

# FOREST



OF THE

# DIVINE

BETWEEN THE LORE AND THE LAW

# Acknowledgment

I extend my sincere gratitude to Mrs. Milan Rawat for her invaluable insights and firsthand knowledge of sacred groves in Maharashtra. Her on-ground experience and deep understanding of indigenous conservation practices have greatly enriched this report. I also appreciate the contributions of researchers, policymakers and community custodians whose work has informed this study. This report is dedicated to those who continue to protect and preserve sacred groves for future generations.

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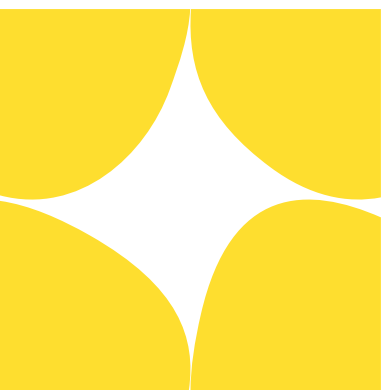
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## Disclaimer

The research presented in this report is based on publicly available data, scholarly sources and stakeholder insights. Any unintended inaccuracies or misrepresentations are unintentional and corrections are welcomed. Additionally, no proprietary, classified or confidential information has been used in the preparation of this document. The report aims to promote awareness, advocacy and policy engagement for the protection of sacred groves while respecting all intellectual and cultural property rights.



# Executive Summary

Sacred groves are critical ecological sanctuaries that function as reservoirs of biodiversity, climate regulators and sources of water security. These ancient forested landscapes, traditionally protected by indigenous communities, are not only spiritual spaces but also essential components of ecological sustainability. Sacred groves play a vital role in preserving endemic species, maintaining soil moisture, facilitating groundwater recharge, and preventing erosion – making them indispensable to environmental resilience.

The conservation of sacred groves is intertwined with indigenous ecological knowledge where communities have long employed sustainable practices like controlled harvesting, ritualistic prohibitions and oral traditions that govern resource use. These traditions have ensured that sacred groves remain protected. However, increasing challenges of deforestation, urbanisation, climate change, and the erosion of traditional knowledge systems are putting these ecological and cultural landscapes at risk.

Despite their significance, sacred groves remain inadequately protected under many legal frameworks. Some nations have integrated sacred groves into conservation policies but broader formal recognition is necessary to ensure their long-term survival. Strengthening legal frameworks, incorporating indigenous knowledge into conservation efforts and promoting community-driven stewardship are essential steps toward safeguarding these vital ecosystems.

This study emphasises the importance of sacred groves as ecological strongholds and highlights the urgent need for integrated conservation approaches that blend traditional wisdom with modern environmental governance. By acknowledging sacred groves as both cultural heritage and environmental assets, conservation efforts can better protect these landscapes from contemporary challenges while preserving their ecological integrity for future generations.

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# Introduction

Sacred groves, often referred to as nature's temples, represent an ancient yet enduring tradition of ecological conservation intertwined with spiritual reverence. These forested sanctuaries are not merely places of worship but vital ecological systems that sustain biodiversity, regulate climate and preserve water resources.

Sacred groves act as biodiversity hotspots - harbouring endemic flora and fauna, many of which are threatened or endangered. These groves function as seed banks, maintain soil moisture, facilitate groundwater recharge, and serve as crucial corridors for wildlife movement. They play an essential role in preventing soil erosion and mitigating climate change by sequestering carbon. Additionally, many groves are located near water sources which further help sustain hydrological cycles and ensure water security for surrounding communities.

Beyond their ecological roles, sacred groves serve as repositories of indigenous ecological knowledge. Local communities, often stewards of these groves for generations, have developed intricate conservation practices that balance human needs with ecological sustainability. Traditional methods of resource management like controlled harvesting of medicinal plants and ritualistic taboos against felling certain trees have contributed to the long-term preservation of these landscapes. Many indigenous groups regard these groves as sacred; these are governed by oral traditions that dictate how and when resources may be used. These unwritten laws have historically ensured that sacred groves remain undisturbed.

Despite their ecological importance, sacred groves face mounting threats from urban expansion, deforestation, climate change, and shifting socio-cultural values. The rapid encroachment of agricultural and industrial activities has led to habitat fragmentation

and loss of biodiversity. Commercial exploitation driven by timber and non-timber resource extraction further exacerbates environmental degradation. Additionally, generational shifts in cultural beliefs and the erosion of indigenous knowledge systems have weakened traditional conservation practices resulting in neglect and gradual deterioration of these ecological sanctuaries.

