



Earthwatch

It was a beautiful spring evening with light drizzle romancing the green façade of Margalla hills dotted with lush chir pines and springy bushes—the subtropical scrub forest smelled lusciously, while a group of villagers were busy sending their viewpoints across a group of media persons who had visited them precisely for this very reason.

Would it be all right to believe all in all that these seemingly simpletons narrated as their woes and their miseries and some solutions. We listened with keen ears but discerning minds.

'Had it been simply for a pipeline of Sui gas we would not have to cut for the fuel wood that we have for so many years!' said one. Ofcourse these denizens living here for many decades have a right to survive. But had it not been inside the only federal national park—the Margalla National Parks on the peripheries of this beautiful capital city we would not have even been there, with them. The Margalla Hill National Park (MHNP) was established in 1980 and includes areas of Rawal Lake, Shakar Parian and parts of Margalla foothills together making 15833 hectares. The Islamabad Wildlife Ordinance 1979 prohibits interfering with wildlife and its habitats as well as any consumptive use of natural resources including cultivation, grazing, mining and polluting water.

'We cut from the Shamilaat forests!' was a common retort from many a villagers belonging to two different villages namely Gokina Khurd, Talhar Khurd ensconced within the fold of these

In serious danger

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S.W. FATIMA discusses the endangered ecological balance inside the Margalla National Park

hills, the natural guardian and grandeur of the capital city. We argued that cutting trees from the Shamilaat was not equivalent to the same activity in guzara forest. But who could withstand the confident claim of so many, not even CDA the Capital Development Authority that is said to have made payments to 25 villages' original residents out of the 36 villages, host to more than 100 families with 92000 people according to 1998 census, within the national park.

The villagers explained that they don't cut Pine trees, which are most vigilantly guarded and protected but said they cut other trees and bushes, but not from the core zone acquired by CDA.

Margalla National Park is unique in the sense that it is comprises three separate chunks of land, that which skirts Rawal dam, another portion comprises Shakarparian hills and the third most biggest chunk spans the undulating heights of Margalla hills. However, the most interesting aspect of the story is that even after the passage of more than a decade the villagers residing in these areas are not convinced of any right the state might have on what they believe to be 'their land'.

The most senior person of the community, the hale and hearty Feroze Khan spoke his mind to us in plain terms: all the natural resources were for the usage of the people. What to do with wildlife or flower or fauna if the human needs remained unfulfilled. But to fulfil those needs was it necessary to chop off the forests, that too inside a declared national park Such questions and queries kept racing in our minds. Was it not clear that the

state should have resolved the issue once for all, an issue that remained burning, and still steams right under the nose of the administration.

That reminds one that only last year there were more than 60 fires that erupted within this dry tropical forest. The villagers and conservators told us that these sad annual incidents have much to do with those careless visitors who throw away burning cigarette butts while visiting the place that provides



access through metalled road, the network of which is still growing. An ageing forest guard told the media persons a harrowing story that he himself filed an FIR against a culprit who belonged to our local Manchester and claimed he enjoyed the hungry flames as it reminded him of his own unmet needs. Another myth that is less commonly linked with these fires is that it is a locally induced phenomenon to get fresh grass once the old one perishes in the blaze. But the community guarded themselves against this myth, fiercely asserting that why

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*Park Dept. Gwalior
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endangered ecological National Park

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would they harm their forests.

Whatever is the reason but the fire deprives the foothills of their rich soil if rain follows soon afterwards as it would wash away the fertile soil cover, explained Dr. Ghulam Akbar Director Environmental Education WWF, who has led Environmental Education Program for Margalla Hill National Park.

We gathered that the question of re-locating the population of resident villagers was growing in multitude given the fact that the population is fast multiplying.

Another major problem faced by the Park is the practice of quarrying as an active cement factory exists within the prescribe area of the Park. So question is development vis-a vis conservation. But shouldn't the cost of development, in terms of its impact on the ecological balance also come into consideration when the question pertains to a National Park?

One could not help question as to whether the conservators and welfare workers who have just taken

up work within the National Park and its peripheries will be able to make a dent in the situation by convincing the communities of the national loss at stake and by building up enough public opinion in favour of the health of this beautiful land.

Only recently WWF and another NGO Human Welfare and Nature Conservation Society have started working for conservation activities and community development programme. More recently a BHU lying incomplete and hence abandoned got completed and

would soon become functional, it was learnt. Vocational institutes for women and informal literacy centres for children have also been set up for the village communities.

Leading conservationists, social workers and wildlife lovers runs human Welfare and Nature Conservation Society.

To motivate younger people and children for the importance of conservation and information centre has been established adjacent to the Zoo at the footsteps of Margalla Hills which is receiving good response from the students who often come to visit this recreational point.

Like wise the Environmental Program for Margalla Hills National Park aims to provide Wide spread support to the Park management in running the Park to the desired national and international standards using effective tools of environmental education involving rural communities, teachers, students and visitors, stated Dr. Ghulam Akbar Director of this WWF project.

One last word about the importance of the Margalla National Park as far as its bio-diversity is concerned: There are two vegetation types in Margalla Hills - a subtropical, dry, semi evergreen forest and a sub-tropical pine forest. Important flora of the Park

Includes chir pines, oak, trees, Bohr, sumbal, phulai, kahu, kachnar, kikar, peeli, chambeli, dhawl, and anar. The associated shrubs and herbs are numerous due to which the valleys and hills are thickly covered. There are about 600 species of plants and 33 animal species. Some important animal species are grey goral, jungle cat, rhesus monkey, hare, barking deer, common leopard, fox, wild boar, white crested kalij pheasant, Russell's viper, common cobra etc. The Park hosts a galaxy of birds, mostly local migrants and resident birds.

However, almost 28 plants species were introduced after wrong political decisions in early 50s and 70s, without proper research including the notorious paper mulberry generally known to cause the pollen allergy that has remained a source of suffering for so many denizens of the capital city. ■