

Voices from the forest



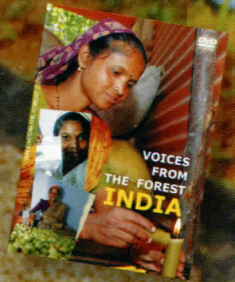
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NEW FILM ON NTFPS

voices from the forest in India

Women from a self-help group in India sort through dried amla fruit. Traditionally, amla is made into chutneys and pickles. Here it is processed into candy, breath freshener. Through the assistance of Keystone Foundation, productivity has increased three-fold with the adoption of new technology for processing. This story, and many others, are featured in a new film made by the NTFP-EP through Gekko Studio/Telapak and Dusty Food Productions.

The 30-minute film was first shown during the Madhu Duniya (Honey World) Conference (see p. 8). For details to get a copy, please email publications@ntfp.org (Manila) or kf@keystone-foundation.org (India).



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a sweet taste of honey

by KUNAL SHARMA, Keystone Foundation, India

The sleepy town of Araku woke up to a rather unusual episode on its single arterial road on the evening of 27th November 2008. For two Siddhis, with close resemblance to their African forefathers, were conducting a mock display of their honey hunting prowess, leaving delegate members and passersby speechless. To the accompaniment of music, honey hunters swiftly scaled a eucalyptus tree and artfully hunted mock honey. As they climbed down, an enterprising delegate collected user fees from the exasperated members of the town and gifted it to the honey hunters for their daring effort. This in essence was the spirit with which the first ever Madhu Duniya was held, with camaraderie and a willingness to learn from the experiences of one another.

Madhu Duniya has been unique in more ways than one. It was an international conference with participants from eight countries and about 70 participants; the agenda varied from scientific collection of honey to its management and marketing. There were technical discussions on appropriate technologies as well as light hearted sessions such as this impromptu mock honey collection. But above all, this was probably the first time in living memory that indigenous honey hunters from so many places on the earth assembled at one place and spoke about their art with pride, disagreed, sometimes even argued vociferously but each one basking in the knowledge that theirs is an art that is unique to the world we live in today. This was also an anthropologist's dream come true for it is not everyday that you find so many sub species of the human race come together, people with different looks and diets, but all sharing the common ancestor.

Programme

Participants from ten Indian states and seven countries deliberated for three days, with a field trip packed in so that they may see techniques used by locals in honey collection.

The conference was inaugurated with a ceremonial tasting of honey by participants and assemblage of people as per languages common to them. Thereafter, Snehlata Nath, director of Keystone

Foundation spoke on how the conference was conceived and what was aimed to be achieved. Laya Director Dominique also spoke in detail about the region and about his organisation, LAYA.

There were various sets of discussions that began with Jenne de Beer of NTFP-EP speaking about the work being done by the NTFP-EP and the need to work actively towards better management of NTFPs. Nicola Bradbear, from Bees for Development, spoke about the status of bees in the world through a well laid out presentation that touched on all the major issues affecting management of bees.

The conference was also an occasion to launch a new book by Keystone Foundation, *Honey Trails in the Blue Mountains* that elicited positive response from the delegates.

Voices from the Forest India, a documentary by the NTFP-EP that was produced by South and South East Asian partners of the exchange programme was the most awaited release of the conference. The film documents the role of NTFPs, including honey, in the livelihoods of people from various places of the country. These places, though geographically distinct, share a common link with each other – that of close associations with the forest and forest resources. Madhu Duniya was an apt moment to release the film as most of the partners who were involved in the shoot were present at the conference and heartily congratulated each other for the fine effort. Jenne De Beer officially released the film and it is now available to all through the EP office and through its partners.

Honey hunters who had assembled from various parts of the nation and Southeast Asia had an engrossing time as they listened to one another speaking about their trade and small secrets about this ancient art. The discussions were wide and varied as Joanne Abrina of NATRIPAL, Philippines spoke of their gained skills in forming sustainable organisations, Johnny Utama of Dian Niaga, Indonesia, spoke of the evolution and branding of the "Dorsata" brand which is in high demand these days. With people reminiscing about their honey types and nest sizes – honey hunters offered their experiences from the Nilgiris and from Mandla district, from Nagarjuna Srisailam and from Vishakapatnam region, from Orissa



PREVIOUS PAGE, L-R: Chandran talking about honey hunting in the Nilgiris; The participants during a plenary session; Banewar Dehuri explaining the various tools used in honey hunting

THIS PAGE: Government officials in a honey taste testing session; Wrapping up a day's session by dancing the night away; BELOW: Honey hunters in Peddabidda village

and from Belgaum, from Bastar and from Maharashtra. It was a day of sharing age-old wisdom that is under threat and the tribal way of life was perhaps better understood, fitting perhaps was to wrap up the night with a tribal dance performance locally called the *dhimsa*.

A field visit was planned for the delegates and they were taken to two separate villages, Peddabidda and Bangarampeta, where they got a glimpse of the village life of the indigenous people of the region. The visits were facilitated by the Kovel Foundation which imparts trainings and has set up

nurseries to replenish forest resources. The afternoon was spent in speaking to the people about their honey hunting techniques and benefits accrued from training sessions.

The conference continued the next day with presentations and discussions by subject experts where the most prominent issues that came up for discussion included:

- ▶ Culture of the honey hunters should be preserved;
- ▶ Local markets should be developed;
- ▶ Extensions should be taken place with indigenous bees and in a sustainable manner;
- ▶ Transfer of technology should take place, if they have too, in a planned and phased manner;
- ▶ Preference needs to be paid to 'value addition,'
- ▶ It is necessary to consolidate individuals into groups;
- ▶ Branding of value added products should be of a high quality;
- ▶ Technical research should translate at the local level;
- ▶ Policy should not have tunnel-vision approach with one size fitting all, but should be more responsive and sensitive to local cultures;
- ▶ Indigenous knowledge should be promoted and, wherever needed, should be strengthened.

Discussions focused on these larger topics and the last day saw delegates assembling into smaller groups to further discuss and

come up with recommendations and ideas.

The conference saw the active cooperation of officials from various government departments who were keen to use the expertise of the groups in their larger NTFP enterprises. Mr. Tapeshe Kumar Jha, conservator of forests in Bastar, spoke about his region and the efforts undertaken by the Minor Forest Produce Federation to bring together tribal villages and increase their options of earnings from sale of NTFPs. Mr. Pattabiramaiah, senior manager of the Kasipatnam branch of GCC, explained his organisation's pioneer role in organizing the tribal population and initiating sales.

The conference in its larger format was an opportunity to get a glimpse of the myriad ways that honey hunters practice their art. The practice of honey hunting is itself in decline, having being replaced by more commercial ventures. Moreover, the role of cultures and traditions is being relegated to the backseat, and the conference was a chance for implementing agencies to see for themselves the richness of this art. As it was the first such initiative, it is envisaged that in future, conferences would involve greater inputs from various stakeholders and thus assist in securing better management principles.

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Honey hunter Leiken, on the way back from Araku to Bastar, sharing some mahua flower wine with a couple of resus monkeys: "I learned something during the Madhu Duniya. Not to take the whole hive is really a good idea! Yes, I will remember it, but, you know, I am also glad to go home and back to work. Because at such events, day after day, it is sit and eat and eat and sit again." Hmm, maybe we need to plan for more exercise during future meetings...