

Potential for Community and Conservation Reserves in the Western Ghats, India

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ABSTRACT

Protected Areas represent the world's economic and political commitment towards the conservation of biodiversity. The Western Ghats (WG) in peninsular India, part of the Western Ghats-Sri Lanka Hotspot has the highest human population density and population pressure in the world and is in need of urgent conservation attention. Community Reserves and Conservation Reserves are protected area systems in India which integrate local communities as well as private organisations into protected area management. The potential for Community and Conservation Reserves was evaluated at 25 reserve forests and privately owned/leased forest fragments at Kodaikanal, Theni and Valparai, which are limited-access areas in the human-dominated landscape of the southern WG. Data collection at each site, on a range of issues, was based upon the characteristics of local communities which would be central to the integration of resource-use, community participation and biodiversity conservation. The sites where local communities preferred to participate in protected area management were further prioritized through ranking them for the variables and index calculated. Sixteen potential, community and conservation reserves were subsequently identified and prioritised. An analysis of the perceptions, of forest department officials and conservation researchers, towards the establishment of such reserves revealed that they were unsure whether these reserve systems would be beneficial for biodiversity conservation.

Key words: biodiversity conservation, community-based conservation, prioritization