

## Indigenous Peoples' Plan by Keystone Foundation

The cultural diversity in the NBR – with its number of adivasis and other communities, is one of the reasons to declare the area a Biosphere Reserve. There is a well known symbiotic relationship between the indigenous communities here. These include the *Aalu Kurumbas, Paalu Kurumbas, Jenu Kurumbas, Kattunaickans, Sholegas, Betta Kurumba, Urali Kurumba, Kaadu Kurumbas, Kadars, Cholanaicken, Pathinaickens, Mudugas, Adiyans, Arnadans, Paniyans, Kurichiyans, Mullukurumbans, Malaivedans, Panjari/Badava Yeravas, Tani Yeravas, Karimpalans, Pathiyans, Malapulayans, Mala Kudiyas, Muduvas, Todas, Kotas, Irulas/Kasabas, Mala Malasar, Malapanikkars, Malamuthans, Thaccanaadans*. The *Badagas, Wynaadan Chetti* and *Manthadan Chettis*, though not classified as *adivasis* (tribes) are integral part of the complex cultural mosaic. In a rare synergy, most of the hunter gatherers built close links with agriculturists, where the supplying of ritualistic material and forest produce was exchanged with grain. The Kota artisans and the pastoralists played an important role in binding these communities together. The Badagas, though not classified as adivasis, were common links between communities as they practiced both agriculture and pastoralism. The whole NBR has traditionally been divided into socio-cultural territories (the details of which are too lengthy to be elaborated here), which enable a cross-community social fabric.

However, the estimated population of adivasis in the NBR is approximately 2,00,000. This is small compared to the larger migrant population of the area, which is roughly 10,00,000. This is reason enough for political and governance processes to marginalize these communities further. Today, it is even more difficult for the adivasis to follow their social systems as they are administratively divided into different states, their traditional boundaries and landmarks are eroded and migrant populations exert enormous pressure on the natural resources of the area.

Perhaps, to revive the concept of the Biosphere Reserve, not only for forests and wildlife corridors, but also for building back community based cultures and conservation with these people, will be useful. Special efforts can also be made to link up the area with common themes & practices and to follow common regulations across the region. This can be an effort towards maintaining socio-cultural identities of the adivasis, who can then be prevented from being subsumed in the 'mainstream.'

Changes are taking place in the tribal mindset in the NBR. Erstwhile gathering activities and linkage to forest ecosystems are gradually diminishing. There is a need to understand the present context and the socio-economic situation of tribal communities in these hills. Lack of relevant opportunities for the tribal families and failures linked to efforts of "mainstreaming" are making them isolated and creating a situation of a fragile social system in a skewed natural resource base. With time this community is becoming more and more distant and peripheral to development issues and decision-making concerning ecology, conservation of indigenous communities and also to their own culture. This is inevitable, given the shrinking cultural space

and the onslaught of larger development programmes that invoke faster changes than these communities can adapt to.

There are 8 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) as classified by the government within the NBR. These pre-agriculture communities have a different way of life and relationship to the earth. Administratively, these communities are given special categories in all government schemes and reservations for some posts. All are classified as ST (Scheduled Tribe) and some are PTGs. The Constitution of India also specially protects the rights of these marginalized communities. The main rules, laws and Acts that have a direct impact on the indigenous people relate to Forest Conservation and the Rights of People to land and use/access to forests. A landmark Act in India was introduced in 2006 (Forest Rights Act 2006) which discusses both these aspects and gives rights to indigenous communities. It also governs aspects of conservation, displacement and critical wildlife habitat. This Act is now being implemented across the country- as also in the NBR and now forms the backbone to both conservation and tribal rights.

### **Keystone's Indigenous People policies and functioning**

Keystone Foundation is a NGO, working in the NBR with these communities since 1994. It has since then addressed issues concerning the indigenous people and the conservation of nature, keeping eco-development approaches as its focus. Its journey began with 'honey' and has diversified to many other natural resource and market access based activities. Of the 36 indigenous communities known to reside in NBR, about 14 have been assessed to have been traditionally involved in the collection of honey - although this is of varying significance in the livelihoods of these different communities.

