

Linking Conservation, Enterprise and Livelihood in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, Western Ghats, India

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Balancing the goals of biodiversity conservation and human wellbeing in a complex landscapes has been at the core of a journey spanning three decades in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR), India's first declared by UNESCO in 1986. The NBR landscape is a mosaic of Indigenous Peoples territories intersecting with Protected Areas, plantations and rapidly developing peri-urban settlements. The NBR is located at the Southern part of the Western Ghats Biodiversity Hotspot, India. It is here in the NBR that a civil society organization, Keystone Foundation (established in 1993) started to look at conservation, enterprise and livelihoods as the pillars of an ecologically sound development model for Indigenous Peoples in Mountain areas. Lessons about sustainable living and responsible stewardship that are built on traditional and scientific ways of understanding the biosphere have evolved through community based models of 1) co-existence with large mammals/ carnivores; 2) ecologically restoring habitats and endangered species; 3) social enterprises built on core principles of sustainable -use. The continued efforts to achieve goals of biodiversity conservation and human wellbeing have resulted in some desirable outcomes, which we also recognize are context specific. There are trade-offs and while some aspects of human wellbeing have been achieved, different components and attributes of biodiversity have been conserved. A complex question looming over this pursuit is "whose biosphere is it anyway?". The need for collaborations between multiple sections of society built on trust, respect and co-operation with diverse interest groups are certainly important to the journey ahead.