Climate change-induced variations in temperature and rainfall patterns pose an additional threat to sacred groves. While altered precipitation patterns impact groundwater recharge, rising temperatures may disrupt the delicate ecological balance within these groves. Changes in flora and fauna composition due to shifting climate conditions can undermine the resilience of these forests. This threatens both biodiversity and the communities that depend on them for ecological services. Furthermore, increased fragmentation of sacred groves isolates them from larger forested landscapes and reduces their ability to support migratory species and maintain genetic diversity.

Sacred groves, in their essence, are living testaments to the possibility of harmonising ecological preservation with cultural heritage. They demonstrate that conservation is not merely a scientific or legal endeavour but also a communal responsibility rooted in cultural traditions. As environmental philosopher Holmes Rolston III posits, "Nature is too valuable to be preserved merely for human utility; it has intrinsic worth deserving of reverence." Recognising and reinforcing the ecological functions of sacred groves is crucial for ensuring their survival in an era of environmental crisis.



# Global Perspectives

Across the world, sacred groves stand as quiet testaments to humanity's deep, ancestral bond with nature. These sacred spaces embody centuries of reverence, ritual and ecological wisdom. Rooted in the spiritual traditions of indigenous and local communities, they are more than just forests—they are living archives of cultural memory and guardians of biodiversity. Yet, as the modern world expands, many of these ancient sanctuaries risk being lost, taking with them the stories, traditions and species they have long sheltered.

## BRAZIL

Sacred groves hold profound significance in Brazil deeply embedded within Indigenous belief systems and Afro-Brazilian religious traditions. These groves serve as cultural and spiritual sanctuaries sustaining traditional knowledge while also contributing to biodiversity conservation. Found across the Amazon Rainforest, Cerrado and Atlantic Forest, these spaces embody a vital connection between communities and nature.

### ***Indigenous Sacred Groves: Spiritual and Ecological***

For Indigenous communities such as the Yanomami and the Guarani Mbya, sacred groves represent the dwelling places of spirits, ancestors and deities. The Yanomami regard untouched forests as the home of xapiripë1 (or forest spirit). They believe that the spirits safeguard ecological balance and human well-being. Conservation of these areas is essential to their cultural and spiritual heritage.

The Guarani Mbya of the Atlantic Forest maintain protected forest patches near their villages where they conduct rituals and venerate ancient trees as ancestral beings. These groves serve as spaces for ceremonies, healing practices and the preservation of medicinal plants.<sup>2</sup> There is an inseparable link between spiritual reverence and ecological stewardship.

### ***Afro-Brazilian Sacred Groves: Nature as a Spiritual Conduit***

Afro-Brazilian religious traditions, particularly Candomblé and Umbanda, also emphasise the sanctity of forested spaces. Sacred groves or matas sagradas serve as sites for ritual offerings, spiritual communion and the cultivation of sacred plants. Each orixá (deity) is associated with specific trees and herbs believed to be conduits of divine energy.<sup>3</sup>

In Salvador, Bahia, Candomblé terreiros (temples) maintain sacred groves where practitioners gather herbs and conduct ceremonies. The Iroko tree (*Ficus* sp.), venerated in Pernambuco, symbolises endurance and ancestral wisdom. These traditions exemplify the deep interconnection between Afro-Brazilian spirituality and the natural environment.



Source - Selina Maia



Source - One Earth



# CHINA

Sacred groves in China, known as fengshui forests or holy groves, represent an enduring intersection of ecological conservation, spiritual philosophy and cultural heritage.<sup>4</sup> Rooted in the principles of Daoism, Buddhism and indigenous animist traditions, these forests have been preserved for millennia due to their perceived role in harmonising human settlements with the natural world. The practice of designating sacred groves reflects a cosmological understanding of balance where forests are believed to harness and regulate qi and ensure prosperity, good fortune and protection for surrounding communities. Their role extends beyond spiritual symbolism as these forests have long functioned as ecological buffers, preserving biodiversity, regulating hydrological cycles, and preventing soil erosion.<sup>5</sup>



Source - Chris Coggins

Historically, sacred groves have been integral to the social and religious fabric of Chinese society. Many are linked to temples, shrines or ancestral halls. Their status is that of inviolable spaces of worship and reverence. Rituals, festivals and seasonal offerings conducted within these groves further solidify their role in maintaining cultural continuity. The reverence for such forests has historically deterred deforestation as cutting trees from a sacred grove is often perceived as an act of desecration bringing misfortune or divine retribution. This intertwining of spiritual belief and ecological conservation has played a fundamental role in their longevity. This has allowed these landscapes to persist despite waves of sociopolitical change.

## **Regional Variation**

In southern China, particularly in Guangdong and Fujian, fengshui forests are commonly found adjacent to villages which serve as vital ecological refugia within subtropical broadleaf ecosystems.<sup>6</sup> These forests harbour endangered species such as the Hainan black-crested gibbon (*Nomascus hainanus*).



