Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) and Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) organized a three day participatory assessment workshop at Bengaluru from 9-11, June 2015 that was attended by grantees, members from coordinating institute, national institutes, NGOs and individuals working on Western Ghats, forest department, and a variety of stakeholders from India and other countries. The aim of the workshop was to provide a venue where CEPF grantees from across the Western Ghats Region can exchange results and lessons learned (both good and bad), as a contribution towards a collective understanding of good practice for biodiversity conservation; facilitate networking among conservationists from different status and disciplines and; solicit feedback from grantees about how CEPF can improve their support to civil society, in terms of grant making operations, capacity building and delivery of results on the ground.

The programme started with opening presentations. Dr. Bhaskar Acharya welcomed the gathering and on day-one a series of presentations and group discussions were organized. Dr. R. Sukumar, Indian Institute of Science gave the presidential address. He as a member of the National Board for Wildlife said "the standing committee of the board is receiving a number of projects from India and less than 2 or 3 percent of the project come from southern Western Ghats. This speaks volumes about the relative conservation strategy that we have already achieved. The number of developmental projects in this region that are coming are very few. We all know that this does not mean that we have achieved conservation in this region. We still have the problem of habitat connectivity. I feel that although a lot of research has been done I don’t think that we have come to a forum that really has comprehensive and sustained dialogue. Conservation comes in different shapes in the country. We have done a number of projects even conservation projects when it comes to overarching ideas what we have achieved, I don’t think we have sufficient dialogue. We have not communicated to the public. The perception in the minds of the people is very different. It is often people do not know what the conservationists are trying to do. This is a failure at all level as a government and scientist. People on the ground do not know what we are trying to do or say. So effective communication is needed before the mischievous elements get deliberately spread the misinformation that what we are trying to say. This is a splendid job of coordinating CEPF projects in the Western Ghats for seven years. They have been organizing it to bring people together to have a focused discussion", said Dr. Sukumar.

Dr. Oliver Lungard, CEPF Executive Director, during his talk thanked ATREE for organizing this workshop inviting all grantees. He said CEPF is a unique tool to achieve conservation of biodiversity in the hotspots of the world. Western Ghats is one of the 35 hotspots. CEPF is existing for 15 years and it has invested already in 23 of these 35 hotspots. In rest of the hotspots the government, NGOs and private sectors are already involved in conservation. Important about CEPF is the fund. CEPF is the result of a number of donors coming together; the idea came from Conservation International. Now we have seven donors who have been contributing to CEPF. So far we have invested 180 million US$ in 89 countries in different hotspots and involved over 19,000 civil society groups. In terms of conservation...
achievements, the grantees have created 13 million hectares new PAs and improved management of 36 million hectares. This is quiet significant.

Another thing CEPF has achieved is creating ecosystem profile for every hotspot. Ecosystem profile is a strategic document, which is also used by other investors also to contribute conserve biodiversity in hotspots. We have looked at how much we have been able to leverage in addition to the world hotspots, we have so far contributed to leverage 346 million dollars for conservation through CEPF process we have established. Now we have completed two phases of CEPF and we are looking at third phase of CEPF. This is very important one especially because we want to raise more money to do more work on the ground. Also we want to include a number of things. 1. Improve communications of the work we are doing to the public, to the donor, to the government and all sectors. They have to understand the importance and value of work we do. 2. Looking at how we can make the resilience of the conservation community we have been supporting in the past ten years. In some places we know that the civil society needs to be built and a strong society will not happen over night. We also have some lessons learned that is coming from the Western Ghats. The investment of the CEPF has not been that big but quiet important in making the conservation community work together. Making the conservation community as recharged element and present the civil society as an important driving force and use the same conservation community to promote partners. The lessons that we learn here can be transferred to all other hotspots and we can definitely learn a great deal from our own experience here” he said.

