

The Western Ghats

*WinG*

Information Network

March 1996

### UPDATE

Well, we're still here, and though not quite ready to produce a first issue of **Western Ghats *Alive*** it definitely feels like time to get in touch with you again.

Firstly, we want to thank all of you who replied to our introductory letter of last October. The response rate was very good and though it was disappointing not to have heard from a number of individuals whom we had counted on (including a few old friends!) the support was unanimously enthusiastic. Replies came in from the whole spectrum of our mailing list - which itself has now grown by 12% - major science and research institutions in India and abroad, NGOs large and small, managers of plantations, teachers, amateur naturalists of all kinds, even a few forest officers.

It seems at this stage we can do no better than to give you an idea of who else is involved in **WinG** and about some of the ideas they have contributed.

To begin on a sad note, we received a letter dated Feb.3rd from M. Krishnan in Madras. He was supportive but not overly optimistic about the ability of "people like us" to affect beneficial changes in the Western Ghats, at least not until such time as State and Central Govts. realise their duty "to safeguard the physical and biotic entities of the land they govern". Unfortunately this distinguished naturalist, wildlife photographer and writer died a few weeks later at the age of 83. Collectively, perhaps we can prove him wrong.

Another elder statesman of conservation, Zafar Futehally, recalled the recent history of environmental efforts in the Western Ghats, and enclosed for our growing reference files some interesting documents relating to this. We may reprint parts of these in an early issue of the Newsletter. K.M.Mathew of the Rapinat Herbarium reminded us that Zafar Futehally had himself at one time edited a Western Ghats newsletter, "excellent but now defunct for want of funds and encouragement". Let us hope that we can avoid a similar fate.

Prof. M.S.Mani regretted not being able to repeat "an exploratory survey of the whole length of WG from Nasik to Ponmudi" that he had carried out between 1971-79, but others, such as Ajay Mahajan of the Delhi-based KALPAVRIKSH environmental action group, are thankfully continuing such efforts.

From among the rising generation of professional conservationists, including those in the relevant state offices of WWF - India, we heard from Vivek Menon, an independent wildlife consultant, offering us help and information in his specialist field of monitoring poaching and trade in wildlife; from Seema Bhatt, now South Asia Coordinator for the Biodiversity Conservation Network, who has for a long time been convinced that a WG information network is essential; and from G.S.Jayadev of the WG Biodiversity Inventory Programme, a group of college teachers and students working under the guidance of Prof.Madhav Gadgil of IIS., Bangalore.

Prof. Gadgil's programme is linked to the Natural History Museum of London's Biogeography and Conservation Laboratory, whose head, Dr.R.I.Vane-Wright, wrote optimistically about projects to map and assess biodiversity in the WG. Also working in conjunction with this project is the Harrison Zoological Museum from where Dr.Paul Bates reveals that they are in the midst of producing a book and CD-ROM of Indian bats, much of which will be relevant to the WG, which of course has two wholly endemic bat species - *Otomops wroughtoni* and the recently re-discovered *Latidens salimalii*. The individual species found in the WG, in particular the multitude of endemics, will be a primary focus of **WinG** and **Western Ghats Alive**.

A large group of **WinG** correspondents consists of teachers, lecturers and professors in colleges and universities up and down the region and they responded with huge interest and enthusiasm. Among them are Dr.V.D.Vartak(Pune), Dr.J.C.Uttangi(Dharwad), Prof.R.Jambulingam(Mettupalayam), Prof.N.R.Adur(Belgaum), Dr.S.Subramanya(Bangalore), Dr.T.N.Vijayakumar (Manjery) and Dr.Arunachalam Kumar (Mangalore). From those currently studying or working overseas we had long and informative replies from John Mathew in Norfolk, Virginia; from R.Kannan at WestArk College, Arkansas, who contributed the note on fig trees and hornbills which we have included here; and from Anita Malhotra at Univ. of Wales, Bangor, who is currently working on the *Trimeresurus* pit vipers, of which perhaps four species are endemic to the WG. A colleague of hers, Dr.Jenny Daltry, has recently joined the team at the Centre for Herpetology, Madras Crocodile Bank, where she hopes to concentrate on reptile education programmes. We hear that the Centre's king cobra project is well under way and they have been filming the species in the WG.

