

Summary of a meeting between members of CWEH and the Wildlife of India Institute (WII)

1 September 2013

The meeting began with an introduction by the Dean, Professor V.B. Mathur to the work of WII, mentioning wildlife conservation, impact assessment, and resources used by pastoralist communities.

Dr Vinita Damodaran introduced the work of CWEH and suggested potential partnerships with the Forest Research Institute (FRI) and the WII. ACRE India was mentioned, as were the collections of South Asian materials held by the Natural History Museum (NHM) in London and the possibility of digital repatriation of fauna collections.

Professor Mathur gave a powerpoint presentation on the WII and its work since its founding in 1982. With the support of Rajiv Gandhi, the WII had been autonomous since 1986. The Minister of the Environment remains the Chairperson of the organisation.

Its mission is to nurture the development of wildlife science and to promote its application in conservation, in consonance with cultural and social milieu. Professor Mathur noted the lack of true 'wilderness' in India and the recognition that people are part of the management of fauna. The WII has a mandate for capacity-building and training of local communities. Representatives of civil society groups have a voice in the WII, as does the academic committee, consisting of 47 full-time scientists and some social scientists (although new appointments were not being made within the social sciences).

Training offered by the WII was discussed. Opportunities included a ten-month diploma in advanced wildlife training; customised training for professionals, including customs and excise, zoos, paramilitary organisations; a two-year MA in wildlife conservation; and a PhD programme. Regional recruitment for these courses was common and some delegates came from as far off as Zambia.

There was some discussion over the National Biodiversity Act and the provisions for benefit-sharing that it contained. It was noted that there were now around four hundred agreements with local communities, at panchayat level, concerning the exploitation of natural resources by drugs or mining companies. The WII emphasised their commitment to benefit sharing, but Drs Damodaran and Minoti Chakravarty-Kaul objected that in the 'closed' areas of Niyamgiri hills and Saranda forest, which were officially protected areas, but had been opened to exploitation by resource-extraction companies.

Members of WII argued for a balance between the protection of biodiversity and the need for resources, suggesting the preservation of certain 'source populations' of bio-diversity. They noted that the restrictions on movements of certain tribal groups had led to environmental problems. The approach of removing such communities from the land was discussed, with several CWEH delegates raising the issue of the problematic replication of colonial approaches of removing people from the land and on placing the responsibility for environmental degradation on the shoulders of pastoralists rather than in a wider context, notably of the post-1991 opening of India to international resource extraction companies.

Some WII projects were discussed: including an attempt to track the movements of turtles in the Bay of Bengal with the aim of ensuring that exploration by oil companies could be carried out without disturbing the annual migration to Sri Lanka. Another study, supported by TATA, was used as an example of a successful attempt to mitigate the impact of development on turtle nesting patterns by altering the lighting used in a port.

There was some discussion over the five percent of India's land that is currently ear-marked for conservation. The WII propose that a further one percent of land should be maintained 'inviolable', including the removal of local communities if necessary, in order to maintain biodiversity. They also propose 1-2km buffer zones around currently protected areas, in which the types of activities conducted would be assessed for their potential impact. A system of corridors was also proposed, in which wildlife should be able to move between conservation areas. Farmers affected would be compensated.

The meeting ended with a brief discussion of the WII's links to the Indian Institute of Environmental Sciences.