

CEPF SMALL GRANT FINAL PROJECT COMPLETION REPORT

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| Organization Legal Name: | Keystone Foundation |
| Project Title: | Conserving the Sacred – An Eco- Cultural Approach to Community Conservation in the Nilgiris District |
| Date of Report: | May 2013 |
| Report Author and Contact Information | Archana Sivaramakrishnan & N. Selvi |

CEPF Region: Western Ghats (Mysore-Nilgiri Corridor)

Strategic Direction: 1 - Enable action by diverse communities and partnerships to ensure conservation of key biodiversity areas and enhance connectivity in the corridors.

Grant Amount: \$ 19,798.87

Project Dates: November 2011 to February 2013.

Implementation Partners for this Project (please explain the level of involvement for each partner):

Type here

Conservation Impacts

Please explain/describe how your project has contributed to the implementation of the CEPF ecosystem profile.

The Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve is identified as being a representative of the bio geographical zone of the Western Ghats and has rich tracts of biodiversity and home to indigenous communities. The sacred groves in the reserve have had deep and ancient association with the indigenous communities. These sacred groves were considered as sacred burial grounds and place of ancestor worship. Four Sacred Groves located in the Coonoor region of the Nilgiris District falling within the CEPF Priority Investment zone, have been selected for conservation action initiative by involving indigenous communities of Irulas and Kurumbas and other stakeholders such as settlers, estates and Forest Department. Quality of conservation and current status of the ecology of sacred groves, using culture and traditional governance systems to revive local management regimes and explore FRA and Community Forest Resources approaches to redefine and place the importance of sacred groves in these fragmented landscapes. The project was implemented in the upper Nilgiri plateau and falls in the Mysore-Nilgiri CEPF Corridor defined in the CEPF Ecosystems Profile. The sacred groves identified for implementation of this program are 4 (four) in the Coonoor region (CEPF priority site for investment No. 31 of the site outcomes for the Southern Western Ghats).

The project was designed to involve indigenous communities mainly to get motivated to conserve their sacred groves, as also claim rights on them under the Community Forest Rights of the FRA 2006. During the course of the work efforts were undertaken to negotiate boundaries both with the Forest Department and the nearby estate owners. Enabling discussions and meetings both within the community to revive sacred grove practices, and with other stakeholders, was of prime importance in the project. Mapping, biodiversity assessment and setting up boards to mark the entry to the grove were also undertaken.

The project has enabled the directions of CEPF profile which enable communities to be involved in biodiversity conservation and help establish bridges between communities, state agencies and private players in this landscape to manage priority areas.

Please summarize the overall results/impact of your project against the expected results detailed in the approved proposal.

Detailed ecological and community conservation of 4 selected sacred groves – Kavalcombankai, Johicombai, Sengalcombankai and Doddahatty - has resulted in the direct involvement of indigenous communities in conservation of sacred forests. Meetings and participatory discussions (see attached Annexure 1.a) in the 4 villages were useful to evolve a strategy on how community monitoring will take place and how the youth will be involved in this both for transfer of knowledge and building capacities for the future. During the course of the project young people from the village were taken to the forest by the elders. For more details on the protocol developed please refer to the appendix 3 entitled *Protocol for participatory monitoring of sacred groves by the community*.

Community involvement and participation was ensured through negotiations, and meetings held with the estate owners and the concerned area forest department officials. The demarcation of the sacred grove area and its recognition through a board resulted in all stakeholders recognizing the importance of the forests. 7 signboards in four Sacred groves (Sengalcombankai - 2, Kavalcombankai – 1, Johicombai -2 and Dhodatty 1 have been installed). Please refer Appendix 6 for the text of the signboards. Submission of Community Forest Rights claims and the process of mapping of ancestral boundaries resulted in good discussions amongst the community on forest use and conservation. This CFR submission (see Appendix 1), when granted will lay the foundation for securing tenure for communities for both use and governance of the sacred groves. It has resulted in the formalizing the claim and responsibilities of the community vis-à-vis the sacred groves.

Mapping perimeters and ecological status data (Appendix 1) has been shared with the village people and the forest department, estate owners to emphasize on its diversity and importance, even though these are small fragmented areas. This has also identified the RET species and the need for their conservation given their threat status. This information has been useful to share with the younger generation amongst the community. It is also a useful tool for advocacy with the forest department and will be used in the future at appropriate meetings.

