

'Development cannot come at cost of conservation'

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Pune: The Western Ghats have seen a habitat loss of over 80% and cannot be compromised further for developmental activities, wildlife photographer and documentary filmmaker Sandesh Katur said during the 7th Kirloskar Vasundhara International Film Festival on Monday.

He added that protected areas should not be used for developmental activities, especially to set up hydroelectric irrigation projects, as they cause large-scale destruction of the environment.

Katur was speaking at a press interaction organised as part of the festival. "There is little habitat left in the Western Ghats and much has been lost to development. Another problem that can affect the biodiversity of such habitats is mining. Mining affects rivers, which in turn affects life. It has far-reaching consequences and habitats such as the Western Ghats should have no mining activities," said Katur.

He added that the Western Ghats are like a sponge that absorb monsoon water and release it throughout the year. "The Ghats are the backbone of peninsular India and everything has to be done to protect them. In addition, maintenance of existing dams in the Ghats can provide for additional electricity needs, instead of building new dams," he said.

He added that India has a long way to go in conservation of its environment and biodiversity. "Enforcement of environmental policies is needed.



Sandesh Katur (right) and Girish Sohani

Though there are many acts concerning the environment and forest, not a single water conservation act has been formulated. Water will increasingly become an important aspect in the future and needs to be conserved," said Katur.

He added that every individual can contribute immensely to environmental conservation by adopting the three 'R's — reduce, reuse and recycle. "In India, 97% of the landscape has been taken over by human-kind, while protected areas constitute only 3% of the country. The Western Ghats form a small portion of this area and thus need to be conserved. Development does not have to come at the cost of conservation; it can happen in areas that are not ecologically sensitive," he said.

Documentaries by Katur include 'Sahyadris: Mountains Of The Monsoon', 'Return of the Clouded Leopards' and 'Elephant Kingdom', among others. They have been showcased on popular international

television channels. His publications include 'Sahyadris: India's Western Ghats' and 'Himalaya: Mountains of Life'.

BAIF Development Research Foundation president and managing trustee Girish Sohani was also present at the interaction. "The drought in Maharashtra this year is far severe than the one experienced in the 1970s. This drought has brought with it fodder and drinking water shortage. Also, there has been a concurrent discussion on climate change accompanied with global warming. This is the first time we have global warming accompanied with water scarcity," Sohani said.

He added that it has become necessary to have strategic reserves of water for the coming years through concepts such as the holistic watershed development programme. Sohani added that BAIF also plans to start a Water Academy to train youth as 'water literate technicians', who will facilitate resource management and use.