Source - Xueli Chen

In the Tibetan and Yi communities of southwest China, sacred groves are deeply embedded within religious cosmology often associated with sacred mountains or ritual spaces that reinforce their conservation status.<sup>7</sup> The belief that deities inhabit these forests strengthens local commitment to their preservation and protecting species like the Yunnan snub-nosed monkey (*Rhinopithecus bieti*).

In northern China, Daoist temples and Confucian academies maintain sacred forests where ancient trees serve as living testaments to spiritual and intellectual traditions.<sup>8</sup> The continued existence of such groves near burial sites and monastic centers speaks to their historical role in fostering cultural and ecological resilience.

# NIGERIA

The Osun-Osogbo Sacred Forest, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, exemplifies the profound intersection of spirituality and ecological conservation within Nigeria's sacred groves.<sup>9</sup> The site is dedicated to Osun, the Yoruba goddess of fertility and water. It holds immense religious and cultural significance. The annual Osun-Osogbo Festival draws thousands of worshippers and tourists, reaffirming its status as a vital spiritual center. In Yoruba cosmology, sacred groves are liminal spaces where the human and spiritual realms converge.



Beyond their spiritual importance, sacred groves serve as critical ecological refugia. The Osun-Osogbo forest harbours endangered species such as the African grey parrot and indigenous antelope species along with a repository of rare medicinal plants essential to traditional healing practices.<sup>10</sup>

# GHANA

Sacred groves in Ghana represent a confluence of ecological significance and cultural heritage which is deeply embedded in the spiritual traditions of the Akan<sup>11</sup>, Ewe and other ethnic groups. These forests are revered as the dwelling places of ancestral spirits and deities. The spiritual reverence accorded to these groves fosters a community-driven form of conservation as any disruption is believed to invoke misfortune.

Among the most notable sacred groves in Ghana is the Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary where Colobus and Mona monkeys thrive under the protection of indigenous beliefs.<sup>12</sup> The prohibition against harming these primates is rooted in spiritual tradition. Similarly, the Tano Sacred Grove is inextricably linked to the Tano River deity.<sup>13</sup> The presence of medicinal plants within this forest highlights the symbiotic relationship between ecological preservation and indigenous medical knowledge where conservation is not merely an environmental concern but an extension of spiritual and communal well-being.





## ***BENIN***

The sacred groves of Benin, deeply intertwined with the Vodun spiritual system, represent a confluence of religious, ecological and cultural significance. Vodun, an indigenous belief system, venerates the power of nature and the spirits that inhabit it. Among these, the Kpassè Sacred Forest in Ouidah is dedicated to Vodun deities and imbued with profound religious reverence.<sup>14</sup> These groves are not merely spaces of worship but are integral to the transmission of cultural heritage as they serve as loci of spiritual authority and social cohesion.

Ecologically, these groves harbour centuries-old baobab trees and medicinal plants which form reservoirs of biodiversity that sustain both environmental balance and traditional healing practices.<sup>15</sup>



Source - Stefan Huenis  
via Getty Images

## ***ETHIOPIA***

Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity has long upheld the sanctity of forests surrounding church compounds viewing them as earthly manifestations of the Garden of Eden.<sup>16</sup> These sacred forests that are maintained by religious institutions for centuries represent some of the last vestiges of native woodlands in an otherwise extensively deforested landscape. Within these spaces, spiritual devotion and ecological preservation are inseparable as the church's theological framework regards nature as a divine gift requiring careful stewardship.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, these forests function as both spiritual sanctuaries and ecological refuges.



Source - Kieran Dodds

Beyond their spiritual significance, church forests harbour exceptional biodiversity including rare and endemic flora such as wild coffee (*Coffea arabica*).





## ***EUROPE – ESTONIA***

Sacred groves, known as hiied in Estonia, held profound spiritual and communal significance for the Finno-Ugric peoples. These sacred spaces were dedicated to various deities and spirits like Uku, the sky god and Maaemä, the earth mother. This reflected an animistic worldview that venerated nature as inherently divine. Functioning as open-air sanctuaries, these groves served as sites for religious ceremonies, communal feasts and even legal assemblies.

The reverence accorded to sacred groves was expressed through stringent ritualistic practices and prohibitions. Activities such as tree-cutting, hunting and even loud speech were strictly forbidden as these spaces were perceived as untouched and inviolate. Within the groves, offerings were made at designated sacred stones, trees or springs and other objects imbued with spiritual significance. These offerings are done in the form of food, fabric or coins symbolised acts of devotion and reciprocity between humans and the divine. Healing rituals, prayers for fertility, protection and well-being were also central to the spiritual function of these sites.

