

## Earthy matters: Sindh's legendary forests

Rina Saeed Khan

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Deserts, forests, rivers and freshwater lakes — interior Sindh has all of them, along with a rich history and heritage that dates all the way back to Mohenjodaro. Just before the really hot weather set in, I was back in interior Sindh to visit the Indus For All project, which is being implemented by WWF-Pakistan in collaboration with the Government of Sindh and other stakeholders.

This multi-million euro project is funded by the Royal Netherlands Embassy and its aims are long term biodiversity conservation and livelihood improvement in the Indus River eco-region.

On this trip, I finally got a chance to visit one of Sindh's legendary riverine forests. These types of forests, once found in abundance along the 'kacha' Indus River banks, are disappearing fast. There are several reasons for this — over exploitation, decline of water in the river, grazing pressure, encroachments and misguided forest policies. Under the current forest lease policy, influential people are grabbing forest land for cultivation of crops. Sindh's riverine forests are also infamous as hiding places for dacoits. In recent years, given the breakdown in law and order, even forest personnel are not safe to move around and perform their duties freely! Without forest guards to protect the wooded lands, tree cutting and theft have become uncontrollable.

I was invited to visit the Matiari forest near Hyderabad, where even the local dacoits have been encouraged to become conservationists! In 2006, the UNDP's GEF Small Grants Programme gave funding to the Indus Development Organisation, a local NGO, to organise and mobilise the communities living in and around the forest in planting 10,000 trees and saving what was left of this once thick riverine forest (which used to be spread over 28,000 acres — now only a few thousand acres remain forested). The Indus For All project is continuing the reforestation drive by giving the NGO more funding under their partnership fund to plant trees on another 1000 acres of forest department land.

After a quick briefing, we were taken into the forest in 4 by 4 vehicles, since the road is little more than a dirt track. We were shown the plantation done by the villagers, who have formed 54 community based organisations

in the area (in 54 villages). The trees planted under the UNDP's GEF funding have already grown to adult height. The predominant species found in riverine forests are Babul, Kandi, Bahan and Lai and they are all fast growing species, dependent on water received during the monsoon season.

"It is a struggle to save this forest" pointed out Zain Daudpota, who heads the project. "There have been attempts to put the forest on fire in order to lease the land. Once, they burnt down 20,000 trees in one night! Then there are all these encroachments — they have grabbed land more than 10 feet inside the forest. The forest policy introduced in 2004 also allows people to lease this land — but according to the policy you are supposed to plant trees first, before cutting them. But people who lease the land are not planting any trees, they are just cutting them instead!

The communities mobilised by the NGO have set up two protection committees for the Khebrani and Rais Mureed forests, which include members of the CBOs and range forest officers. The communities are also being taught about honey-bee keeping, and buffalo and goat rearing. "Almost a 100,000 cattle graze in the forest. There should also be sustainable cutting allowed. We want the people to benefit from the forest" pointed out Zain, who once used to be a journalist himself. The new thinking in conservation, which is participatory forest management, includes public involvement and partnerships. The NGO will also introduce silk rearing soon, with training given to the local communities.

"Our main concern right now, however, is to make this area lease-free. The forest lease policy is the most damaging. We want to lobby the local MPAs, MNAs and bring this to their notice. The forest department and community should work together to help this forest grow. The community has been mobilised and is very aware of the benefits of this forest. They are ready to own these forests," said Zain as we drove deeper into the forest and onto the island called 'Keti' which is connected to the bank right now due to the low level of water in the Indus. Here the forest is thick and runs wild — the Indus runs alongside, and hog deer and wild boar are found in abundance. No one lives in the Keti area (except for dacoits, I'm sure!) since it is subject to seasonal flooding.

There are huts deep inside the forest and we stopped for lassi and tea. An influential landlord of the area comes here for hunting, we were told. That's too bad — it was an ideal spot for eco-tourists — here, in the shade of the forest, all you can hear are the sounds of birds and wild animals and you can almost sense the cooling river nearby. A few minutes drive later, we cleared the trees and found ourselves on the bank of the Indus River, which shimmered below. The sandy beach was inviting and it was a perfect place for a picnic. I really hope that these special forests can be saved before it is too late.