Stories of bees and honey have formed the basis of growth in the organization- which systematically took up traditional agriculture and land use issues, more NTFPs and forest assessment work, documentation of indigenous knowledge with medicinal plants, wild foods and sacred groves, helped provide value to their produce and a market facility. More details of the programmes and projects of Keystone can be found at [www.keystone-foundation.org](http://www.keystone-foundation.org)

Currently, Keystone is a group of 40 staff, out of which 20 are indigenous people staff. We have since the very beginning believed in positive discrimination toward them for employment and have a policy to build capacities amongst them. Towards this Keystone has a:

1. Education Fund
2. Capacity Building Fund

It also involves people in all its activities including planning and participatory monitoring and evaluation of its different projects. Keystone has since 2004, a special 'People and Culture' programme that addresses issues of indigenous communities including rights, governance and culture.

As an institutional mechanism we also have the Tribal Advisory Committee with representation from all the areas of the NBR, which advises Keystone in its future direction and work. This committee meets two times a year, which gives an opportunity to all communities to express their ideas and plans. Previous meetings minutes are available for perusal.

Over the years, these processes have involved the people in all the work of the organization. Keystone, principally is not involved in programmes that negatively impact indigenous communities.

The following mechanisms will be followed for the CEPF programme to ensure free and fair discussion with communities and their participation.

1. Holding the Tribal advisory Committee meeting 2 times during the course of the project
2. There will be planning and implementation meetings held in the project area during the course of the project. These meetings will be recorded and minutes available.
3. As far as possible indigenous people of the area, will be benefitted from and made responsible for the project activities and outputs. These details will be made available through project reports.

Specifically for this project, which involves barefoot ecology, representatives from different communities will be selected for ecological monitoring in the project sites. A series of meetings and consultation had already begun since early 2013 to plan the project, these have been listed and minutes provided in Appendix 1 which can be found in this document. Meetings were also held in July to inform the selected villages specifically about the project. A constant sharing of information and capacity building measures are incorporated in the project. For clarifications with regard to this project a poster has been prepared in English and will be translated to Kannada and Tamil to be displayed at area level centers and project implementation sites. The poster is attached separately as Appendix 2. This project will enable them to learn new skills and fortify their knowledge of the forest, enabling better engagement in the FRA process. Results from the monitoring will be shared with the community members through different meetings/forums, through their own paper, Seemai Sudhi and through the community radio.

Summarizing, it will be ensured that indigenous people are benefitted through this conservation project, they are involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation, there are regular and necessary forum created for expression of their views and ideas. No negative impact on them is envisaged through this project.

## Appendix 1- Summary of discussions - FPIC meetings held in villages across the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve Area:

Several meetings were held by conservation team leaders from Keystone Foundation during the period January 2013 to July 2013. These meetings were held with the intent of understanding people's dependence on the forests, the knowledge they had about their environment and the challenges they faced in relation to accessing forests for various needs. The meeting schedule, participant numbers and community is as per Table 1

Table 1. Meetings held to discuss feasibility of community involvement in forest protection:

Date	Location	Region	#Women	#Men	Community
29-01-2013	Sigur	Nilgiri North	4	2	IR, SO
04-02-2013	Semenarai	Nilgiri North	6	1	IR, KU
11-02-2013	Bedaguli	BRT	4	6	SO
11-02-2013	Badayarnpodu, Punanjanur	BRT	10	14	SO
12-02-2013	Ethemanegowdathody, Punanjanur	BRT	7	15	SO
22-02-2013	Kolikorai	Nilgiri North	0	10	KU
19-03-2013	Dhalamukh	Nilgiri North	1	7	IR
09-07-2013	Chokanalli Sigur	Nilgiri North	3	11	IR
20-03-2013	Munkai, Punanjanur	BRT	0	7	SO
11-07-2013	Bikapathy mund	Nilgiri North	5	7	TO
14-03-2013	Semenarai	Nilgiri North	1	5	IR+KU
05-02-2013	Keelkoop	Nilgiri North	3	6	IR+KU
16-07-2013	Srinivasapura, Punanjanur	BRT	6	9	SO-adults am
16-07-2013	Srinivasapura, Punanjanur	BRT	6	8	SO-children group pm

