Expert Corner: A Unique Coexistence of an Indigenous Tribe (Adivasi) with Tigers in the Western Ghats of India

Suggesting New Perspectives on Conservation

Photo by Pradeepkiran on Wikimedia Commons

This article provides information about the Soligas, an Indian Adivasi tribe that has been coexisting with wildlife such as tigers and elephants in the Western Ghats of India for many years.

To understand people's perspectives and their relationships with the area, the authors visited them in November 2022. They met with Dr. Madegowda, a senior researcher at the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment, who guided their discussions with the community elders and provided insights.

A global biodiversity hotspot: the Western Ghats

The Western Ghats in India – along with the island of Sri Lanka – are one of the world's 36 biodiversity hotspots, spreading over six states covering an area of around 164,280 km², and stretching over a distance of 1,500 km. A significant feature of the Western Ghats is that they are recognized among the world's eight 'hottest hotspots' of biological diversity and were designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2012 for their exceptionally high level of biological diversity and endemism. The Indian Ghats harbour 27 national parks (five in Karnataka) and 165 wildlife sanctuaries (33 in Karnataka alone). These GHats are home to around 6,000 flora and fauna species with a high degree of endemism.

Most importantly, the Ghats represent a living cultural landscape, meaning that people have lived with and managed the landscape with ongoing intimate relationships, including their livelihoods and religious, socioeconomic, cultural and spiritual connections.

Figure 1 Location of the BRTWS, Karnataka, India (Source: Shankar et al, 2020)

The Soligas: Indigenous Peoples of the Western Ghats, India

The Soligas, as Adivasi are called in India (meaning "the original inhabitants of the land"), are an Indigenous tribe believed to be among the first settlers in India. They speak the Dravidian language and practice subsistence living to this day.

The Soligas have historically inhabited the Biligiri Hills of Karnataka in India for millennia. However, over recent decades, there have been changes in their rights and relationships with the forest. The Soligas have faced challenges and toxic developments that are still based on the country's colonialism. The Biligiri Hills constitute a part of the BRTWS, which was declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1974, covering an area of 540 km² (Figure 2). In 2011, this area became a tiger reserve. The BRTWS is currently home to about 70 tigers, more than 300 elephants and several other animals, such as deer, bison and leopards, among other unique flora and fauna.

Legend
Forest Cover
Forest Type
Tiger Reserve
Protected Area
Tiger Reserve Boundary
Protected Area Boundary
Forest Beat Boundary
Forest Division Boundary
Forest Range Boundary
Forest Circle Boundary
Forest Division Boundary
Forest Range Boundary
Forest Beat Boundary
Forest Circle Boundary
Forest Type
Tiger Reserve
Protected Area
Tiger Reserve Boundary
Protected Area Boundary
Forest Beat Boundary
Forest Division Boundary
Forest Range