The survival of sacred groves faced significant challenges, particularly with the advent of Christianisation in the 13th century which sought to suppress indigenous belief systems.<sup>18</sup> Later, Soviet-era policies further restricted native religious practices contributing to the erosion of these sacred sites.

Despite such disruptions, several groves have endured often safeguarded by conservation laws or cultural heritage initiatives. Contemporary efforts by organisations like Maavalla Koda seek to revitalise Estonia's indigenous faith – Mausk – to preserve these groves as vital expressions of cultural and spiritual continuity.<sup>19</sup>



**Source - Pille Porilla**

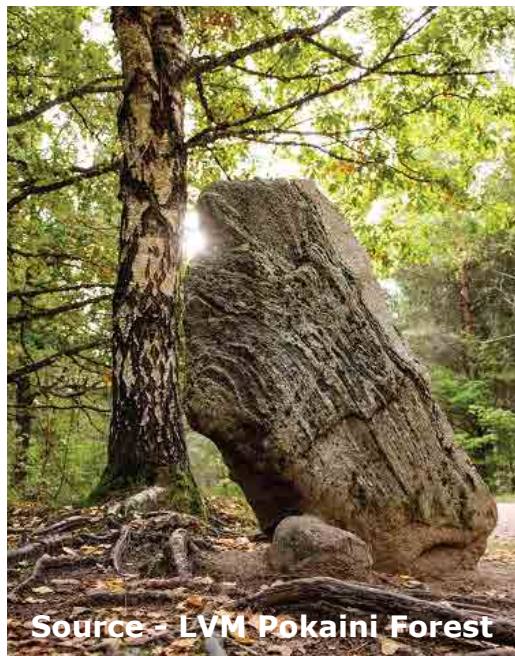


## ***BALTIC REGION – LATVIA AND LITHUANIA***

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Sacred groves in Latvia, known as svētbirzis, held profound spiritual significance within pre-Christian Baltic traditions.<sup>20</sup> These groves were not merely clusters of trees but were imbued with divine presence like Dievs, the celestial deity.<sup>21</sup> Rituals performed in these spaces underscored their centrality in communal life serving as sites for fertility rites, matrimonial ceremonies and seasonal observances that harmonised human existence with cosmic rhythms.

Similarly, Lithuanian Romuva traditions continue to venerate sacred groves as loci of spiritual communion. These sanctuaries dedicated to Perkūnas, the thunder god, and Laima, the arbiter of fate reflect a worldview in which nature and divinity are inextricably linked. The enduring protection of ancient oak and linden groves in Lithuania as cultural heritage sites attests to their historical and philosophical significance.<sup>22</sup>



Source - LVM Pokaini Forest

## ***GERMANIC AND CELTIC EUROPE (GERMANY, BRITAIN, IRELAND)***

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The sacred groves of Germanic and Celtic Europe were central to religious practice, serving as sanctuaries of divine presence and ritual activity. Among the Saxons, the Irminsul – a sacred pillar embodying cosmic order – stood within such a grove before its destruction by Charlemagne in the 8th century.<sup>23</sup> This marked the imposition of Christian hegemony over indigenous belief systems.

In Britain and Ireland, Druids revered oak groves as sites for divination, sacrifice and ceremonial rites. The persistence of ancient yew trees in Welsh and Irish churchyards suggests continuity between pre-Christian sacred spaces and later Christianised landscape which indicates the endurance of nature-based spiritual traditions.<sup>24</sup>





# India's Sacred Groves

It is claimed that India is home to an estimated 15 lakh sacred groves<sup>25</sup>, yet only around 14,000 have been formally documented. Deeply embedded in indigenous traditions and local belief systems, these groves serve as ecological reservoirs, supporting biodiversity, regulating water cycles, and preserving rare flora and fauna. From the Devrais of Maharashtra to the Law Kyntang of Meghalaya, sacred groves vary in size and culture share a common foundation of religiosity.

## RAJASTHAN

In Rajasthan, sacred groves are known as Orans and Dev Vans. They serve as crucial ecological and spiritual refuges in the desert landscape. These groves are traditionally protected by Rajput, Bishnoi, Bhil, and Jat communities. They believe that local deities, saints and spirits reside within them. The Bishnoi community, followers of Guru Jambheshwar (Jambhoji), exemplify this commitment through their stringent environmental ethics. They worship nature as divine and adhere to strict prohibitions against tree felling and hunting, reflecting their reverence for all life forms.<sup>26</sup> In the infamous Khejarli Massacre of 1730, 363 Bishnois sacrificed their lives to protect sacred Khejri trees (*Prosopis cineraria*), remains an enduring testament to their unwavering devotion to conservation.



