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Maharashtra Gene Bank to help document, conserve biodiversity through local knowledge

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NAGPUR: The state government will set up a Maharashtra Gene Bank (MGB) to document native resources, conserve them, and add value to the community that is conserving this rich diversity in the state, launch biodiversity conservation as a people's movement and engage folk ecologists in a scientific enterprise.

Started in 2014, the MGB project demonstrates the power of community-led conservation activities. For these to sustain and continue in mission mode, the state will now include these projects for funding. This will benefit local communities using traditional and scientific knowledge for sustainable development.

Pravin Srivastava, PCCF & member-secretary of the Maharashtra State Biodiversity Board (MSBB), said a report has been submitted to the state government. "At least 30 NGOs worked in the project and 130 workshops were held since 2014 when the project started," he said. Presentation on the gene bank report was done at a three-day conference in Pune from September 21-23.

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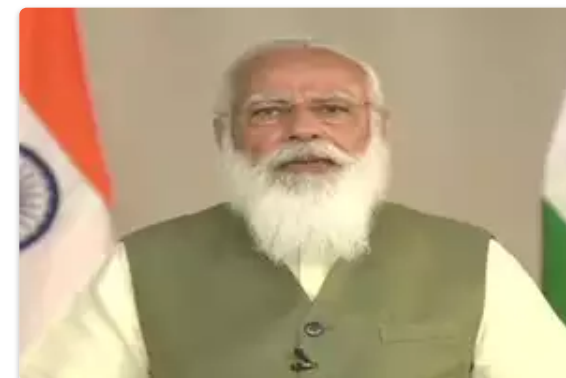
Funded by Rajiv Gandhi Science & Technology Commission, it is a collaborative work of Indian Institute of Science Education & Research (IISER), Pune; National Institute of Oceanography (NIO), Goa; National Centre for Cell Science (NCCS), Pune; Shivaji University, Kolhapur, and College of Fisheries, Ratnagiri. It also saw participation of 13 NGOs, of which two (BAIF and CEE) are pan-India organizations.

Srivastava said the project was conceptualized by eminent ecologist Dr Madhav Gadgil and brings together grassroots community workers with scientists from academic and research organizations.

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“We have generated data on traditional knowledge of crop genetic diversity, sponges, livestock, grasslands, freshwater aquatic fish, native cow breeds like Dangi, Lal Kandhari, Gaulau, and Sangamneri, besides Berari goat and Satpudi hen, for identifying superior animals for breeding purposes. Modern genetic tools were also used to identify the genetic relations between different breeds. A Dangi Breeders’ Association has been formed to conserve the cattle breed,” said Srivastava.

“We took special efforts to reach out to the people and community-based organizations (CBOs) at the grassroots, blending

science and technology tools and scientific validation. Providing livelihood and nutrition benefits to marginal communities and creating field evidence and multi-institutional partnerships across the state,” Dr VS Rao of IISER, the project coordinator, told TOI.

“In these six years, the project achieved significant contributions in biodiversity documentation and conservation, livelihood generation, and sustainable utilization of resources in agricultural crops, native livestock breeds, grasslands, forest eco-restoration, management of forest produce, wild edible plants, fresh water, and marine ecosystem,” said Rao.

“We developed seed banks at the community level for exchanging and conserving these resources, and market linkages were provided. Native livestock breeds are also similarly climate-resilient and adapt themselves to the local harsh environments,” Rao added.

PCCF Srivastava said the project achieved grassland conservation in about 2,000 hectare across Maharashtra in Dhule, Hingoli, and Washim districts. This includes conservation of abiotic resources such as soil and water, as a result of increased grass cover in the area. Documentation and conservation of 48 grass species was done at these sites.

Livelihood strengthening efforts happened in the course of this project via activities related to fodder management. About 4,000 MT of palatable grass is produced in this area and this fodder availability is supporting about 3,000 animal heads, which belong to about 1,000 livestock-keeping families.

Rao said biodiversity enhancement via eco-restoration activities were implemented in four districts of Maharashtra covering about 1,200 ha of community forest rights (CFR) land. Documentation and validation of knowledge of ecology, propagation, utility, and properties of 150 plants and animal species selected by local communities was also done.

The project has also documented androgenic and recreational activities along the sea coast threatening the coral and sponge species in the intertidal region. Under this project over 2,000 bacteria associated with sponges were isolated.

Aquatic habitat restoration activity was carried out for indigenous fish diversity conservation in Bhandara under the MGB project. It is continuing in 23 tanks in three districts in 317 hectare area. Net profit of fishermen from indigenous fish production rose 2 to 12 times after habitat development.