

## REHABILITATION OF SETTLEMENTS FROM WITHIN THE WAYANAD WILDLIFE SANCTUARY – RESETTling VISIONS FOR A GREENER FUTURE

The Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary is a strip of forest along the eastern border of Wayanad district in Kerala State. It extends from the south-east from the edge of Gudalur in the Nilgiri District of Tamil Nadu and continues past the tri-junction of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka State borders towards north-west up to the Kodagu District of Karnataka. This forest belt has a 20km wide total discontinuity between the Kurichiyad and Tholpetty Ranges along the Kerala-Karnataka border in the Mullankolli Panchayat. Here the State boundary runs along the Kabini reservoir and upstream along the river for some extent where settlements have come up to the water's edge.

The Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary extending along 344sq km was notified in 1973. This stretch of forest in Kerala is perhaps the most sensitive and crucial forest corridor linking the Western Ghat forests in Tamil Nadu with that in Karnataka. The Kerala forest links the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve in Tamil Nadu along the northeastern edge of the Nilgiris with the Bandipur Tiger Reserve and Nagarhole National Park in Karnataka. The Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary is a part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. The Kerala stretch of forest receives higher rainfall than the contiguous forests in the other two States. Nuguhole (Noolpuzha) in Kerala starts from the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary and is a major tributary joining Kabini downstream of the Kabini Dam. A number of other streams also originate from the Sanctuary forests and drain into Kabini. Terrainal conditions, especially the presence of a number of semi-enclosed swamps called 'vayals' store a considerable quantum of rainfall and feed into Kabini. These moist depressions also support luxuriant vegetation even in summer providing water and forage in the lean season for the very large congregation of wildlife from the adjacent parts of Western Ghats and the Mysore Plateau.

The forests in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve support the largest concentration of the Indian Elephant and the largest population of tiger in the Peninsula. It is not an exaggeration to say that the long-term survival of elephants in this extensive landscape actually depends on the ecological status of the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary. In addition this 344sq km belt of forest is the only barrier preventing the entire 2000sq km Wayanad Plateau from getting desiccated. It is also the best remaining catchment forest in the Kabini Basin, the most important tributary of Cauvery. Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary forests must be protected at any cost.

Till fairly recently practically the entire Wayanad Plateau was heavily forested. Within this vast stretch of moist tropical vegetation, only along some vayals there were scattered settlements of tribal communities belonging to 6 different groups and a small population of subsistence farmers from the plains. Since the 1940s most of the forests in the Wayanad Plateau were cleared leaving only the eastern strip and some scattered small islands of Reserved Forests elsewhere. Extensive plantations of cash crops replaced most of the hill forests. After Independence, large extent of natural vegetation in the Reserved Forests were cleared and converted to teak and eucalyptus plantations. Recurrent man-

made fires, heavy grazing by cattle, regular timber extraction and extensive bamboo extraction depleted the remaining natural vegetation. The overall desiccation of the land also affected the fragmented forest ecosystems causing severe retrogression. All this reduced the wildlife habitat value and the carrying capacity of the Sanctuary area also.

Because of the topography, historical pattern of human settlements and the pattern of forestry operations, even though the Sanctuary has an extent of 344sq km, actually there is no extensive stretch of continuous natural vegetation. The fragmentation of forest by human settlements, sterile plantations of teak and eucalyptus, an extensive network of roads and patches of extremely degraded forests has not only reduced the overall carrying capacity but also adversely affected regeneration of the remaining patches. If the Sanctuary forests have to carry out their ecosystem functions, primarily climatic amelioration, watershed protection and sustain potential natural biodiversity, the forest ecosystem contiguity has to be re-established. This can be achieved only by relocating settlements, and by regenerating ecologically degraded areas, specifically the monocultural plantations. The presence of the large number of human settlements, sharp dry summers, especially with the regular monsoon failure affecting Wayanad, the gregarious flowering and drying of bamboo creating fire prone situations resulting in Wayanad forests becoming the most fire susceptible forest in Kerala. The forest fires removing ground vegetation and desiccating the land further exacerbates the man-wildlife conflict.

There was no displacement or relocation of the people when the Sanctuary was notified in 1973. Hence the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary is the Protected Area in Kerala with the largest number of enclosures and the highest human population within its boundaries. Naturally man-wildlife conflict is also severe. Over the past decades, extensive forests in the adjacent States beyond the boundaries of the earlier mentioned Protected Areas have been lost concentrating wildlife into a rapidly shrinking remaining stretch. Uncontrolled and unscientific tourism development has overtaken the entire tract and the Kerala part also. Dense vehicular movement into the forests especially cutting through elephant migration routes have accentuated the potential for conflict. During peak summer only the settled and cultivated valley reaches within the Sanctuary area have any greenery and moisture. This attracts all the wild animals and with more effective protection of forest by the Department curbing poaching, cultivation has become next to impossible.

