

Celebrating diversity!

"It is the belief of my community that trees reside with their entire families (fruit, flowers, etc.) from February to May. We believe that if trees are cut during these months, they will disappear," said Puwalabalama, a Savara tribal from Durubali village, Andhra Pradesh, during a consultation for the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP). He added that there was "no wild fruit for birds" in his village, and that non-tribals were cutting down trees.

At another such consultation held at Nahin Kalan village, Uttaranchal, children were asked to list various plants from the forest that they used (they could list about 30-40) and then told to imagine what it would be like if there was only *one* type of tree left in the forest. The startled children found this difficult to imagine, yet they were sure that "their cattle would be unhappy with such a boring diet".

Innate wisdom and simple logic, characteristic of traditional cultures... how does one translate this into an action plan to save India's biodiversity? How does one infuse such common sense, along with hard-headed ecological science and social responsibility, into the decisions that affect Indian society? Is there

some way in which Puwalabalama and the children of Nahin Kalan can impart their vision to the mandarins of rural development, tribal welfare, forest management and economic progress?

For the last three years, I have participated in an exercise that has attempted to do this. For once in the country's history, a national planning process has involved not only conventional 'experts' (scientists, government officials, NGOs, etc.) but also those who

Virhitio Pimuyii, a Naga tribal from Chedema at an NBSAP meeting. Those interacting with biodiversity on a daily basis were consulted.



interact with biodiversity on a daily basis... forest-dwellers, fisherfolk, livestock herders, farmers and artisans. Experts in their own right, these sections are usually ignored by all of us in the cities who think that we know best.

The origins

In late 1999, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) obtained funding from the United Nations Development Programme and Global Environment Facility (UNDP/GEF), for the preparation of India's NBSAP. Technically, this was a follow-up to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, but more importantly, it was a response to the country's growing biodiversity crisis. We know that there are at least 130,000 species of plants and animals in the country, uncounted species of micro-organisms, and several hundred species of crops and livestock. There is countless genetic variation within these species; in the case of crops, for instance, there are several thousand varieties of rice, mango, millets, beans and so on. And all these are harboured in perhaps the world's largest range of ecosystems... forests, wetlands, deserts, grasslands and pastures, mountains, coasts, marine waters



Small farmers consider their traditional seed diversity to be not only critical for survival but also sacred.

Draft National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan

The draft NBSAP plan, released in November 2002, has 126 strategies and 339 actions aimed at ensuring the country's ecological security and the livelihoods of millions dependent on biological resources. Some key aspects are:

- Preparing a participatory national land and water use plan and integrating biodiversity into district, state and national planning.
- Creating/strengthening decentralised institutions of governance.
- Reorienting development policies, laws and schemes to ensure that biodiversity is secured.
- Eco-regional planning across administrative boundaries, e.g. for river basins.
- Expanding and strengthening the network of wildlife conservation sites over 10 per cent of India (at least two per cent inviolate), managed in a participatory manner.
- Focussing on threatened and neglected ecosystems and species (marine areas, micro-organisms, etc.).
- Conserving landscapes critical for indigenous crop and livestock diversity and promoting practices to conserve diversity among farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk and artisans.
- Protecting and building on traditional knowledge of biodiversity and building capacity of all sectors.
- Facilitating sustainable, bioresource-based livelihoods and tenurial security to resources.
- Promoting indigenous, nutritionally superior food crops such as coarse millets through the public distribution system.
- Strictly regulating tourism and facilitating sustainable tourism by or with local communities.
- Tackling a range of threats to biodiversity, including alien invasive species and pollution.
- Strengthening the Environmental Impact Assessment procedure by integrating biodiversity in all its aspects (including agrobiodiversity, which is currently missing).
- Estimating the full ecological, economic and social values of biodiversity and reorienting budgets to integrate these values.
- Promoting traditional and new technologies that are ecologically sustainable.
- Developing ecologically conscious consumer groups and markets.
- Ensuring long-term independent studies, full risk disclosure, participation of stakeholders in decision-making and nationwide consultation regarding genetically modified organisms.
- Integrating biodiversity and livelihood issues specific to India, at all international forums, including economic agreements of the World Trade Organisation.

