

**Report**  
**Mahashivratri Festival 2010**  
**At Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP) and Yeoor**

**Pre – preparations:**

This year the festival of Mahashivratri fell on Friday 12<sup>th</sup>, February. In order to curtail these problems of garbage accumulation and forest fires and to protect our wildlife and forest, CAT among other NGOs together involve volunteers at different locations of the National Park at the Borivali end, at Yeoor, Thane and at Tungreshwar.

A meeting was held on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February, 2010 at the SGNP by the Forest Department to discuss the details and arrangements for the 12<sup>th</sup>. The various other bodies involved were present, such as the Police Department, the Archeological Survey of India, BEST, NGOs such as CAT and BNHS and few volunteers.

Emails were sent out to various E-groups such as ‘Birds of Bombay’, ‘Mumbai naturalist’, ‘The Climate Project’-India, and our volunteer list that we had obtained at the CNMF festival as well as the previous year’s volunteers. A reminder email was also sent out to all volunteers informing them of the registration time, the volunteer hours, the basic schedule of the day also telling them what they need to bring.

**On 12<sup>th</sup> February: @ SGNP, Borivali end.**

The volunteers began to arrive at 7.15am as specified; as they registered themselves they were given a volunteer badge. The batch of 10 volunteers from the NGO, PAWS was assigned to Tungreshwar were briefed first and then sent ahead in a hired vehicle to the site. The rest of the volunteers were then briefed and deployed to different areas of the National Park such as: Main Gate, Kanheri Bus depot, base of Kanheri Caves, Tulsi Lake, Tulsi Gate. A total of 121 volunteers registered for the event on the day, of these about 12 volunteers came for the second half of the day.

This year, both the Forest Department and the Archeological Survey of India charged the usual entry fee of Rs. 20 and Rs.5 respectively as a measure to further deter the crowds from coming into the National Park. This especially since the Kanheri caves that they visit are Buddhist caves and the stone idol that they venerate as the 'Shivling' is actually a Buddhist 'Stupa';

The total ticket count at the SGNP gate was 12,500 as informed by Mr. Thoradmal, RFO, Krishnagiri Upawan, thus indicating a sizable decrease in the numbers from previous years.

The volunteers checked the visitors for plastic bags, tobacco and inflammables such as cigarettes, bidis, lighter, matchbox, incense sticks as they result in garbage accumulation and forest fires. Large amounts of these were collected at the various locations. Packed lunch was provided to all the volunteers and the forest guards by 2.00pm, provision was made for those fasting.

This year the people began to come in at around 9.00am. The maximum inflow was between 11.00am to 4.00pm. No visitors were allowed to enter after 5.00pm. The volunteers were then picked up from the various locations at 5.15pm. We left the park by 6.30pm.

### **On 12<sup>th</sup> February: @ The Yeoor range of SGNP**

We began our activities this year at 7:30am. There were approximately 20 volunteers from various NGOs such as the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), the Conservation Action Trust (CAT) and Nuturing Grounds among others. After assembling at Ram Nagar, Yeoor, the volunteers were split into four groups each comprising three to four people (volunteers + forest guards). One group headed towards Jungleshwar temple, another towards Mama-Bhanja and the last two were deputed at Pakkad Baba *Ashram* and Ayappa temple.

Once again here the volunteers checked the visitors for plastic bags, tobacco and inflammables such as cigarettes, bidis, lighter, matchbox and incense sticks. At

Jungleshwar, footfalls were moderate enough to be controlled by five volunteers. A small fire did start but due to the timely information by a group of devotees the volunteers were able to put it out and a very small patch was burnt. This was probably due to some devotees going downhill. On our way downhill we found some images of deities placed strategically on rocks, which we collected and handed over to the forest guards. The crowd was mostly concentrated between 7:30 a.m to 11:00 a.m. and then from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.

Around 60,000 devotees visited the Pakkad Baba *Ashram*. Here, inspecting the devotees was difficult as the flow was continuous and not many volunteers were positioned at a given point. Footfalls were the highest from 8:00 a.m to around 2:00 p.m. Thereon, the footfalls were sparse.

At Mama Bhanja the visitors were less in number, possibly due to its very high almost vertical ascent. Approximately midway there is small stop over called Mastan Baba. At first we climbed to Mama Bhanja *Dargah* and then descended to Mastan Baba.

### **Conclusion:**

**At Borivali:** Most of the people were very cooperative; however a few threw up a bit of an argument. It has also been observed that the vendors in the Park give out plastic which also need to be discouraged the next year. All in all it was a successful day.

**At Yeoor:** The patrolling and inspection activities were not stressful for the volunteers as the devotees cooperated. The devotees assured us that they would not litter the *ashram* premises and that the *prasad* and the sacramental refuse would be handled in a way that would be non-polluting.

We hoped to make paper bags this year to give the people as alternatives to the plastic we confiscate from them so they can carry their pooja items however due to lack of sponsorship were unable. The next year we would like to take forth the same with the necessary sponsorship.