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Centre for
the Environment,
Resilience and
Global Sustainability

World Wetlands Day 2011 'Forests for Water and Wetlands'



As a 'boundary organization' with an overarching goal of 'linking knowledge with action', the Centre for the Environment, Resilience and Global Sustainability (CERGS) made an attempt on

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the occasion of World Wetlands Day 2011 to initiate a sustained and constructive dialogue among the general public on issues of wetlands, forests and human security, which goes beyond the traditional approach of awareness generation. CERGS strongly believes in and advocates for actions and informed decision-making on such critical issues. Young volunteers and staff of CERGS reached out to hordes of tourists in the holy shrine of *Pir Jahania*, a unique shrine equally revered both by the Hindus and the Muslims along the sea side village of Gundalaba in Puri district of Orissa, which is also one of the three mass nesting (*Arribada*) sites of endangered olive ridley sea turtles (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) in India.

Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials from the Ramsar Secretariat and customized posters in local language, which were put up right at the entrance of the road leading to the holy shrine, were very helpful in attracting the attention of the tourists and devotees. All most all of them were curious to learn as to how forests and wetlands are inter-linked. The poster designed by the Ramsar Secretariat with a huge tree about to be pulled out of the wetland and depicting its impacts on other living beings in the wetland, both animals and plants, contextualized the situation and helped us to describe the role of forests in wetlands functions and services.

As we moved on we bumped in to a group of young management graduates and the discussion that followed reinforced and strengthened our emphasis on 'actions'. As the group was there for picnic we were careful to be more interactive and participatory in our approach. The team led by Mr. Chinmay Padhi and Mr. Charbak Gadanayak initiated an unscheduled quiz



among the students on Ramsar, Ramsar Sites and mangroves in the state of Orissa. It was followed by an open-ended Q&A session on '*What Young People Can Do for Forests and Wetlands*'?

Mr. Jyotiraj Patra, Honorary Advisor, CERGS and Member - Commission on Ecosystem Management (CEM), IUCN briefly described about some of the global initiatives like the International Year of Youth (2010-2011)¹, the International Year of Forests (2011-2012)², the International Decade for Action "Water for Life" (2005-2015)³ and most importantly the 40th Anniversary of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (1971-2011)⁴ through which students can participate in and contribute to these challenges by systematically channelizing their ideas, initiatives and actions, individually and collectively. "We aren't aware of all these global initiatives and even when we know about any one of them we are not sure how to collectively and systematically organize our actions for an impact in society", shared a student. Prof. P. K Tripathy, who was with the students group, invited members of the CERGS team to support and strengthen students' enthusiasm and willingness for greater environmental causes.

This was followed by an open-house discussion with women members of the local forest protection committees (FPCs) organized in association with STAP (Sea Turtle Action Programme), a local NGO. The all women *Pir Jahania Jungle Surakhya Samiti* (Pir Jahania Forest Protection Committee) which is at the forefront of forest conservation and management in this coastal areas has been appropriately featured as the 'Green Warriors'⁵ for their strength and determination against all odds. They described the 'protective roles' of these coastal vegetation and forests against low-intensity tidal waves during storm surges in the Bay of Bengal and substantiated this through experiences from the 1999 Orissa Super Cyclone. Concerns were raised over the rise in shrimp cultivation related activities, mostly because of shrimp ponds and its impacts on the surrounding mangroves and groundwater.



¹ <http://social.un.org/youthyear/>

² <http://www.un.org/en/events/iyof2011/>

³ <http://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/>

⁴ http://www.ramsar.org/cda/en/ramsar-activities-40ramsar/main/ramsar/1-63-443_4000_0_

⁵ http://cmsdata.iucn.org/downloads/policy_matters_17_pg_143_172.pdf

Discussion centered mostly on the issues of littering and accumulating solid waste in and around this fragile ecosystem because of tourism-related activities and attitudes of the tourists which is mostly in the line of 'come, enjoy, dump and go'.



Most of our volunteers, who were in a community for the first time, were taken aback to witness the vibrancy and vision of these women members who are at the forefront of forest protection in these coastal areas. Naveen Agarwal, an engineering graduate and CERGS volunteer shared his understandings as: "Such a rich repertoire of human ingenuity and capital remain mostly under-utilized in many of our interventions for natural resources conservation and management. Efforts would be more equitable and sustainable if we design and develop our strategies by capitalizing on these assets and resources."

The day-long event came to an end with a walk-for-a-cause along the beaches to experience the richness and tranquility of nature and the urgency to rethink human-nature interactions in a changing world.

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Contact:

Mr. Chinmay Padhi

Head - Communication and Outreach
Centre for the Environment, Resilience and Global Sustainability (CERGS)
Layout & Design: Ms. Sanjukta Badhai
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