The participation of NGOs is vital to any effective natural history network in the WG and almost all those we wrote to, plus a few that we didn't, responded. They include WWF - India, SACON, Coorg Wildlife Soc., CEE(Ahmedabad), Nature Club Surat, the Goa Foundation, Palni Hills Conservation Council, BNHS, Nirmala Kodagu, French Institute (Pondicherry), LEAF, Anglade Institute of Natural History, Jeewan Sanstha (Pune), Nilgiri Wildlife & Environ. Assoc., Nelliampathi Hills Conserv. Society, Acad. of Development Science, FRLHT(Bangalore), Coimbatore Zool. Park & Conservation Centre and NEST (Trichur). Other organisations we heard from are the ZSI and state Forest Depts., *Sanctuary*

magazine and the UK journal *Oryx* (whose editor kindly gave **WinG** a mention in their latest issue), Tata Tea Ltd. who are major landowners in the WG, and the British Council.

A host of individuals associated with one or more local and national NGOs have sent in a continuing stream of letters in their own right. A typical response is that of P.K.Ramesh, a plantation consultant from Chikmagalur. "We are living amidst Western Ghats" he writes "and we are aware of the destruction and damage being caused.... in the name of Progress and Development. Nature is being stripped and destroyed". Another reply is from M.B.Krishna in Bangalore who suggests that **Western Ghats Alive** be "targetted towards conservation of biota and habitats, with emphasis being given to field studies". Bombay-based Rishad Naoroji, an expert on diurnal birds of prey, tells us he feels that "someone had to take this step of promoting conservation of this unique zone which has been severely fragmented. It will also help in bringing professionals and conservationists together and create awareness in the interested laymen about what is happening to the flora and fauna of this area". Thank you Rishad, we couldn't have put it better ourselves.

Altogether there have been too many responses to mention each one but we thank everyone for their support and apologise that we aren't able to reply individually to each of you.

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From our side the big news is that **WinG** has submitted a proposal for significant funding for the **Western Ghats Alive** newsletter to a major conservation organisation. We are hopeful that it will be favourably considered, and if so will put the newsletter on a sound financial footing for the time being, allowing us to employ a part time editor and to publish regularly with a few colour pictures.

We have been living with the project for several years now and tend to forget that you don't know much about it or us. Putting the proposal together obliged us to think through our aims and methods in a useful way, and it may be helpful to clarify these for the members of **WinG** by paraphrasing some sections of the proposal.

"In the end we will conserve only what we love,  
we will love only what we understand,  
we will understand only what we are taught."

*Baba Dioum*

"There are many avenues to promote the understanding that will lead us to effective conservation. Among these are the sharing of information, raising the level of awareness, strengthening the will and the ability to act, inspiration and encouragement, and combining the insight and accuracy of the scientist with the enthusiasm and wonder of the amateur. In all these ways we can help to stem the haemorrhaging of a precious life source and its conservation for future generations."

"The ultimate outcome of the project will be the permanent establishment of a collective voice for all species in the Western Ghats, in particular the endemics which can be saved in the wild nowhere else on earth, whereby their presence can be made known, their cause championed, their needs expressed, their rights upheld, and their future guaranteed."

"The global importance of the Western Ghats ranges, as a unique reservoir of biodiversity and endemism, has in the last decade become widely appreciated and the region has become the subject of increasing attention since its public identification as a biological 'hotspot' of international significance.

"The proliferation of interest has resulted in a plethora of projects initiated by government, universities and research establishments, major international conservation organisations, small local NGOs, and even by individual residents. Public attention is increasingly fuelled by wider coverage in the media.

"Though welcome in most cases, like the habitat itself much of the activity is fragmented. Specialists pursue their own goals; institutes work among their peers; state bureaucracies within their own sphere; international NGOs with chosen partners; local NGOs often in isolation; individuals haphazardly and without direction; the media reporting superficially and even erroneously.

"In such a situation any person finds it hard to keep in touch with wider trends, or to find specific information outside their immediate circle. Even the largest and best funded organisations have limits on research facilities and database resources, while others may simply never know half of what is going on.

"At present no periodical publication exists devoted solely to the natural history and conservation of the Western Ghats, where one might hope to find answers and information. Even for the professional, but certainly for less well-connected amateurs, finding the right answers can be frustrating, and without proper information our efforts are much reduced in value.

