

The Nilgiri Hills – a world Biosphere Reserve

We are working in what must be one of the most beautiful parts of India.

The Nilgiri Hills lie at the junction of the East and Western Ghats of South West India and play a critically important role in the water systems, energy and the so called 'shakti' of South India.

The Blue Nilgiri Hills are approximately 7000 feet above sea level. To get there by road from Bangalore you travel through Mysore, thence through the National Park of Bandipur, into the Mudamalai Tiger Reserve and then upwards into the mountains negotiating a series of hairpin bends which make your hair literally stand on end, particularly if you meet on-coming traffic in low cloud conditions!. Caroline Quentin recently presented a series about her travels in India and one programme featured a tea estate (the Emerald estate) near Ooty, where she remarked on the beauty of the Hills. Another way of reaching Ooty by road is from Coimbatore where you have even more hairpin bends to negotiate passing dramatic waterfalls and mountains covered with shola forest. Alternatively you could of course take the mountain railway, a world heritage site featured in the short series last year about Indian mountain railways.

This important biosphere is at the very heart of our work. In the Nilgiris, however, the landscape is populated by degraded and polluted watersheds and farms. Soil erosion is very noticeable and the effect of recent cyclones has caused much devastation through landslides, destruction of homes and villages and land and crop damage. During a cyclone in November 2009 82cm of rain fell within 24 hours. During this cyclone 82 people died.

The rural poor in the Nilgiris are tribal people – The Badegas, The Irullas, The Kotas, The Todas, and The Kurumbas are the principal groups. We are helping them create sustainable livelihoods for themselves. We achieve this by training farmers to convert to biodynamic organic farming with 'zero input cost' other than labour, a self-help health programme which encourages the village women to grow and gather medicinal herbs from which they can make the traditional Siddha medicine, Income generation programmes such as dressmaking, knitting and craft training programmes, and through our school eco-clubs.

Although our project focuses on sustainable livelihoods by definition this is all embracing as we are encouraging ethical food production, sustainable health, and eco education - together it is all part and parcel of protecting the environment in which the tribal groups we are helping live and work.

Model Nursery

From our Kollimalai nursery, The Earth Trust's staff provide free practical training to poor marginalised farmers in organic and biodynamic practices. Biodynamic preparations for use by these participating groups are also made at the nursery which provides a helpful start to these farmers with their first BD applications.

From the herb bank at the model nursery and on land adjacent to it, over 300,000 herb plants have been multiplied for use by women's self-help groups and farmers participating in the **sustainable livelihoods** programme. These herb plants provide the 'seed' for the village community herb gardens and the production of herbs for making into medicine

Through The Earth Trust we focus on **sustainable livelihoods** and farmer training, particularly in areas such as irrigation, BD preparations, mulching, medicinal herb gardens, and crop rotations and inter-cropping techniques. We are well connected with local Government and have been requested to lead the organic movement here in conjunction with the NHM and NABARD. Since the programme started, between 100 and 202 farmers each year have been trained in bio-dynamic organic farming methods