

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

February 2017

Applied Environmental Research Foundation (AERF)

This project was carried out by the Applied Environmental Research Foundation (AERF), an Indian NGO

Biodiversity Survey

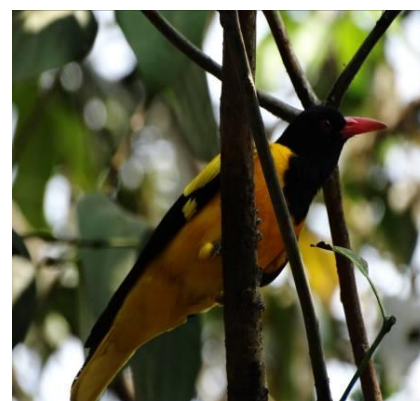
Before selecting a forest site for conservation, it is important to assess its potential for conservation. The AERF team thus carried out biodiversity surveys in the villages of Kirbet and Devade. Both these villages have been included in a list of Ecological Sensitive Area villages compiled by India's Ministry of Environment and Forests, and thus they need to be given particular attention in order to maintain the balance between conservation and development initiatives. Sacred groves from both these villages were visited in order to understand the diversity of plants, birds, and animals. Sacred groves are old growth forests managed and protected by local communities and they are representative areas of regional biodiversity. The AERF team found 74 species of plants, 38 species of birds, 14 species of butterflies, and three species of ants in the sacred grove of Kirbet, which covers an area of 10 acres (four hectares). In the village of Devade, AERF set up camera traps to detect and monitor the presence of wildlife. Camera trap data indicated a food chain with a healthy balance between predators (such as leopards) and prey (such as Sambar deer) in forest areas adjoining the sacred grove in Devade.



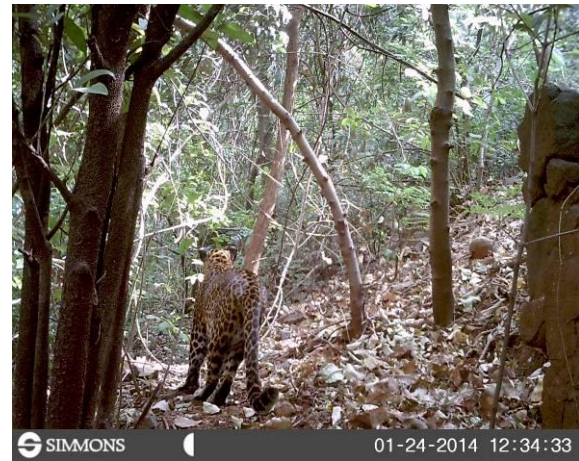
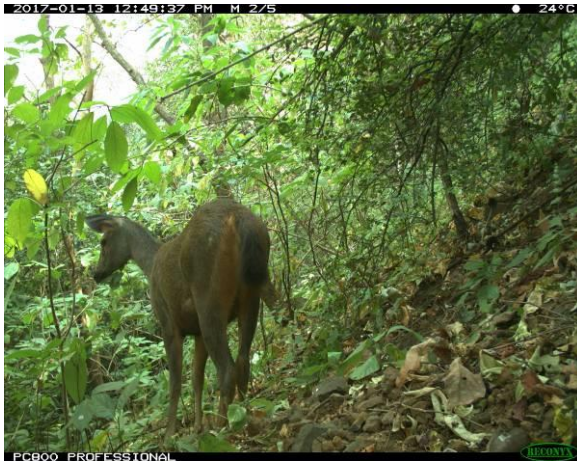
A temple in the Kirbet sacred grove



Large *Terminalia bellirica* tree



Black hooded oriole



A Sambar female deer (left) and a male leopard (right) photographed by the camera trap in the Devade forest

Community Meetings

AERF conducted community meetings in the villages of Devade, Kirbet, Terye, and Hedali as part of a feasibility study towards implementing conservation agreements. These meetings were important to understanding the perception of local community representatives with respect to existing forest governance, use of the forest, and what kinds of benefits communities expect. Community leaders from all four villages expressed positive opinions about conserving forests as long as suitable incentives could be provided to the landowners. Interestingly, community members from Kirbet were aware of the forest conservation initiative implemented by AERF in a nearby village and were curious to know the details of the project. Community members from Devade had also heard about the initiative and wanted to meet the AERF team to understand key aspects of the conservation agreements, discuss their concerns, and voice their expectations.



Meetings with community leaders in Terye (left) and Kirbet (right)

Sustainable Livelihoods

AERF has been working to promote income-generating activities through sustainable use of biodiversity for quite some time. Conservation agreements are of fundamental importance to the success of this strategy. Since 2013, AERF has been working on the FAIRWILD certification scheme, under which certification would provide higher income to the local communities and thus stimulate their interest in sustainable collection of non-timber forest produce. In 2015, AERF became the first organization in all of South Asia to receive FAIRWILD certification. As a result of this certification, community members receive at least 100% more than the market price for the fruits they collect. In the Daikin-supported project area, community members and AERF are involved in collecting the fruit of *Terminalia bellirica*, large trees that provide nesting cavities for many birds including the hornbill.

In the last quarter, AERF field staff measured all the certified *Terminalia bellirica* trees and tagged them to show they are protected. In addition, training was conducted for collectors in newly certified areas so that they could understand the FAIRWILD protocol for sustainable collection. Under this initiative, 15 families are engaged and benefit from sustainable collection, while about 300 large *Terminalia bellirica* trees have been saved.



Training collectors at the AERF field office



Tagging a *Terminalia bellirica* tree

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