The main tool to conserve groves was through youth participation, patrolling and involving adjacent villages. In one of the groves planting of approximately 300 saplings within the Sengalcombankai grove were done to augment the status of the grove. The grove is located in the forest between the two habitations of Sengalcombankai and Sengalpudur, the first being a predominantly Irula habitation and the latter an Alu Kurumba habitation. A decade ago, both communities resided in Sengalcombankai. This is normal for the Irulas and the Alu Kurumbas to share a habitation space. Sengalcombankai being more inaccessible than Sengalpudur, the majority of the Alu Kurumbas decided to move to the more accessible location of Sengalpudur about a decade ago. This decision has had wide ranging ramifications for the community in Sengalcombankai. These include large tracts of Sengalcombankai lands becoming fallow even as youth decide to enroll as daily labour in the adjoining TANTEA estate, the Alu Kurumbas becoming more mobile with the road

being closer, a decrease in NTFP based livelihoods. More directly pertinent to this report is the the impact of this change on the institution of the sacred grove. While the annual rituals at the sacred grove have continued, albeit with some interruptions, the physical distance from the grove has meant that the degree of monitoring that the community was able to enact with regard to entry of outsiders into the grove has considerably decreased.

This has resulted in significant traffic from the Irula communities at the foothills. This complex of factors has lead to the degradation of the sacred grove institution. It was among the objectives of this project, to revive community mechanisms for conservation for the grove. This has resulted in an overall outcome of community based conservation with these indigenous people.

The survey conducted amongst the Toda and Badaga community sacred groves has resulted in interest from the communities to engage with this issue. Discussions related to disuse of groves, lack of interest amongst younger generation for restoration, use and conservation.

The project is based on the premise that tenurial security can lend a large impetus to community efforts to conserve sacred groves. Undoubtedly there is also much work necessary at the community level to revive systems that may have fallen to disuse due to long decades off non–recognition of community tenure as also other factors of degeneration of cultural continuity n the community. The project has used a two pronged strategy of working with the community on the one hand and with de jure decision makers –forest and revenue departments of the government on the other hand. Dialogues were also initiated with some estate owners, who acknowledged the presence of these communities and the grove within their estate. They agreed to give access and placing of the information board. One of the village sacred groves- of Doddahatti falls within the Adderley Estate who are a partner in the Rainforest Alliance. They have in line with their commitments to the Alliance allowed the village access to the sacred grove as well as to put up an information board. A total of 8 acres of the village land fall within the Estate.

Please provide the following information where relevant:

Hectares Protected: 10.30 ha

Species Conserved: RET species (five) only

| Species | Status | Citation | Method of Conservation |
|---------------------------|--|------------------------|--|
| <i>Smilax wightii</i> | Rare, Endemic | Nayar and Sastry, 1990 | Social Fencing and community monitoring of habitat |
| <i>Cycas circinalis</i> | Endangered | Varghese et al., 2009 | |
| <i>Aristolocia tagala</i> | VU -Karnataka, DD- Tamil Nadu, Lower risk least concern Kerala | Ravikumar & Ved, 2000 | |
| <i>Persea macrantha</i> | Endangered Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, VU Kerala | Ravikumar & Ved, 2000 | |
| <i>Canarium strictum</i> | VU-Karnataka, Kerala & Tamil Nadu | Ravikumar & Ved, 2000 | |

Corridors Created: NA

Describe the success or challenges of the project toward achieving its short-term and long-term impact objectives.

The project was successful in achieving short term objectives which related to initiating a monitoring mechanism lead by the community. Annexure I indicates some of the issues discussed by communities. Please refer also to Annexure 2. In the case of Doddhatti, the project was successful in establishing a cooperative platform with the Adderly estate to secure access to the community to their sacred grove. At another level, the submission of CFR claims in 3 of the sites helped in the process of submission of claims while making the presence of sacred groves visible in district level discussions.

The other major success was the mapping of the groves by two other communities and their engagement in the issue. This has good implications for future work and action, especially in the upper Nilgiris plateau, both with the Toda and Badaga communities.

The challenge in the project was to get the Kurumba community to use and culturally engage with the grove and its deity. This was difficult because of the extensive land use change that has taken place in their lands. The grove was important for both the sowing and harvest festivals, when traditional agriculture of millets and mixed crops used to take place by the Kurumbas. Now their lands have tea or coffee and the sacred groves have fallen into disuse for annual prayer. It was a challenge for us and the community to revive this agriculture, due to problems related to human-wildlife conflict and loss of land to other permanent cash crops. Though this project resulted in a lot of debate and discussion, it remains to be seen in the long run if the community will adapt traditions and continue to protect their sacred forests.

The other challenge related to the granting of the CFR, which is held up in Tamil Nadu due to a court case. Till this is awarded the legal backing to the community will be lacking in managing their forests. In anticipation of the stay being vacated, all these villages have submitted their claims to their community forest resource which includes the sacred grove. These submissions follow ongoing discussions on both forest use and specific conservation practices. In the case of the sacred groves, the conservation practices include greater awareness about the sanctity of the grove, information about the biodiversity of the groves and social fencing and monitoring of the sacred grove.

Were there any unexpected impacts (positive or negative)?

