

Forest Certification & Southern Western Ghats Ecology

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Abstract—*Water, forests and minerals are interdependent. According to a definition by the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization in 2000, "Forests are lands of more than 0.5 Hectare, with a tree canopy cover of more than 10%, which are not primarily under agricultural or urban land use. Responsibly managed forests are necessary for the maintenance of biodiversity and ecosystems services, both on the individual sites and within the wider landscape.*

Humans, with their use of tools and deliberate, planned actions are of course the dominant actors on earth today, and have shaped the ecology of the Western Ghats over many millennia. Human influences have certainly been disruptive, but humans are also remarkable for being the only species that can be prudent, that can deliberately put conservation measures into practice.

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) is an international body which accredits certification organizations in order to guarantee the authenticity of their claims. The goal of FSC is to promote environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests, by establishing a worldwide standards of recognized and respected Principles of Forest Stewardship.

This paper discusses Forest Certification, its promotion amongst small holders and primitive tribal groups taking Southern Western Ghats and relevant problems faced. The foundation of this paper is to understand the importance of FC in Indian Forests which are much diversified.

1. INTRODUCTION

Responsibly managed forests are necessary for the maintenance of biodiversity and ecosystems services, both on the individual sites and within the wider landscape. Forest management, including intensive commercial management, is a critical and cost effective conservation tool within large-scale conservation strategies. Well-managed commercial or community forests can be vital buffers and links between protected areas.

Humans, with their use of tools and deliberate, planned actions are of course the dominant actors on earth today, and have shaped the ecology of the Western Ghats over many millennia. However their influence has grown tremendously once iron tools permitted them to bring extensive tracts of wet forests under cultivation. Human influences have certainly been disruptive, but humans are also remarkable for being the only

species that can be prudent, that can deliberately put conservation measures into practice.

The Western Ghats consists of a series of mountains stretching from Southern coast of Kerala to southern part of Gujarat encompassing 6 peninsular Indian states. It covers an area of 1600 km. The forest of these regions is dense with luxuriant vegetation with high biodiversity, comprising tropical evergreen rainforests, mixed deciduous forests and subtropical or temperate forests in the peninsular mountains.

Forestry is the second largest land use in India next to agriculture and more than 200 million people are directly dependent on forests for their livelihoods. India is likely to face severe imbalances in supply and demand of wood due to inadequate supply of wood from domestic sources. The small holders can play a major role in providing sustainable wood and non-wood forest products, if suitable incentives are ensured. In this regard, promotion of forest certification is relevant.

2. FOREST CERTIFICATION

It is widely accepted that forest resources and associated lands should be managed to meet the social, economic, ecological, cultural and spiritual needs of present and future generations.

Forest certification was introduced in the early 1990s to address concerns of deforestation and forest degradation and to promote the maintenance of biological diversity, especially in the tropics. Initially pushed by environmental groups, it quickly evolved as a potential instrument to promote sustainable forest management (SFM) [1].

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Consequently, forest certification caters for many different peers and their respective interests. For industry and trade, it is

an instrument for environmental marketing and market access. For buyers and consumers, it provides information on the impacts of products they purchase.

For forest owners and managers, it is a tool for market access or gaining market advantage. For governments, it is as soft policy instrument to promote SFM and sustainable consumption patterns. For environmental movement, it is a means to influence how forests are managed to promote, inter alia, biodiversity maintenance [1].

Leading paper manufacturing companies such as ITC Limited, BILT and TNIL have already initiated forest certification programmes in farm forestry/ agro forestry plantations where they source wood. The awareness on the benefits of forest certification, particularly among the small holders and primitive tribal groups is very low.

By recognizing the significance of forest certification, the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India has set up a committee on forest certification to address various aspects of forest certification, its benefits to stakeholders and to identify the process of establishing national forest certification systems.

It would be useful to examine the scope of, and opportunities for, forest certification among small holders and primitive tribal groups with a view to the protection of High Conservation Value Areas and priority landscapes in India.

2.1 FC in India and the incentives

Indian Green Building Council’s rating system awards one credit point to the Building Owner, if the Building Owner uses at least 50% wood based material which is FSC Certified.

“Use a minimum of 50% of wood-based material and products, certified in accordance with the Forest Stewardship Council’s Principles and Criteria, for wood building components including but not limited to, structural framing and general dimensional framing, flooring, finishes, furnishing, and non-rented temporary construction applications such as bracing, concrete form work and pedestrian barriers”

3. FC IN SOUTHERN WESTERN GHATS LANDSCAPE

The Western Ghats harbours over 1500 endemic species of flowering plants (27% of the country), at least 500 species of endemic fishes, amphibians, reptiles, birds , mammals and 56% of the trees here are endemic [3].