Implementing these actions is proposed through a series of governance structures starting from the basic village or town unit and moving out to district, state and nation. Also proposed is a detailed time-frame and a transparent monitoring process, so that implementation can be assessed. The NBSAP draft is open for public review and will be finalised by March or April 2003. The full draft and summary are available (summary in several Indian languages also) at <http://sdnp.delhi.nic.in/nbsap>

A street play on biodiversity and water underway in New Delhi, where environmental education is needed the most!



invested voluntary labour and resources into the process, enriching it well beyond the money that the UNDP had provided. In dozens of places, people who had never before sat together hammered out consensus by overcoming differences to reach a common action programme. Agricultural departments in Karnataka and elsewhere were willing to look, for the first time, at the diversity being conserved by farmers. *Adivasi* (tribal) communities in Nagaland and elsewhere tentatively agreed to stay the hunting of threatened species. Large commercial farmers in the drylands of Andhra Pradesh listened to the wisdom of *dalit* women who were demonstrating that organic farming had a brighter future. Farsighted MoEF officials demonstrated that despite a straitjacketed system, if there was sufficient will, open and transparent functioning was possible. The UNDP not only never interfered in the process, but facilitated contacts and readily agreed to mid-term budget changes.

The usual stereotypes, of course, were also seen: officials unwilling to open up to public participation and empowerment, the occasional hardcore wildlifer looking askance at livelihood issues and the equally hardcore social activist wondering if 'biodiversity' was another means of taking away people's rights. Many government ministries remained aloof despite repeated attempts at bringing them in. But instead of derailing the process, these gaps provided insights on refining our public outreach.

Processes are vital, but in the final analysis, they must deliver the goods. The NBSAP process has produced 70 action plans and 34 review papers, ranging from single village focus to countrywide reports. These remain independent documents, but their essence, in addition to earlier documents on forests and wildlife, have been distilled into a draft national action plan that was released in November 2002 and is currently open for public review (see box).

We are the first to admit that all the inputs are not evenly detailed or substantial. Some, for instance, are more comprehensive and far-sighted than others on the fronts of gender and equity concerns and agrobiodiversity. Serious thematic weaknesses involve the status of micro-organisms and the links between wild and agricultural biodiversity. The national plan attempts to deal with these weaknesses.

Action on the ground

But will the action plans be implemented? Or will they merely adorn the shelves and the *Curriculum Vitae* of the coordinators? Have we been able to put together sufficient fuel to translate the plans into desperately needed action on the ground? Will the plans stimulate improved behaviour across sectors, with developers accepting that biodiversity is as crucial for development as technology or money? Will conservationists consider people's livelihoods and knowledge while seeking to save tigers and butterflies? Will social activists integrate the rights of wild species into their visions, and will communities realise that the practices of their ancestors were more relevant to sustainable living than the ones that they are now adopting?



MAVANKHOLKAR



THAKUR DALIP SINGH

Floral diversity (the long-leaved morina Morina longifolia from the Valley of Flowers) and avian diversity (the Kalij Pheasant) were among the areas focussed on during the three-year process, that culminated in the release of a draft action plan, which will be finalised within the next few months.

It is too early to answer all these questions definitively. But some positive signs are emerging from the NBSAP process. Several states are setting up high-level bodies to focus on biodiversity, with Madhya Pradesh announcing policies to integrate biodiversity into the district planning process. Several villages and communities have vowed to protect heronries, stop hunting or switch to organic farming. In Sikkim, the armed forces have responded positively and in Ladakh, they are committed to ban all detrimental activities in and around protected areas including biota and artefact collection, off-track driving, target shooting, low over-flights and major infrastructure

to fight to ensure that the wisdom we have been privy to gains entry into the policies and practices of a development machine that currently displays a lethal attitude to the subcontinent's biodiversity.

Already there is discussion of continuing the NBSAP's process of networking, primarily to push for implementation. The action plans are being seen as tools that can also be used for advocacy, e.g. on issues of large dams, mining, industrial development, globalisation and other threats to biodiversity. And there is also the coincidental passing of the *Biological Diversity Act*, which will hopefully provide some teeth to several conservation actions suggested in the NBSAP. MoEF officials have

also indicated that they would orient many existing programmes towards the priorities identified in NBSAP.

