

YACHAY WASI Sacred Sites Event - Submission 6 – INDIA - Received April 20, 2006

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DEVARAKADU – The unique community managed sacred forests of Kodagu district in Western Ghats of India.

Kodagu district in the state of Karnataka in South India is one of the well wooded districts in India with 80% of its land area under tree cover. With a diversity of ecosystems and unique traditional system of management of natural resources this district has been in the forefront of conservation and sustainable utilization of natural resources in Western Ghats one of the Hottest hotspots of biodiversity in the world.

One of the major reasons for supporting and nurturing biological diversity in this district is the conservation ethos of indigenous communities living in this district. These communities were nature worshippers and the entire landscape was sacred. Sacred forests are patches of forest preserved in the names of local deities by local indigenous communities. Every village in Kodagu has at least one and many villages have more than five sacred forests. Kodagu district has 1214 Devarakadu with an area of 2550 hectares and 18 indigenous communities have been worshipping 165 deities with unique forms of dance, music and traditional rituals. These sacred forests served as socio-religious centers fostering the communal harmony and social well being of the indigenous communities. But currently they are also serving as a network of sites for conservation of biodiversity in addition to the socio-cultural roles.

The institution of sacred forest has undergone rapid changes over the years and have transformed with respect to its structure and functions. These forests are owned by the forest department for the last hundred years and indigenous communities had only limited roles in management of the forests and were only managing the temples and the religious functions. Over this period of time there has been a major loss in the area and changes in the traditional management due to issues related to ownerships, demography and changes in socio-economic and political scenario in the district. The earlier Forest temples have transferred into Temple forests where the temple and not the forests is central to the communities.

Hence, a revitalization initiative of this unique indigenous community linked conservation concept has been initiated with the active participation of all the stakeholders. A series of meetings held with active participation of forest department the legal owners and indigenous communities, the traditional managers has resulted in creation of village level and district level institutions to manage the sacred forests. College of Forestry, Ponnampet, of University of Agricultural Sciences in Bangalore facilitated this initiative. Currently efforts are being undertaken under the Kodagu Model Forest programme the first model forest programme in India to evolve effective participatory management systems for these sacred forests. It is heartening to note that with the active participation of all the stakeholders the movement has gained local, regional, national and international support. The inclusion of this revival initiative in national and state level biodiversity strategy and action plan and mention as the only site from India in the proposed international initiative to conserve sacred sites by I.U.C.N under UNEP programme indicates the significance of the revival initiative. This initiative needs additional support of international and national institution to bring back this unique informal conservation concept.