

Project Update: December 2010

1) In an initiative between the Gram Panchayat and one of the schools, the children had prepared some saplings to plant around the school campus, and had been given seeds and plastic bags. There were a mix of invasive / exotic species like Australian Acacia, Jatropha, Subhabul, Gulmohar, and local species like Reetha, Shikakai, and some others.

After consulting a few botanists, who advised us to stop the exotics from being planted due to the impacts they cause to the environment, we wrote a letter to the principal, and had a discussion on the effects of invasive species, along with a list of trees / plants appropriate for the region.

The principal readily agreed to plant only the local species.

2) Training on content and use of material is being extended to interested community members, members of village youth group and a school teacher from Bhorgiri village. The programme has started in two additional schools, one in Bhorgiri village, and one at Yelavli.

Bhorgiri has students from grades 3 to 8, and Yelavli has children of primary level. There is a lot of participation from community members of both these villages as they are trying to set up home stays as a tourism activity, and feel that the education programme can help them with strengthening their knowledge of the fauna and flora which they could share with tourists.

Also, Yelavli is inaccessible by road, and it is a 1 hour walk to reach the village from the road after crossing two streams and climbing one hill. The community feels that the exposure their children would get with this programme is even more important since even their formal schooling does not happen regularly due to the place's inaccessibility.

3) Two workshops have taken place in Terungun and Tokawade schools. The topic of discussion this time was the riverine ecosystem. We discussed with the children the journey of the river from its source, till it meets the sea, and all the functions it does along its course, and the influence of the surrounding factors on the river.

The children have now organised themselves into 'nature clubs' and want to follow up with various activities like awareness programmes within the school and their villages, singing, street plays, slogans, etc.

4) Development of relevant and local educational material is ongoing. Various resource persons who have knowledge of the area and have worked there are being consulted and their inputs are being sought to make the information booklet.

5) Around the festival of 'Mahashivratri' in February 2010, the children from Terungun and Tokawade Ashram schools had written a letter to the DC and other officials requesting them to implement the plastic ban within the sanctuary. There was no response to their letter, nor was there any action taken at the temple site.

Some days back, the Tokawade children wrote a follow-up letter to the same officials, and had demanded a response this time. The timing of the letter had been coincided with the '*Shravan*' month, when again there is a huge influx of pilgrims. They said in their letter that they would organise a '*morcha*' if there was no response from officials.

Chief Conservator of Forests, MK Rao, acknowledged receiving both the letters, and has responded to their letter.

In a meeting with Mr Rao, he mentioned that he has already started discussions with various stakeholders in Bhimashankar like the Temple Trust, community members, shop owners, etc to put a garbage disposal system in place.

It is encouraging to know that the children's consistent follow-up has resulted in some action starting off, however long the result may take.

The press (*Times of India*) is following this issue closely and has kept in touch with the Forest Department and us.