During the inaugural, Dr. Jack Tordoff, CEPF explained the whole process of the CEPF Project. He said that CEPF has been investing in the Western Ghats for seven years. The investment started with the document prepared back in 2003 with the scientists from ATREE, WCS, India, Centre for Wildlife Studies, and a number of other institutions several other came to gather and prepared Western Ghats Ecosystem Profile to set out a joint strategy for grant making to support conservation by civil society in India in the Western Ghats. The document was approved by CEPF donor council and the grant making programme was made available in 2009 for the Western Ghats. CEPF has a small team mainly based in Washington DC to give a local body to enable the grants to be targeted to the invitee, bring those partners to gather for the community who are working on conservation. This was necessary to establish local-team coordinate the CEPF investment. ATREE was selected which is doing very able in the last seven years. Drs. Jagdish, Bhaskaran and their colleagues has been leading the process around the whole period and stayed with the team all the time and continued with the programme. In 2009 the first round of grant was awarded and then four rounds of grants in total. Shortlisted proposal grantees were invited to Bangalore to present their project ideas in front of the panel and the expert panels recommended the grants that get through. In 2001 we had a series of workshops inviting different grantees to gather and evaluate the progress today and again in 2013 we had another series of workshops again to evaluate and to give people a chance to exchange ideas. Now five years assessments were also presented to CEPF from that donors are very pleased with the progress and they agreed to extend the investment programme. Eventually it is a five years, with 4.5 million US$ which they agreed to extended to seven and a half years with little over 6 million US$. We are now coming to the end of the extension period the final grants will be implanted during the second half of the 2015. This workshop is to bring the grantees together to the final assessment of this first phase of investment. There is no guarantee that will be able to make another investment programme in the Western Ghats but we are able to, depending up on convincing our global donors, that this should be a priority for investment and also raising more funds. I think for both of these things it is critically important that we can communicate effectively what has been achieved here. Actually we have to tell it to the world that we have been doing the work on the ground”.

The purpose of this workshop is to provide a venue for the different CEPF grantees and others to come together to develop shared learning about the results of the CEPF investment programme in the Western Ghats. There are three aims for this workshop and the first is to give all of the grantees and other invited guests opportunities to exchange that the work that they have been doing, what are some of the achievements, and some activities that did not work so well. We can learn a lot from challenges. The second thing that we want to bring people to gather. One of the most important thing that I observed is that during the second years of the programme so far is the great extent of communication and information sharing of joint projects between different active people who has come from different states people from wildlife conservation perspectives, economics, people with different languages, different technical jobs, different philosophical points that actually people can able to exchange ideas with one another and see from different perspectives and still talking about the same complex problem even though they have been working at different levels.
Dr. Jagdish Krishnaswamy, ATREE gave an overview of the Western Ghats and the processes portfolio and partnership that CEPF has inspired and facilitated. He said, ATREE is committed towards society that fulfills environmental conservation and sustainable utilization. We would like to generate knowledge relevant for achieving this. After developing the CEPF ecosystem profile we came up with the investment strategy. The objective is conservation of biodiversity by empowering and strengthening the civil society in the Western Ghats. It has two strategic plans.

We have 44 large and 66 small grant projects from Agasthiyamalai all the way to Sahyadri’s, Maharashtra. This is a substantial geographical spread of the project covering the Western Ghats though there are some gaps. The partnership has done lots of remarkable things. They looked at site sectors, swamps, engaged the local communities and formed new partnerships required for that ecosystems, and now they are also looking towards state and funds available from national schemes to expand local people participation for swamp restoration. There are also partnership between forest department and NGOs in establishing conservation reserves in areas which can not be made into National Parks. In terms of the over all portfolio we have 57 civil society actors of seed grants, 5 international and 52 local, 21 alliance and networks. These are alliances and networks formed as network of CEPF investments. Eighty key biodiversity areas have been strengthened. CEPF has brought together very polarized groups other wise really not talking to each other. People who work with communities are also engaged with conservation biologists and we have seen that happened in many workshops and meetings. Taking conservation out of the realm of National Parks and Protected Areas, an increasing emphasis on how on production landscapes, where people depend on economic sustenance and livelihoods, as well as agro ecosystems, how they can contribute for the connection of the Western Ghats as well as the conservation neglected forms of biodiversity.

Grantees who received large and small grants gave a series of presentations on the following: towards a green economy; assessing species’ conservation status; enhancing corridor connectivity; communicating results to new audiences; empowering communities for conservation; mainstreaming biodiversity into other sectors; recovery management of threatened species; building a broad constituency for conservation. Group discussion on Long-term goals was conducted to plan the progress towards long-term conservation goals in the Western Ghats. The participants divided into groups and discussed issues on conservation priorities, civil society capacity, sustainable financing, enabling environment and responsiveness to emerging issues. The group also discussed on sustaining the momentum. Groups suggested improvements to CEPF grant making and management processes. Each group suggested ways to sustain momentum of the CEPF investment programme in the Western Ghats focusing on the following topics: securing new resources for conservation, facilitating networking, collaboration and exchange, leveraging information generated and held by civil society and communicating Western Ghats conservation to new audiences. In the evenings video shows were screened, that highlighted of the success stories of the CEPF projects.

Towards the end of the workshop Dr. Ganesan Balachander, Director, ATREE gave a presentation to carry forward the momentum gained during the CEPF project. The workshop was closed with a summary of the workshop by Jack Tordoff and closing remarks by Olivier Langrand. Bhaskar Acharya gave vote of thanks.