



## India

### Healthy Forests, Healthy People, and a Healthy Climate: An Initiative for Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Livelihoods in the North Western Ghats

#### News from the Field

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Applied Environmental Research Foundation (AERF)  
Conservation International

#### Background

The Western Ghats mountain range stretches approximately 1,600 kilometers along the west coast of India facing the Arabian Sea. The monsoon winds from the ocean strike the mountains, causing the plentiful summer rains that provide the main source of water for India's major rivers. This warm and humid climate gives the Western Ghats their rich forests and vast wildlife. The people who have lived here since ancient times enjoy a rich cultural diversity that is tied inextricably to the forests, and it has been their tradition to protect the culturally and religiously important areas of forest that dot the region.

Wood and charcoal are still major sources of energy in India's rural areas, and this region is no exception. People have a limited number of ways to earn a livelihood here, as well as limited knowledge about the range of ecosystem services that the community forest ecosystems provide. These factors contribute to destruction of the forests. The steep slopes of the Western Ghats are pounded by strong winds and rain, and once deforestation occurs the soil begins to run off and it becomes very difficult to restore ecological balance. This region has been identified as an ESA (Ecologically Sensitive Area) by the Indian government. Unlike protected areas, ESAs are populated with people who live and work. The goal in an ESA is not to forbid economic activity but rather to promote environmentally friendly economic activities.

Another feature of this region is the way that the forests are owned. In many countries, forests are public land held by the national or local governments, but here about 90% of the land is owned and managed by communities. Since many people currently do not understand the importance of conservation, this community ownership system is unfortunately one of the reasons that the forests are disappearing. At the same time, it is also a wonderful opportunity to work together with communities to conserve the forests.





Agriculture in a local community



A waterfall in the project area

The aim of this project, which was launched in July 2016, is to have people living in the districts of Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg conserve their forests by taking on challenges in their communities. To this end, the following activities are being carried out.

- In villages designated as ESAs, conserve the forests under conservation agreements that make use of incentives.
- Spread word of the project and hold capacity-building training for residents in order to come up with ways to earn a livelihood that do not interfere with sustainability of the ecosystem services.
- Introduce cooking stoves that run on biogas and biomass fuel in order to decrease the use of wood and charcoal.
- Map out ecosystem services and raise their value in the eyes of residents.

Note: This project is being carried out by Applied Environmental Research Foundation (AERF), an Indian NGO.