Deforestation of upper catchments of rivers for timber, river valley projects and plantations has drastically reduced the capacity of the hill streams that feed into the rivers to hold and recharge water. The hydrology of the region is also very important as a number of key rivers, supplying water to major towns in Kerala originate from here. The overall aim of the landscape conservation programme is to ensure the long term

ecological security of the landscape based on multi-stakeholder participation.



Fig. 1: The Western Ghats [4]

There is a lot of scope to extend forest certification in India, where there is currently just one FSC certified rubber plantation of 644 hectares in Tamil Nadu, South India. However, the number of Chain of Custody Certificates has increased from 4 in 2007 to around 140 in November 2010

showing that there is strong demand for certified products by the Indian industry.

The aim of this project is to promote forest certification among small holders and primitive tribal groups to help protect High Conservation Value Areas in Southern Western Ghats Landscape.

The specific objectives are to:

- Create awareness among the small and marginal farmers and other stakeholders, including the Forest Department, about the benefits of forest certification.
- Explore feasibility of forest certification of a community enterprise (village forest committees/self-help groups) with focus on non-wood forest products.
- Document lessons learnt in this process and put forward recommendations.

Small and marginal farmers in the landscape grow trees as part of gardens, agro-forestry and farm forestry systems and contribute to the supply of wood for both the economic needs of the communities as well as industrial purposes. There is much potential to promote group certification among these growers.

However, there is currently insufficient awareness on the benefits of wood certification. Several enterprises sourcing raw material from in and around this landscape have the links with the markets in India and overseas that are demanding certified forest products.

3.1 Certification of non-wood forest products

In the case of non-wood forest products (NWFPs) certification, the focus is on honey and bamboo collection, processing and trade carried out by the Kadars, the primitive tribal groups in the Vazhachal Forest Division in the landscape.

3.1.1 Vazhachal Forest Division:

The Vazhachal Forest Division has a total area of around 400 sq km and is located in Thrissur and Ernakulam districts of Kerala State. It is a beautiful landscape containing the beautiful waterfalls of Athirapally and Vazhachal.

The tropical moist deciduous and evergreen forests are also home to hornbills and elephants. Some of the unique flora includes *Aglaia barberi*, *Aglaia canarensis*, *Ammonium microstephanum*, *Piper barberi*, and *Syzygium occidentale*. There is also great diversity in fauna like the Niligiri langur, elephants, gaur, sambhar, spotted deer, barking deer, Malabar giant squirrel, porcupine, Indian civet, toddy cat, sloth bear, tiger and leopard.

Kadars are one of the most primitive tribal groups of Kerala, and live in the Chalakudy river basin and areas of Vazhachal, Chalakudi, Parambikulam and Indira Gandhi Wildlife

Sanctuary. Traditionally they were hunter gatherers and lived in clan groups inside the forest.

The total population of Kadars is around 1500-1700. The language that they speak is a combination of Tamil and Malayalam but the stronger linguistic influence is dependent on the area or the state they live in. The community was settled into colonies by the Forest department around 50 years ago.

Kadars still depend on the forests and the forest department for their livelihoods. Their main occupation is NTFP collection and fishing. The Forest department has formed Vana Samrakshan Samithi's (Forest Protection Committee) in the Kadar settlements.

From the variety of NTFPs collected by Kadars, honey is collected and sold for cash income. After assessing feasibility, a honey filtration unit has been set up by the forest department to help the Kadars add value and obtain a better price for the honey. WWF India has facilitated the entire process through focused project activities.

4. ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the past 15 years, forest certification has emerged as one of the key tools to improve forest management.

Benefits:

1. Improved forest management practices;
2. Improved wildlife habitat;
3. More healthy forests;
4. Protection of soil and water resources.
5. Means to earn a better income and improve livelihood opportunities to the local communities.
6. Protection of cultural assets

The differences between forests and plantations extend far beyond their simple physical structure and species composition. They include cultural, aesthetic and spiritual values that can be found only in actual forests.

Indigenous knowledge particularly that related to the uses of local plants is a critical element in the struggle to protect and to preserve forest biodiversity; FSC needs to be made more biodiversity friendly.

Despite some shortcomings, it is clear that the emergence of certification, in particular the FSC, has been a positive force for the world's forests. It has brought diverse stakeholders to the table to discuss sustainable forest management and has led to increased demand for timber products from well managed forests, thus creating an incentive for producers to improve their practices.

It is important to remember the limitations of certification, however and to continue to support the diverse range of

mechanisms and initiatives (such as the Global Trees Campaign) that are needed to improve the conservation and sustainable management of the world's forests and tree species.

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