ban on extraction of NTFP from BRT sanctuary. What is the present status around extraction from BRT Sanctuary? Order challenged? Interpretation with relation to BRT? (According to TTF Report, this has led to unbridled exploitation and greater stress on the habitat.)

This goes on to show that once these activities are deemed “illegal”, they actually turn counter-productive. There is also much ambiguity regarding the law. Blanket bans like this amendment to WPA which are intended to aid conservation actually begin to work against the interests of conservation, if one goes by the example of BRT. One can understand if such laws were to apply to “real” ecological threats like mining, etc.

When did this order come into effect and what has happened since? How has it affected the functioning of the cooperative, livelihoods/economic base in general and what are the consequences for the habitat? If the impact has been detrimental, then it is a perfect example of how an innovative conservation model has been dismantled by agencies that seem to speak in the interests of conservation.

Traditional knowledge - the resistance of hard-line conservationists to incorporating these models within the conservation framework. What are their reasons? This model is based on the belief that people need to be seen as a part of eco-systems and not as being extrinsic to it. The Soliga enterprise demonstrates that if such systems are regularized, resource usage can also be monitored and brought within sustainable limits. We cannot obviously expect such initiatives to take shape within all Protected Areas. And we cannot be naïve in thinking that every community will follow the same eco-friendly practices as the Soligas. There are obviously areas where there is unbridled exploitation of resources. The possibility of these exploitative practices being regulated into more ecologically sustainable forms should not however be written off completely under the blanket assumption that wherever there will be people, there will automatically be pressure on resources.