

PROTECTED AREA UPDATE

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PERSPECTIVE

BARE FOOT ECOLOGISTS
Experiences from the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve

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One of the biggest opportunities and challenges in conservation linked field studies lies in the use of local and indigenous knowledge for ensuring benefits to the people while meeting the goals of conservation. Keystone Foundation's effort at doing precisely this has resulted in the formation of a brigade of 'barefoot ecologists' who work closely with its team of academically trained ecologists.

The barefoot ecologists were involved in ecological field studies on 'non timber forest produce' (NTFP) that involved the creation, location and measurement of plots and transects. When the results were unpacked along with them stimulating discussions resulted: 'did low seedling numbers during a transect mean all the fruits were removed during harvest with no seed left over for the next generation; was it firewood collection that was responsible; *Lantana* maybe good to make furniture but is it choking all the other saplings?' These discussions have flowed into villages and amongst NTFP harvester groups.

In 2008, 22 volunteers from villages located within reserve forest areas and along borders of PAs like the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve and Sathyamangalam Wildlife Sanctuary were trained in ecological field methods. The barefoot ecologists walked the forests of their ancestral domains along pre-marked routes at regular intervals. The purpose of these 'walk abouts' was to record qualitative and quantitative observations on habitat quality (presence or absence of fire, weedy plants, status of canopy, soil type etc), wildlife sightings (including birds, insects, honey bees etc), plant presence (to include useful and lesser known ones). Each team of two was encouraged

to take two more people from the village on the 'walk abouts' ensuring that diversity of knowledge within the village was captured. Nearly 200 kms were covered every month as part of this initiative that lasted a year.

The barefoot ecologist's willingness to come forward to scout the forests stems from their familiarity of the area and an eagerness to try out something new. They spoke, at the end of the project, of greater knowledge transfer, awareness on the need to conserve and the need to generate interest among youth and children. In one particular case, for instance, a team from a village just outside the tiger reserve met up with resort owners in the area and encouraged them to use less firewood and grow native tree species.

It is extremely important that these barefoot ecologists be nurtured. Their stake in the region is high because it is intricately linked with their identity and their livelihoods. They can be committed partners in our conservation efforts, be it to monitor forests, revive native species or deal with the problem of poaching and illegal removal of resources from the forests.

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PERSPECTIVE is a new column that will feature invited opinion, comment and critique every issue.