At the end of an arduous process, are we at Kalpavriksh satisfied? Not fully. We could have involved still more women, for instance, and got more ministries and departments on board. We failed to involve some prominent wildlifers who believed that our process would not lead to conservation. We were unable to get the NBSAP concerns centrally integrated into the 10th Five Year Plan. But overall, we feel satisfied that a seed has been sown, that good people from all walks of life have responded to the collective call to protect biodiversity in all its *avatars*.

Other quiet steps have been taken in the right direction. A monthly column on

biodiversity that we place in the immensely popular children's magazine *Chandamama* is bound to provide kids with nurturing thoughts. A huge amount of scattered biodiversity data has been organised and people now need to come forward to maintain and use it. Sectors that have been traditionally distrustful of each other have begun to talk to each other. Perhaps the most abiding of all our impacts is the general sense that we have been able to unearth, that biodiversity protection transcends hard ecological facts and resides safely in the celebrations, culture and psyche of millions of Indians. If many more thousands can join in this celebration, the implementation of the NBSAP will become a reality. 🦋

and agricultural and agroforestry lands. Finally, we know, though often ignore, the tremendous diversity of cultures that depend on and, in turn, nurture this biological diversity.

Much of this diversity is being destroyed, or is under threat. The cheetah and the Pink-headed Duck have gone forever, several thousand varieties of crops are probably no longer grown and natural ecosystems are down to a fraction of their original extent. Equally alarming is the loss of cultures, languages, and traditions that nurtured biodiversity, as India Inc. attempts to McDonaldisise and Monsantise our diets, fashions and thoughts. A comprehensive action plan to save what is left, and revive that which can be brought back, has been long overdue.

What was interesting about the MoEF approach to the formulation of this action plan was its initiative in giving its technical coordination to an NGO, Kalpavriksh, the organisation with which I work.

The process

We were asked to take on this responsibility in late 1999. We accepted after the MoEF agreed with our vision of how to carry this out. This included mass participation and decentralisation of the process, no interference from foreign agencies, and openness to all kinds of voices and opinions.

Our first goal was to broadbase the entire process. We revised the project budget

Thematic action plans under the NBSAP

- Natural aquatic ecosystems
- Natural terrestrial ecosystems
- Wild animal biodiversity
- Wild plant biodiversity
- Micro-organism diversity
- Domesticated biodiversity
- Livelihoods and biodiversity
- Culture and biodiversity
- Health and biodiversity
- Economics and valuation of biodiversity
- Education, training and awareness
- Policies, laws and institutions
- Access, benefit-sharing and Intellectual Property Rights

(about four crore rupees), distributing a very large chunk, originally earmarked for a handful of consultants, to over a hundred organisations and individuals across the country. Over 75 per cent of the budget was dedicated to activities across various states. About 10 per cent was earmarked for the technical planning, coordination and central support to countrywide activities. For this, we set up a Technical and Policy Core Group (TPCG) of 15 scientists, officials and activists – a tiny microcosm of the various sectors of society with a bearing on biodiversity. For the next three years, this TPCG met almost every month to plan, monitor and steer the process. The only budget head we could not change was the 12 per cent or so earmarked for administration.

It would have been easy to sit in Delhi, consult a few 'experts' and make a glossy action plan. But the NBSAP was planned differently. It initially generated dozens of

action plans for local sites, states, union territories and eco-regions. We covered themes of national importance based on inputs from people within and outside the government, ranging from formal scientists to community experts. All this involved covering the nooks and corners of this vast country to glean insights from local communities, academics, forest and government officials, students, media persons, activists and others.

To reach out to the public, we printed several thousand copies of a *Call for Participation* in about 20 languages. We also released advertisements in government and NGO newsletters, announcements on radio and television, through street theatre, cultural programmes and even a rock show! Organisations across the country added their own special touches, generating participation through boat and cycle rallies, *padayatras* (walkathons), cultural and biodiversity festivals, children's exhibitions, public hearings and the customary workshops and seminars. Communication was intense and continuous, with the core teams handling about 100,000 letters through e-mails and the post! The entire process was documented in print and film.

Cynics who suggest that Indians are unable to tackle their own problems should have witnessed the participation in the NBSAP, which reflected hope, enthusiasm, capability and depth of vision. Thousands

The NBSAP process aims to integrate issues that include conserving insects such as the mating danaid eggflies (facing page) and managing protected areas such as Kanha (below).