Source - X/Manish03031994

Orans are dedicated to local deities like Gogaji (a snake deity), Pabuji (a folk hero) and Bhaironji, and many serve as sites for spiritual retreats of ascetics. Some Orans house eternal sacred fires (Dhuni) which are tended by hermits and function as pilgrimage sites for rural communities. The Bhil and Garasia tribes who are known for their deep animistic traditions play a vital role in maintaining these sacred spaces by performing rituals that invoke nature spirits and offering symbolic sacrifices.<sup>27</sup> These groves, often attached to village temples, act as community gathering spaces. The royal patronage of Rajput clans has historically ensured the protection of many such groves.



# HIMACHAL PRADESH

Himachal Pradesh is home to Dev Vans, sacred forests venerated as abodes of deities, spirits and ancestral souls. These groves are often found in proximity to temples and are safeguarded by village councils and temple authorities who enforce strict taboos against disturbing the forest. Cutting trees or even collecting fallen wood is believed to anger the presiding deity. The state's deeply Hindu and animistic traditions intertwine to preserve these landscapes where nature itself is an extension of the divine.<sup>28</sup>



Source - WWF-India

Many groves are associated with Nag Devta (Serpent God), Hadimba Devi, Jamlu Devta, and Baba Balak Nath. The rituals may involve animal sacrifices, trance-induced possession ceremonies and spirit mediumship. These ceremonies seek divine guidance for community welfare. It is evident that the indigenous belief is in a reciprocal relationship with the environment. The Hadimba Devi Temple in Manali and the Kamru Temple in Kinnaur are prime examples of sacred groves seamlessly integrated into Himalayan religious cosmology.



Source - Universal Image Group via Getty Images

Indigenous groups such as the Gaddi (shepherd) tribe hold these groves in deep reverence when they perform ancestral rites before embarking on their seasonal migrations. The Kinnauri people, whose traditions merge Buddhism with animism, maintain groves as spiritual zones where mountain deities manifest. Through centuries, the protection of these sacred forests has ensured the survival of Himalayan biodiversity making them vital ecological corridors as well as religious sanctuaries.<sup>29</sup>





# KARNATAKA

In Karnataka, sacred groves known as Devarakadu (God's Forests) are predominantly found in the Kodagu (Coorg) region and Western Ghats.<sup>30</sup> These groves function as centres of ancestor worship, spirit cults and animistic traditions. The Kodava community, a martial race with animistic roots, are the primary guardians of these groves.

The deities enshrined within these groves include Bhadrakali, Ayyappa and the Naga Devata (Serpent God).<sup>31</sup> The rituals involve offerings of toddy, meat and



Source - The News Minute



Source - Wikimedia Commons

rice to appease the spirits. Bhoota Kola, a dramatic possession dance performed by oracles, is held within some groves. Terracotta figurines and wooden idols are common offerings.

Tribal communities such as the Maleru and Soligas utilise these sacred forests for traditional healing, rain-invocation rituals and spirit appeasement ceremonies. Local temple festivals, organised by village elders, serve as both religious and ecological events reinforcing the inviolability of Devarakadus.<sup>32</sup>

# KERALA

Sacred groves in Kerala are known as Kavu. These are revered as dwelling places of serpent deities (Naga Devatas) and ancestral spirits.<sup>33</sup> These groves reflect the tantric, Dravidian and animistic influences that define Kerala's religious landscape. The worship of serpents, central to Kavu traditions, is rooted in the belief that Nagas are divine protectors of land and water. It is believed that their blessings bring fertility and prosperity. Mannarasala Sree Nagaraja Temple, one of Kerala's most famous serpent temples, is



Source - Special Arrangement



Source - The Hindu

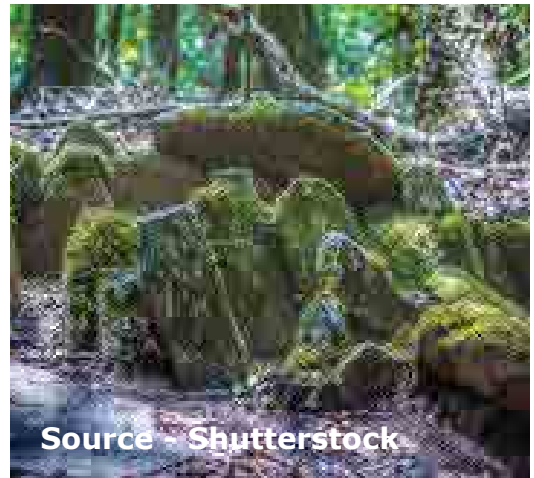
surrounded by an extensive Kavu where women pray for fertility blessings and prosperity.<sup>34</sup>

Theyyam performances, a form of seasonal ritualistic dance invocation, are held in these groves with performers embodying divine beings. Offerings such as milk, turmeric and flowers are made to serpent idols placed beneath banyan or peepal trees.<sup>35</sup>