The major unexpected positive impact was through the survey done of the Toda sacred sites. This was supported by the community leaders and villages requested specifically to work to conserve these forests in the future. Similar strategies will need to be adopted to work with the Todas, whose context is totally different from the Kurumbas and whose areas are destroyed with commercial plantations of wattle and eucalyptus, encroachments from tea and agricultural estates. The survey was a planned project activity. What was unexpected was the proactive interest shown by the Toda community in continuing the process of

conservation. The project had assumed that the survey would be the first stage in talking to the Toda community about the need to proactively engage in conservation measures.

There was no unexpected negative impact.

Lessons Learned

Describe any lessons learned during the design and implementation of the project, as well as any related to organizational development and capacity building. Consider lessons that would inform projects designed or implemented by your organization or others, as well as lessons that might be considered by the global conservation community.

The main lesson that needs to be highlighted is related to the larger question of involving local and indigenous communities in conservation efforts. In the case of the sacred groves, which have direct linkages to community based conservation, it was seen that people took interest in the project and participated to debate on the issues surrounding its conservation. Discussions and dialogues with external role players like the estate and forest department gave them confidence that they could access and protect their sacred forests.

It is important to learn from this example that communities are neither insensitive nor irresponsible if involved and explained about the micro and macro issues surrounding conservation. e.g. Despite having no direct relevance, they are interested to know about RET species and why they are in that status, willing to protect them in their forests.

The fact that project investigator and biodiversity assessor were both women and could not directly visit some or all of the sacred groves was admittedly a setback. However, we understand that in such contexts, where culturally grounded gender roles forbid direct interventions by women, it remains important that women act as agents of revival and change. We also understand that cultural understandings change and women as project implementers could act as role models for communities.

Project Design Process: (aspects of the project design that contributed to its success/shortcomings)

As the project design was based on a consolidated survey and participation of the community – its implementation was mostly smooth and engaging in these 4 selected villages/groves.

In the project design more emphasis could have been given to advocacy and engagement with the FD – so that they too could participate and understand the significance of community led conservation efforts

Project Implementation: (aspects of the project execution that contributed to its success/shortcomings)

During the project implementation, the aspects that have led to its success is the sharing of information and data with the people; their direct involvement in the conservation of sacred groves; the project being led by a Kurumba leader (Selvi) who could explain and work with her own people effectively.

The project intervened in both internal community processes (of building pride and knowledge among youth) as well as with external stakeholders- Forest Department and Estate owners – to build awareness and legitimacy. While it is would be premature to claim that over a 15 month period, these efforts have lead to fruition, it is our understanding that these processes have not been without impact and will need to be pursued.

Other lessons learned relevant to conservation community:

As mentioned above, the conservation community could learn to work with communities for conserving resources – forests, water, springs, etc. as these people are directly involved in the use and have a cultural significance to their area. There is an increasing trend of the viewpoint biodiverse areas need to be de-populated by humans to make way for inviolate habitats for wildlife. It would be difficult in a densely populated country like India to get many inviolate areas. This approach and method will help the conservation community work in non-PA zones, which are ecologically very significant and have larger areas under them.

ADDITIONAL FUNDING

Provide details of any additional donors who supported this project and any funding secured for the project as a result of the CEPF grant or success of the project.

| Donor | Type of Funding* | Amount | Notes |
|---------------------|-------------------------|---------------|--|
| Keystone Foundation | A | Rs 3,00,000 | Salaries and administrative expenses |
| Tribal communities | B | Rs 60,000 | Opportunity cost of members involved in community meetings and patrol. |
| | | | |

***Additional funding should be reported using the following categories:**

- A** *Project co-financing (Other donors contribute to the direct costs of this CEPF project)*
- B** *Grantee and Partner leveraging (Other donors contribute to your organization or a partner organization as a direct result of successes with this CEPF project.)*
- C** *Regional/Portfolio leveraging (Other donors make large investments in a region because of CEPF investment or successes related to this project.)*

Sustainability/Replicability

Summarize the success or challenge in achieving planned sustainability or replicability of project components or results.

Summarize any unplanned sustainability or replicability achieved.

The sustainability and replicability of the project is very high in the Biosphere Reserve or any area where communities and forests have a high interface. In this case, there is a pre-survey done of 28 sacred groves, out of which we have worked directly in seven till now (see [www.keystone-foundation.org/downloads/sacred grove report](http://www.keystone-foundation.org/downloads/sacred_grove_report) for more details). There is scope to increase the work to all identified groves of the Kurumba community. In addition, high replicability is there amongst other communities, especially the Toda, where the survey has been done through this project.

Sustainability of the monitoring applied by the youth in the village will be ensured through regular contact with the people by members of Keystone. The communities are closely associated through Honey gatherers network and other cultural programmes of Keystone. The current project funded by CEPF-ATREE Western Ghats Program on Ecological Monitoring by Barefoot Ecologists is testing the protocol for community based monitoring. The vision is to use this method across various community forest resources, including sacred groves.

