



FRLHT

Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions



14-08-21-3

Dear Leo Saldanha

Subject: Amrit Mahal Kaval: reference to your mail to me asking for my opinion

This is regarding diversion of Amrit Mahal Kaval Grasslands in Challakere Taluk, Chitradurga District, Karnataka for a variety of infrastructure development and industrial activities. While I am not competent to question the merits of the projects for which the diversion has be affected and I assume that the projects serve worthy social purposes, nevertheless I would like to place on record my opposition to the diversion for 4 reasons outlined below.

1. Independent studies, such as those by Dr. Ganesh Babu of Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions - FRLHT and a quick survey by Centre of Ecological Sciences, IISc, reveal that the Kavals are a region of extraordinary biodiversity value. The endemism of flora in the district is unique and belies the common misconception that the region is dry, degraded and with low biodiversity value. Botanical surveys have revealed that 139 species of flora are endemic, out of which 4 are endemic to the district. Two taxa discovered in the Amrit Mahal Kaval of Challakere Taluk are critically endangered and of medicinal importance viz., *Caralluma adscendens* var. *carinata* and *Caralluma adscendens* var. *gracilis*. Studies also reveal that some species of flora, including endemic taxa, which are found in other parts of the country have only been recorded in the Challakere area and nowhere else in the state of Karnataka. The floral surveys of the region conducted by Babu over the past decade indicate that the region is replete with a variety of very rare grasses that could play a critical role in enhancing food production. The diversion of this land is therefore a matter of great concern as Challakere Kavals are the last remaining contiguous stretch of grassland ecosystems left in Karnataka unimpeded by any human developmental activity.



2. More recent surveys by ornithologists indicate that the Kavals, if protected and sensitively managed, could encourage the return of the critically endangered Great Indian Bustard (some estimates indicate that only about 250 individuals are found in all of South Asia) and Lesser Florican, birds that have been seen inhabiting such habitats in the region along with the highly threatened Black Buck that is found in the Kavals. The proposed developments will extinguish the possibility of the survival of these species in this area.

3. The Kavals are the region where most local ponds and lakes exist. The diversion of the Kavals, therefore, amounts to denying access to water to around 70 affected villages whose drinking water needs, the water needs of thousands of their cattle and sheep and also that for agriculture are met from these ponds and lakes. The long drought that has affected the region over the past three years has worsened the water crisis and left local communities in deep distress, especially because they have lost access to the lakes and ponds.

4. Researchers have pointed out that the interdependence between the local agrarian and pastoral communities and the grasslands is extremely complex and complementary. For instance, pastoral communities sensitively graze the grasslands without resorting to overgrazing, and the grass is managed in a way that allows endangered species like the Black Buck to thrive. Were it not for the interventions of pastoral communities, the uncontrolled growth of grasses would have risked spread of fires, which would have devastated the unique flora of the region.

I therefore appeal to the concerned authorities to reconsider the decision to divert this stretch of grassland and find alternative sites for the purpose.

  
Darshan Shankar