From the perspective of the farmer the situation is extremely critical. In the past there have been many instances when irate farmers have reacted violently to the forest officials and many wild animal deaths might have been due to human retaliation. There were discussions in 1995 and 2004 to relocate human population from the enclosures within the Sanctuary. Detailed plans were prepared by the Forest Department but there was no subsequent action. The present plight of the tribal population and the small holder farmers within the Sanctuary is indescribably pathetic. This also forms a part of the dismal picture of farmer suicides in Wayanad.

The Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary forest must be fully protected and restored to its former natural glory. Wildlife must be protected, specifically the Indian Elephant which has now

become the National Heritage Animal. The only feasible means to achieve this is to relocate the population from within the Sanctuary area. Early in 2010, on the initiative of the State Forest Department, the Kerala Forest Research Institute, Peechi conducted a detailed survey and prepared a comprehensive plan for rehabilitation aiming to utilize funds from the Tiger Conservation Authority of India.

According to this scheme, there are two options. The first is a compensation of 10 lakhs rupees in cash for the voluntary vacation of the land by the owner. The second option offers land, house and basic infra-structure facilities for those willing to be rehabilitated. As per the latest data, there are 110 settlements, housing 2613 families and an additional 264 families who do not have proper land records. This population collectively numbers 10,604. According to the KFRI study 2485 families in 1385 houses are deemed suitable for relocation. Out of this 2038 families opted for cash compensation and 447 families opted for the rehabilitation package. If the scheme is fully implemented, out of the total extent of private holdings covering 3304 acres inside the Sanctuary, 1700.97 acres will revert to forest habitat. People from 641 households from within Tholpetty Range, 387 households from Kurichiyad Range, 837 households from S.Battery Range and 620 from Muthanga Range have expressed their willingness to move out.

This is a unique situation in the history of forest protection in India – such a large population willing to move out not only for the monetary benefit but at least partially for saving the forest. This magnanimity and enlightened stance of the people are in the face of some inherent drawbacks in the Government of India scheme. The compensation rate fixed on the basis of land value elsewhere in India does not reflect the Kerala condition. The current market value of the fertile lands inside the Sanctuary is many fold higher than what the owners could get from the Government compensation. The cultivations in these enclosures, unlike in the rest of the country, are highly valued perennial cash crops where the viability of the crop land and the initial investment in raising them are much higher than for most other Indian crops. Yet the people are willing to move out. This has to be appreciated and given wider publicity and support by the rest of the society. The implementation of the scheme must be speeded up because it is for the common good. It is not merely helping the people in the enclosures but the added protection to the forests is a great ecological boon for the entire Wayanad. The regeneration of these forests could be the most positive development in the entire Cauvery Basin. On the other hand a mutually destructive situation could have easily evolved. The people aggravated by continuous conflict with wildlife could have turned against forest officials, forests and wildlife. The consequent destruction would have adversely affected millions of people in the agriculturally vital areas in the three States surrounding the Sanctuary.

On the basis of a set of sound criteria, KFRI has identified 14 enclosure villages for rehabilitation in the first phase. These criteria include the entire population of a settlement expressing willingness for relocation, the geographical location of the settlements within the forest reflecting its ecological value, intensity of human-wildlife conflict, the extent of land which will revert to forests once the settlement is vacated and so on. Narimanthikolli and Easwarankolli settlements in the Tholpetty Range, Kooloor, Kurichiyad and Ammavayal settlements in the Kurichiyad Range, Arakunji, Kottankara,

Vellakkodu, Puthur, Manimunda and Pambankolli settlements in S. Battery Range and Pangalam, Kolad, and Chettiyalathur settlements in Muthanga Range have been identified as to be relocated in the first phase. 1388 people in 880 beneficiary families are included in this step which will help revert 656 acres of land to forest at the cost of 88 crore rupees. The entire rehabilitation operation will be directed by a Committee chaired by the District Collector. The Wildlife Warden will be the Member Secretary of the Committee.

Only those families who have relatively larger land holdings and hence are bound to suffer larger financial loss are yet to express willingness to move out. But the State Government could very well take up this issue both with the Central Govt and on its own draw up govt schemes to compensate their loss.

The people are willing and there is an existing scheme with the Govt of India providing the money needed for rehabilitation. The detailed project report has already been prepared by March 2010. But nothing further has happened since then. This state of affairs must change. The long awaited rehabilitation must begin immediately. There must be broader public interest and support from beyond the district and the State. This is not only the survival of a few thousand farmers who got enclosed by changing times and changing environment. At stake it is not just the future of a Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala. The step the people have taken is the most progressive step which the whole country needs to emulate. Farmers need support not merely for the food security they provide to the rest of the society but when farmers take the additional step for ecological security which is primary for food security and survival security everyone else has to be with them. It is not only the question of a few hundred acres of land going to forest. It is the greening of the mindset which has to be lauded, supported and emulated.

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