Indigenous groups like the Muthuvan and Malayarayan tribes uphold these traditions and perform propitiation rites to pacify ancestral spirits. The Nair and Ezhava communities, custodians of many Kavus, ensure that these groves remain untouched due to the belief that disturbing them invites divine wrath.<sup>36</sup>

# MEGHALAYA

Meghalaya's sacred groves, locally known as Law Kyntang, are revered as ancestral and spiritual sanctuaries among the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo tribes.<sup>37</sup> These groves are protected by strong oral traditions, religious taboos and animistic beliefs where it is believed that the divine spirits of nature, known as U Ryngkew U Basa, dwell within these forests. Any disturbance to these sacred lands like tree cutting or foraging is said to invite misfortune. This ensures that these groves remain pristine and undisturbed.



Source - Shutterstock

The Mawphlang Sacred Grove, one of the most well-known in Meghalaya, serves as a prime example of this deep ecological spirituality.<sup>38</sup> Khasi priests, known as Lyngdohs, conduct rituals to honour the spirits of the grove offering rice, betel nuts and sacrificial animals to maintain harmony between the physical and spiritual realms. Additionally, spirit-mediumship and trance ceremonies play a crucial role in communicating with ancestral deities which reinforces a cyclical connection between past and present generations.

The Khasi and Jaintia tribes have preserved their animistic heritage despite colonial and missionary influences.<sup>39</sup> They continue to act as the primary custodians of these groves. These communities integrate their environmental knowledge with religious observance and ensure that Law Kyntang remains untouched by deforestation and commercialisation.



# MANIPUR

In Manipur, sacred groves, known as Umang Lai, are central to the religious and cultural life of the Meitei people. These groves are dedicated to Umang Lais (forest deities) who are believed to be the guardians of the land, water and people.<sup>40</sup> The presence of divine spirits, serpent deities (Nagas) and ancestral beings in these groves makes them sites of ritualistic reverence and spiritual communion.

The most significant ritual associated with these groves is the Lai Haraoba festival which is a vibrant religious celebration that re-enacts the mythological creation of the universe through ritual dance, invocatory hymns and trance-induced performances.<sup>41</sup> During this festival, Maibis (priestesses) and Maibas (priests) enter trances allowing deities to speak through them and offering divine wisdom to the community. Such practices reinforce the idea that these groves serve as spiritual bridges between gods, ancestors and the living.

Indigenous Meitei religious traditions integrate elements of Sanamahism, an ancient animistic faith, with later Hindu influences. This syncretism is evident in the presence of Shiva and Vishnu shrines within some Umang Lais. This shows how local deities coexist with pan-Indian traditions. The strict prohibition against tree felling, hunting and commercial exploitation within these sacred groves has allowed them to remain biodiversity hotspots.





# ***A FOCUS ON MAHARASHTRA***

Sacred groves are locally known as "Devrais" in Maharashtra. These forested sanctuaries have endured through centuries and have been preserved by indigenous religious practices and cultural veneration. Rooted in the sacred narratives of local deities, ancestral spirits and cosmic equilibrium, these groves transcend mere ecological significance. Estimates indicate the presence of approximately 2,820 sacred groves in Maharashtra, predominantly situated in the Western Ghats and Konkan regions. These groves collectively span an area of about 3,570 hectares.<sup>42</sup>

## **GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION AND STATISTICAL OVERVIEW**

Maharashtra's varied topography encompassing the mist-laden Western Ghats, the semi-arid stretches of Marathwada and the tribal heartlands of Vidarbha fosters a rich array of sacred groves.

### ***Northern Western Ghats (Nashik, Pune, Satara, and Kolhapur Districts)***

The Northern Western Ghats, recognised as one of the world's eight "hottest" biodiversity hotspots, host numerous sacred groves that serve as bastions of both spiritual devotion and conservation.

The Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary encompasses an area of 131 km<sup>2</sup>, this sanctuary in Pune district includes several well-preserved Devrais. These groves are sanctified spaces dedicated to deities such as Bhimashankar and Khandoba, reflecting a deep spiritual connection between the divine and the forested realms. Ecologically, these groves are instrumental in groundwater recharge, soil preservation, and erosion control, thereby aligning sacred traditions with sustainable environmental practices.<sup>43</sup>

### ***Konkan Region (Raigad, Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg Districts)***

The humid coastal belt of Konkan is home to numerous sacred groves, particularly in Sindhudurg, where spiritual reverence and ecological consciousness converge.

The Amboli Sacred Grove exemplifies a longstanding tradition of nature worship housing a diverse array of endemic flora and fauna including the esteemed Malabar Gliding Frog (*Rhacophorus malabaricus*). Many groves in this region act as guardians of freshwater springs, embodying the belief that these natural water sources are divine manifestations vital to community sustenance.