Safeguard Policy Assessment

Provide a summary of the implementation of any required action toward the environmental and social safeguard policies within the project.

Please refer to summary of project social impact given in Appendix 8.

Performance Tracking Report Addendum

CEPF Global Targets

(Enter Grant Term)

Provide a numerical amount and brief description of the results achieved by your grant.
Please respond to only those questions that are relevant to your project.

| Project Results | Is this question relevant? | If yes, provide your numerical response for results achieved during the annual period. | Provide your numerical response for project from inception of CEPF support to date. | Describe the principal results achieved from November 2011 to February 2013. (Attach annexes if necessary) |
|---|----------------------------|--|---|---|
| 1. Did your project strengthen management of a protected area guided by a sustainable management plan? Please indicate number of hectares improved. | No | | | Please also include name of the protected area(s). If more than one, please include the number of hectares strengthened for each one. |
| 2. How many hectares of new and/or expanded protected areas did your project help establish through a legal declaration or community agreement? | No | | | Please also include name of the protected area. If more than one, please include the number of hectares strengthened for each one. |
| 3. Did your project strengthen biodiversity conservation and/or natural resources management inside a key biodiversity area identified in the CEPF ecosystem profile? If so, please indicate how many hectares. | Yes | 9.55 | 9.55 | 1. Kavalkombai, Coonoor, 3.8 Ha. 2. Sengalkombai, Coonoor, 4.6 Ha. 3. Jhicommbai, Coonoor 1.42 Ha. |
| 4. Did your project effectively introduce or strengthen biodiversity conservation in management practices outside protected areas? If so, please indicate how many hectares. | Yes | 0.48 Ha | 0.48 Ha | . Dhodatty, Coonoor 0.48 Ha |
| 5. If your project promotes the sustainable use of natural resources, how many local communities accrued tangible socioeconomic benefits? Please complete Table 1 below. | Yes | | | |

If you answered yes to question 5, please complete the following table.

Table 1. Socioeconomic Benefits to Target Communities

Please complete this table if your project provided concrete socioeconomic benefits to local communities. List the name of each community in column one. In the subsequent columns under Community Characteristics and Nature of Socioeconomic Benefit, place an X in all relevant boxes. In the bottom row, provide the totals of the Xs for each column.

| Name of Community | Community Characteristics | | | | | | | Nature of Socioeconomic Benefit | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|--|---------------------------------|--|---------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|---|--|-------------------------------|---|--|--|-------|
| | Small landowners | Subsistence economy | Indigenous/ ethnic peoples | Pastoralists/nomadic peoples | Recent migrants | Urban communities | Communities falling below the poverty rate | Other | Increased Income due to: | | | | Increased food security due to the adoption of sustainable fishing, hunting, or agricultural practices | More secure access to water resources | Improved tenure in land or other natural resource due to titling, reduction of colonization, etc. | Reduced risk of natural disasters (fires, landslides, flooding, etc) | More secure sources of energy | Increased access to public services, such as education, health, or credit | Improved use of traditional knowledge for environmental management | More participatory decision-making due to strengthened civil society and governance. | Other |
| | | | | | | | | | Adoption of sustainable natural resources management practices | Ecotourism revenues | Park management activities | Payment for environmental services | | | | | | | | | |
| Kurumba | | | X | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | | | X | X | |
| Toda | | | X | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | |
| Badaga | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | |
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| Total | 1 | 2 | 1 | | | | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | 3 | 1 | |

If you marked "Other", please provide detail on the nature of the Community Characteristic and Socioeconomic Benefit:

Additional Comments/Recommendations

There needs to be support for more initiatives that attempt to demonstrate formal and informal strategies that support community tenure that encourages conservation. CEPF's support to strengthening the implementation of the Forest Rights Act is an important investment in this context.

Sacred Groves across the country are at threat due to myriad reasons. Foremost among these is the issue of non-recognition by States/other communities. Initiatives on strengthening sacred groves need to invest as much in documenting these as in making them 'visible' as collective conservation institutions.

Information Sharing and CEPF Policy

CEPF is committed to transparent operations and to helping civil society groups share experiences, lessons learned, and results. Final project completion reports are made available on our Web site, www.cepf.net, and publicized in our newsletter and other communications.

Please include your full contact details below:

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List of Appendices:

- 1) CFR claim resolution by Sengalcombai, Johicombai and Kavalcombai
- 2) Maps of Sacred Groves from PRA exercises
- 3) Protocol for Sacred Groves Ecological Monitoring
- 4) Report on Badaga Sacred Groves
- 5) Report on Toda Sacred Groves
- 6) Sacred Grove Signboard details
- 7) Conservation Education Report
- 8) Social Assessment
- 9) Botanical Assessment at Sacred Groves