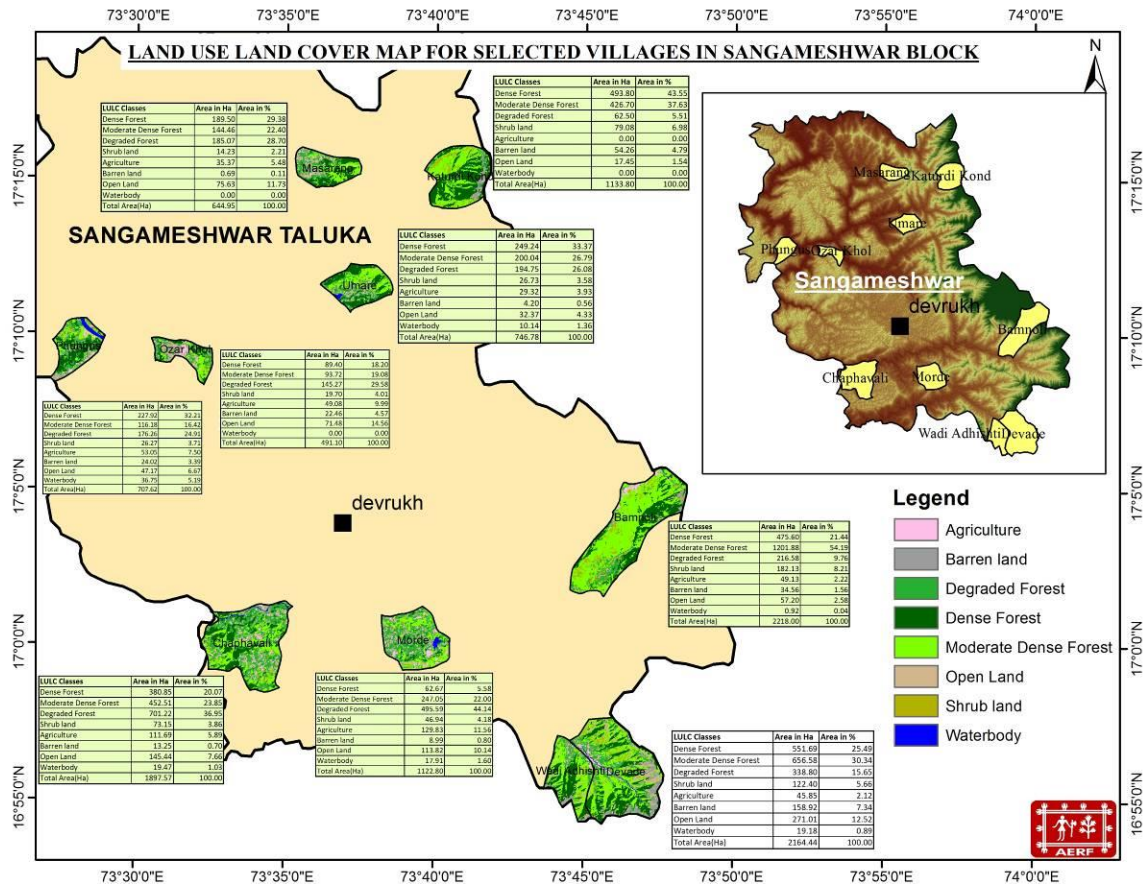
Let's look at the activities of this past quarter.

### **Forest Conservation**

A survey was launched to select communities to work together with on forest conservation. As a first step, a list of ESA villages in the buffer zone of the Sahyadri Tiger Reserve was prepared. This list contains 179 villages. The buffer zone acts as a crucial area for wildlife that are moving between protected areas.

A questionnaire was prepared for a community survey that sought to understand how local people perceive the loss of biodiversity and the disappearance of forests. Based on the criteria of elevation and remoteness, nine of the 179 villages were chosen for stage 1 of the survey. Land use and cover maps of these villages were created to understand the level of deforestation and find opportunities for conservation.

The survey using this questionnaire could not be completed this past quarter due to the busy schedule of farmers and the heavy rainfall during the monsoon period. The survey will be continued next quarter.

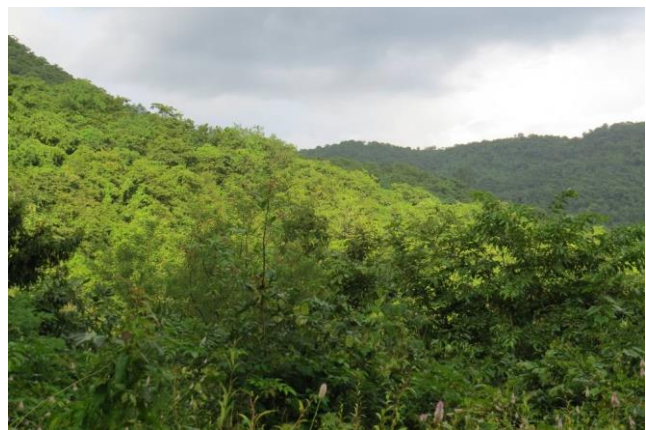


Land use and cover map of nine villages

Once the monsoons eased up, four villages (Bamnoli, Khadi Kolwan, Palu, and Anaderi) were visited to hold community meetings to discuss forest conservation. Community members are feeling positive about conserving the forests.



Meeting with community representatives in Anaderi village



A private forest in Anaderi village

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