

Workshop on  
"Biodiversity and Traditional Ecological Knowledge"

## Let Us Talk on Biodiversity

05 June 2010  
Science & Technology Museum Hall  
Thiruvananthapuram



## Report



Centre for Innovation  
in Science & Social Action



## Background

Biodiversity and Traditional ecological knowledge is increasingly being sought by academics, scientists, and policymakers as a potential source of ideas for emerging models of ecosystem management, conservation biology, and ecological restoration. It has been recognized as complementary and equivalent to scientific knowledge. Indeed, the United Nations Convention on Biodiversity calls for recognition, protection, and utilization of TEK. New directions in applied biology that have direct parallels and precedents in traditional knowledge include ecosystem management, medicine, pharmacology, agroecology, wildlife, fisheries, and animal behaviour. Biological research is moving to explore these approaches, yet acknowledgment or understanding of traditional ecological knowledge is rare in the student community.

TEK is being recognized as having equal status with scientific knowledge and has been termed the "intellectual twin to science". Traditional knowledge has much in common with scientific ecological knowledge (SEK), which is not surprising since both traditions derive from the same source: systematic observations of nature. Traditional ecological knowledge can be a source of new

biological insights and potential models for conservation biology and sustainable development. Examination of traditional ecological knowledge explicitly brings multicultural perspectives into the core of the science curriculum, where they have generally been absent. Incorporation of traditional ecological knowledge into the curriculum can increase the participation of students and practitioners in the scientific community.

In this context, CISSA organised a workshop on the theme "Biodiversity and Traditional Ecological Knowledge" on 5th June 2010. This programme titled "Let Us Talk on Biodiversity" introduced traditional knowledge holders on biodiversity such as tribes, farmers, fishermen, traditional health practitioners etc to the student community for an interaction. The talk was divided into three sessions- Forest Knowledge (Kattarivu), Sea Knowledge (Kadalarivu) and Local Knowledge (Nattarivu)- and each session was moderated by an expert in the field. This unique programme, organised by CISSA, a global partner for celebrating International Year of Biodiversity 2010 of the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, was attended by around 300 students from all over Kerala.



# Inauguration



Sri C Divakaran, Hon'ble Minister for Food & Civil Supplies inaugurating the seminar

The Minister for Food and Civil Supplies, Shri C. Divakaran inaugurated the programme at Science & Technology Museum Hall, Thiruvananthapuram. The minister opined that celebrations such as the World Environment Day are occasions to inculcate the spirit of environmental conservation among students, who are at present not exposed to the realities of nature. He demanded inclusion of traditional knowledge in environmental awareness programmes as well as curriculum so that the children will be proud of our biodiversity heritage.

The inaugural session was presided over by Shri L. Radhakrishnan IAS, Principal Secretary, Water Resources Department, Government of Kerala. Dr. RV Varma, Chairman, Kerala State Biodiversity Board delivered the key-note address and stressed the need for mobilising the student power and the great treasure of traditional knowledge for preparing People's Biodiversity Register. Dr. A. Biju Kumar, Secretary, CISSA, Dr. S. Rajasekharan, Scientist, TBGRI and Shri Jayakumar, Agrifriends Cultural Association spoke on the occasion.



a view of delegates

# Unique Experience.....

The World Environment Day celebrations took on a different dimension when the traditional knowledge holders from various parts of the state explained their close association with biodiversity and the immense

knowledge they inherited while living all these years with biodiversity. The scientific interpretations of the traditional knowledge made the programme much meaningful to the student community.

## Forest Knowledge-Kattarivu



Dr.S.Rajasekharan,Scientist, TBGRI initiates the discussion

The Kattarivu group that interacted with students included the hill tribes Lakshmikutty, Valakkudy Chandran and EM Sivaprasad and the scientific validation and co-ordination was done by Dr. S. Rajasekharan of Tropical Botanic Garden and Research Institute (TBGRI). While beginning the programme with a “chattupattu”, a devotional song of the Kani tribes, Lakshmikutty said that “Lord Agasthya told our forefathers not to rely fully on hunting for food, as this is against sustainable management of biodiversity. That is why he offered us the musical instrument called “kokkara” so that we lead a life of music, seeking fruits and vegetables from the surrounding”.

The knowledge holders spoke about rare herbs such as “valiya arayan” (*Aristolochia tagala*), “cheriya arayan” (*Aristolochia indica*) and “palakan” (*Humboldtia anjengo*) which are widely used to treat snake bites. Dr. Rajasekharan explained that many herbs used by the

traditional healers, when later scientifically validated, were found to be very effective in treating a host of human ailments. While answering queries by the students on the modern developmental paradigms, the tribes explained the ecological impacts of increasing number of tourists in forests within the Agasthyamala Biological Reserve.

The traditions are also reflected in a variety of practices regarding the use and management of trees, forests and water. These include, among others, collection and management of wood and non-wood forest produces, traditional ethics, norms and practices for restrained use of forests, water and other natural resources, traditional practices on protection, production and regeneration of forests, cultivation of useful trees in cultural landscapes and agroforestry systems, creation and maintenance of traditional water harvesting systems such as tanks along with plantation of the tree groves in the proximity.