### ***Marathwada Region (Aurangabad, Jalna, Beed, and Latur Districts)***

In the semi-arid terrain of Marathwada, sacred groves function as ecological sanctuaries, their existence intertwined with both ritualistic practices and environmental necessity.

The groves in Jalna and Beed are associated with folk deities such as Khandoba and Yellamma. These groves epitomise the blend of agrarian spirituality and conservation ethics. They play a crucial role in retaining soil moisture, acting as bulwarks against desertification while preserving indigenous ecological knowledge systems.



## ***Vidarbha Region (Nagpur, Gadchiroli and Chandrapur Districts)***

The tribal-dominated regions of Vidarbha are rich in animistic traditions, where sacred groves serve as vital centers of both biodiversity and spiritual significance.

Gadchiroli's Sacred Groves are interwoven with the cultural fabric of indigenous communities. These groves protect Sal (*Shorea robusta*) forests that support diverse wildlife, including the elusive tiger of the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve. These groves embody the Gond cosmology, venerating the forest as a divine entity and a repository of existential wisdom.<sup>44</sup>

### ***Indigenous Tradition and Religiosity***

These groves transcend physical locales and serve as sacred arenas where rituals, offerings and seasonal festivals. Local deities, guardian spirits and ancestral souls are believed to inhabit these sanctuaries. Ceremonies such as "Jatra" (annual fairs) are hosted in honour of grove deities.

The indigenous worldview regards the forest not merely as a resource but as a sentient entity – a dwelling of life forces deserving honour and preservation. These groves operate as cosmic thresholds where the mundane and the transcendental intersect which reflects philosophical principles of non-duality and ecological symbiosis. Prohibitions against activities such as tree felling and hunting are not solely conservation measures but enactments of dharma (cosmic law) which signify the inviolability of nature's sanctity.<sup>45</sup>

The oral traditions surrounding sacred groves serve as repositories of ethnobotanical knowledge and document the medicinal properties of various plants and their ritual significance. Village elders and priestly lineages act as stewards of these groves. This indigenous epistemology has an intuitive grasp of ecological cycles, resilience mechanisms and the sacred reciprocity inherent in nature.<sup>46</sup>



# **L**essons From The World:

## *Legal and Policy Insights*

### **1. Legal Recognition Leads to Legal Protection**

Article 231 of the Brazilian Constitution, 1988 recognises Indigenous peoples' rights to their ancestral lands and guarantees respect for their cultural traditions including spiritual and ecological practices related to sacred groves. The Constitution also protects Quilombola communities (descendants of escaped enslaved people) by granting them collective land rights which are essential for preserving sacred forests and religious traditions.<sup>47</sup> Although outdated in some respects, the Statute of the Indian, 1973 (Federal Law No. 6001) this law provides a legal foundation for Indigenous land demarcation and cultural protection.<sup>48</sup>

China's Cultural Heritage Protection Law, 2003 legally safeguards cultural landscapes including sacred groves associated with Daoist, Buddhist, and local folk traditions.<sup>49</sup> The Environmental Protection Law, 2014 emphasises the protection of natural and ecological heritage sites, supporting the preservation of forests with cultural significance.<sup>50</sup> Fengshui forests in southern China are recognised under local and provincial cultural protection laws.

Estonia's Sacred Natural Sites Conservation Plan (2008-2012) systematically mapped and assessed sacred groves, ensuring their legal protection. Estonia has formally recognised sacred groves (hiied) as both cultural and natural heritage.<sup>51</sup> The Heritage Conservation Act, 2002 protects their historical significance<sup>52</sup> while the Nature Conservation Act, 2004 acknowledges their ecological importance.<sup>53</sup>

### **2. Integration of Environmental and Climate Policies**

In Brazil, the Forest Code (Law No. 12.651/2012) establishes legal mechanisms for the conservation of forests on private and public lands which can indirectly protect sacred groves by mandating conservation areas.<sup>54</sup> The National Policy on Traditional Knowledge (Decree 7747/2012) recognises the role of Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian knowledge in biodiversity conservation and helps in reinforcing the legal foundation for sacred grove protection.<sup>55</sup> Some states and municipalities' Action Plans for Biodiversity Conservation have included sacred groves in Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) strategies which integrates them into broader climate resilience and biodiversity efforts.<sup>56</sup>

China's National Biodiversity Conservation Strategy and Action Plan (2011-2030) includes traditional forest conservation systems, such as sacred groves, as part of habitat protection measures.<sup>57</sup> The Ecological Red Line Policy, 2011 identifies sacred groves as ecologically sensitive areas and integrates them into regional land-use plans to prevent urban expansion and deforestation.<sup>58</sup>