"The newsletter proposed by **WinG** will serve to provide access to the existing and growing body of relevant information available from past and current work worldwide, disseminating it among different disciplines and to a wider, less specialist audience. It will also act as a forum for the interchange of news, views and contacts among those interested in the living environment of the Western Ghats".

#### "Objectives-

- ☆ to raise awareness of biodiversity in the Western Ghats.
- ☆ to establish a regional and global network linking people with a common interest in the Western Ghats, thereby providing a wider forum for the dissemination and discussion of all aspects of the natural history of the region.
- ☆ to make accessible accurate and up-to-date information relevant to a better understanding of the Western Ghats and the species living there, and to foster a clear grasp of the scientific and technical details that underpin conservation.
- ☆ to enhance the capacity of individuals to make a difference.
- ☆ to provide a resource for environmental/conservation education and for use by other media."

## BE A WATCHDOG AND PROTECT FIG TREES

R.Kannan

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I recently concluded a 2-year study on the ecology and conservation of the Great Hornbill *Buceros bicornis*, based in the Anaimalai hills around Top Slip, Tamil Nadu. One of my major concerns pertaining to the conservation of this bird was the reckless cutting of fig trees by the Forest Department. Fig trees were regularly lopped or cut to feed the 30-odd camp elephants stationed in the sanctuary permanently by the Department to aid in lumbering operations. This practice seems to have historical roots throughout India. Since the colonial days fig trees have been considered useless owing to their commercial inapplicability and their purported strangling of commercially useful trees. Discussions with officials from the Wildlife Institute of India indicate that fig lopping occurs in the sanctuaries of north India as well.

It is well known to tropical biologists that figs are a vital source of food to a wide variety of animals. So much has been the importance of figs in the Asian tropics that they are widely regarded as keystone species, i.e. species that play a pivotal role in the maintenance of regional biodiversity. My studies in the evergreen forests of the Indira Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary around Top Slip support this view. I found that many birds, especially Great Hornbills, depended heavily on figs for their daily food requirements. Figs accounted for nearly 80% of the food delivered at the nest by the parent hornbills. For the common species of fruit-eating birds in the area the percentage of fig visitation versus visitations to all other fruiting trees ranged between 50- 80%.

Figs were available year-round, unlike fruits of other plant species in the forest. This was for two reasons: individual trees within a species were very aseasonal in the way they produced ripe figs, and secondly, there were at least ten species of figs in the area with that unique fruiting pattern, thereby assuring more or less a continuous supply of fig fruits. When coupled to the heavy reliance on figs by many vertebrates, and the fact that figs were available in greater amounts in the breeding season of the frugivores, this makes the conservation of fig trees very important for the maintenance of local biodiversity.

Armed with all this data I managed to coax the local Forest Dept. personnel to impose a ban on the removal of fig trees in the sanctuary. Although, after years of fig abuse, this was a breakthrough in attempts to improve conservation measures in the area I knew it wasn't time to celebrate. I had a feeling that when I packed up and left the site the fragile fig-moratorium would fall apart. And I was right. Recently news arrived from several sources that fig tree lopping and felling has resumed in the sanctuary. There are 30-odd elephants stationed there and everyday mahouts scour the forests uprooting huge fig trees or lopping them so badly that they are reduced to mere barren stumps.

What we direly need are "watchdogs" for fig trees. It is impossible to stop every little violation within the precincts of our sanctuaries but at least we can all join and do something as overwhelmingly important as saving the fig trees.

I suggest we all do this: everytime we go to a sanctuary in the Western Ghats where camp elephants are stationed, we make enquiries about the way the elephants are fed and visit the camp sites if possible looking for telltale signs of fig lopping, very commonly found in the form of branches and figs. If figs are being marauded we lobby by writing to the Wardens and other forest officers concerned and by publicizing it in **Western Ghats *Alive*** or by any other means.

It has worked before, and will work here if we all persevere. Let's join hands and do this. Be a watchdog for fig trees. We owe it to the animals in our sanctuaries.

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Please continue to write to us and send in contributions for the newsletter. We're not only interested in results, but in interim reports and plans, in sightings from the field, in publications and clippings from the media, in forthcoming events, in requests for information and help, in photos and slides of unusual species, in reviews of relevant books. We don't promise to publish everything but all and every kind of information is grist for the network's mill. For the time being we remain based in Madurai.

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