Faculty-Kattarivu ( Forest knowledge)-Smt Lakshmi Kutty, Sri Valakudy Chandran, Sri Sivaprasad



Students interacting with the faculty

## Sea Knowledge-Kadalarivu

In this session the students interacted with elderly fishermen, including T. Peter, J.T. John, Joseph Loppus and M. Ambros and the programme was co-ordinated by Dr. A. Biju Kumar, Dept. of Aquatic Biology and Fisheries, University of Kerala. They spoke about different methods of fishing, the flip sides of modern fishing methods, the varieties of fish and techniques for predicting wind direction and water currents.

“Traditionally we had specific nets for different fish, depending on the size of fish, including those for catching anchovies ('netholi vala), sardines ('mathi vala), etc. With the advent of modern techniques like trawling, the fishes and other creatures are removed from the sea without selection. It also poses irrecoverable damage to the sea bed and reefs” Mr Joseph said.

“The embedded socio-cultural features of the fish economy of Kerala is most evident in the patterns adopted in the sharing of fish harvest, which has direct implication on food and livelihood security of the members of the community; inherent in these patterns of sharing, is a deeply instituted process of care and concern. Traditionally, fishing communities maintained their socio economic ties based on the principle of 'common property resources', despite cultural and religious differences. Though only a small proportion of the fishing community is involved in the labour process to harvest the resource from the sea, the strong socio-

cultural concern requires that the benefits accruing from it should be spread as widely as possible in the community which inhabit the fishing villages” said T. Peter.

Just like the aboriginal tribes in many parts of the world who considered earth as the god, for the traditional fish folk in Kerala, the ecosystem that offered everything for their survival has been the 'Kadamma' or the “sea mother” and there is a popular adage that is even strong today, “Kadamma chathikkilla” or the “sea mother will not betray”.

Traditional fishers also explained their information on the topography of sea floor for finding out better fishing grounds and ocean navigation by locating stars and constellations. Further, they have the expertise in the waves, currents and turbidity of the sea and locating the movements of fish. The traditional fisher folk believe that presence of dark patches in water with ripples indicates a good catch of mackerel and presence of flipping and splashing noise in the water and series of air bubbles coming from below and bursting at the water surface indicates the presence of good shoals of oil sardine. The fishermen also highlighted the need for understanding the ecosystem connectivity as the productivity of the coastal waters is maintained by the organic matter and nutrients carried by the rivers.



Faculty Kadalarivu(Sea knowledge)-Sri T Peter, Sri John J T& Sri Joseph Lopez with Dr.A.Bijukumar Moderator



Students interacting with the faculty



a keenly attending audience

## Local Knowledge-Nattarivu

The Nattarivu group was represented by Manoharan Nair, Peringavil Sali, Santhoshand Malakhi Nadar and the interactions were moderated by Dr. CR Rajagopal, Director, Nattarivu Padana Kendram, Thrissur. Benefits of organic farming, the importance of traditional crop varieties, traditional agricultural methods, and rearing of fish and honey bees were explained by the farmers. "Farms themselves have domesticated biodiversity

essential for survival and subsistence and the only way to store the genetic diversity of rice is by farming them" said Saly, an experienced farmer hailing from central Kerala. Socio-culturally valued species find place in home gardens and courtyards and the discussion highlighted the need for maintaining homestead biodiversity for ensuring food security.



Dr.C.R.Rajagopal, Moderator with Nattarivu Faculty -Sri Malakhi nadar, Sri Santhosh, Sri Manoharan Nair and Sri Peringavil Sali



Dr.C.R.Rajagopal initiating the session with a Folk song





Students interacting with the faculty

## Recommendations

The experts co-ordinated the workshop opined that in order to be effective, efforts on biodiversity conservation can learn from the context-specific local knowledge and institutional mechanisms such as cooperation and collective action; intergenerational transmission of knowledge, skills and strategies; concern for well-being of future generations; reliance on local resources; restraint in resource exploitation; an attitude of gratitude and respect for nature; management, conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity outside formal protected areas; and transfer of useful species among the households, villages and larger landscape.

The following recommendations were forwarded during the workshop:

- The traditional knowledge workshops should be organised across the state for the students in order to provide students first hand information about the rich biodiversity of the state. It was decided to form a network of academic institutions, NGOs and R & D centers across the state to share traditional knowledge with students.
- Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) should be validated scientifically and should be used by the academicians, scientists, and policymakers as a potential source of ideas for emerging models of ecosystem management, conservation biology, and ecological restoration.
- Traditional knowledge should be made part of environmental education programmes and part of curriculum in schools.



## Speakers in the Inaugural Session



Sri R V Varma, Chairman, Kerala State Biodiversity Board



Sri L.Radhakrishnan IAS , Principal Secretary to Govt.



Dr.S.Rajasekharan Scientist, TBGRI



Sri.S.Jayakumar, Programme Co-Ordinator, Agrifriends

# Photo Gallery



# Photo Gallery









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