KN=Kattunayaka; SO=Soliga; IR=Irula; KU=Kurumba; TO=Toda

At all these meetings general discussion was held about the nature of forest dependence. We were informed that the use ranges from NTFP collection - grazing - firewood collection-sacred sites-burial sites-source of wild food. These meetings were also attended by many youth from the community and we were surprised to see the eagerness amongst the youth to have some connection with the forests around them. While people were involved in wage labour and seasonal migration they continue to

exercise their dependence on the forests. This also meant that the traditional knowledge about the forests was still present in various degrees. In villages of Sigur and Srinivasapura the village elders program was being held regularly as a result of which the children were very well aware of their traditional knowledge. At all the villages there was a feeling that the forest department personnel were not entering the forests and had very little idea of what is happening inside the forests. Many of the community people were well aware of the Forest Rights Act and Community Rights provided within the Act. They expressed their consent to be partners with the forest department, NGOs, research organisations and any other conservation related organisation to monitor and protect their forests. But they also firmly mentioned that their use of the forest was not the reason behind biodiversity loss. Rainfall had decreased over the years, spread of lantana, change in large mammal routes, fire incidences were all interconnected but nobody was looking at these important linkages.

The elders of Sigur, Keelkoop, Semenarai, Srinivasapura and Bedaguli were willing to share their knowledge with their young children and asked that the program be supported further so that it may not be interrupted. The children were very keen and would pay a visit to the elders even on weekdays seeking their stories and insights on the forest.

The youth who were involved in wage labour always return to their villages for honey collection and agricultural work. They told us that they could not think of staying away from their villages and forests for more than a few months. It was difficult to earn a cash income if they stayed only in their villages and this was the motivation to look for wages.

Since Keystone has done a project on the lines of ecological monitoring in 2008-09 the people were well aware of its methods and expressed a keen wish to take up this work on a regular basis, uninterrupted by projects. They suggested we meet together with the forest department to request if this activity could form part of the village forest council's role. The people of all the villages we spoke to unanimously felt that such an effort to be involved in monitoring the forests will help in building trust with the forest department and also ensuring that the knowledge about the forests is passed on to younger generations.

Barefoot Ecologists for Ecological Monitoring in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve

Keystone Foundation is a registered not for profit trust that works with indigenous hill communities in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve since the past 20 years. The Foundation's offices are located in the region so as to be in direct contact with biodiversity and communities to better understand the linkages. The project titled 'Barefoot Ecologist for Ecological Monitoring in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve' is being implemented through the Critically Ecosystems Partnership Fund, USA administered by the Ashoka Trust for Ecology and Environment, Bangalore.

**Objectives of the project are as follows:**

- Train and mentor indigenous community members to undertake Ecological monitoring as barefoot ecologists
- Identify ecological indicators based on traditional knowledge and science
- Partner with data managers and forest managers to sustain the work



**Activities to be undertaken:**

- Workshops to train indigenous community members
- Village level consultations to identify ecological changes
- Consultation with data managers to set up a database and analysis framework
- Sharing the results of the monitoring with relevant stakeholders
- Consultations with forest managers periodically to ensure a mechanism for the continuation of the process beyond project period.

Project sites: Bikkapathy mund & Chokanalli Village-, Nilgiri North  
Srinivasapura, Punanjanur & Bedaguli, Billigiri ranga tiger reserve



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