Nigeria's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) integrates sacred groves into conservation efforts.<sup>59</sup>

### **3. Community-driven Conservation + Community Engagement**

China's Ecological Civilisation Framework, 2015 promotes the integration of local conservation traditions (e.g., fengshui forests, temple groves) into modern environmental governance.<sup>60</sup> Provincial policies in Guangdong and Fujian support community-managed sacred groves ensuring that local religious leaders and elders participate in conservation.<sup>61</sup> The role of Buddhist and Daoist temples in managing sacred groves is officially recognised with some temples receiving government incentives for sustainable forest management.<sup>62</sup>

Estonia has actively engaged indigenous religious groups like the Maavalla Koda in policymaking and conservation efforts. Estonia has promoted education campaigns to increase awareness of the historical, spiritual, and ecological roles of sacred groves.<sup>63</sup>

In sacred groves of Epirus in Greece, local communities have managed sacred groves for centuries through unwritten rules that restrict activities like logging and grazing.<sup>64</sup>

Nigeria's Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove thrives due to the active role of traditional custodians and religious leaders.<sup>65</sup> Local communities should be empowered as stewards of sacred forests with government support. Ghana's conservation programs educate youth on the cultural and ecological value of sacred groves.<sup>66</sup> Traditional Vodun practices of Benin protect biodiversity and the government supports co-management models between scientists and traditional custodians.<sup>67</sup> Madagascar's community-driven programs offer sustainable agriculture and eco-tourism to prevent over-reliance on sacred forests.<sup>68</sup>

### **4. Eco-tourism**

China's Forestry Tenure Reform, 2008 allows communities to manage sacred groves as eco-tourism destinations and generate revenue while ensuring conservation.<sup>69</sup> Guangxi and Yunnan provinces have implemented sustainable tourism programs around sacred groves offering government grants for ecotourism infrastructure.<sup>70</sup> National carbon sequestration programs recognise sacred groves as carbon sinks which may be eligible for participation in carbon credit markets.<sup>71</sup>

In Nigeria, revenue from cultural tourism at Osun-Osogbo provides funds for grove maintenance.

## 5. Other unique programmes

China's Grain for Green Program (1999-present) supports afforestation and reforestation efforts where some sacred groves included as pilot conservation sites.<sup>72</sup> Watershed management policies in the Yangtze<sup>73</sup> and Pearl River<sup>74</sup> basins recognise sacred groves as natural water retention areas, preventing soil erosion and enhancing groundwater recharge. The Sponge Cities Initiative, 2015 designed to improve urban water management, has included some sacred groves in green infrastructure planning.<sup>75</sup>

China's Green Finance Policies have encouraged corporate partnerships with local conservation projects where businesses fund reforestation and protection efforts in sacred groves.<sup>76</sup> Collaboration between research institutions and local governments like that of Beijing Forestry University's research on fengshui forests has led to evidence-based policy recommendations for sacred grove conservation.<sup>77</sup> Faith-based conservation partnerships involve Buddhist and Daoist organisations in conservation dialogues.<sup>78</sup>

Under Natura 2000 and EU Directives, while sacred groves are not explicitly recognised, EU policies provide funding and legal protection for natural areas with cultural significance.<sup>79</sup>

In Africa, there are instances where religious institutions are strong conservation partners. Ethiopian Orthodox churches have preserved church forests for centuries. Conservation NGOs now support them with funding and technical expertises. Sometimes creating barriers have helped like building stone walls around church forests has successfully prevent land conversion. Government agencies, NGOs and religious leaders collaborate on reforestation projects.<sup>80</sup>





# **T**The Indian Framework

## Constitutional Framework <sup>81</sup>

The Constitution of India provides a foundational legal framework for environmental protection. Article 48A, a Directive Principle of State Policy, mandates the protection and improvement of the environment. Additionally, Article 51A imposes a fundamental duty on citizens to protect and improve the natural environment. Furthermore, Schedules V and VI of the Constitution of India, 1950 recognise customary laws and indigenous rights which hold particular relevance for the protection of sacred groves in tribal areas.

### NATIONAL LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

#### 1. The Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 <sup>82</sup>

The Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 provides indirect recognition of sacred groves by including them under protected area category of community reserves. Although the Act does not explicitly mention sacred groves, several provisions may be applicable for their protection.

Under Chapter IV, the Act allows the State Government to declare any area as a sanctuary under Section 18 or national park under Section 35 if it holds ecological, faunal, floral, geomorphological, natural, or zoological significance. Section 36C enables the designation of community reserves where communities or individuals can voluntarily conserve wildlife and its habitat. Sacred groves could potentially be classified under this provision.

Traditional rights are also recognised within the broader legal framework. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, provides legal backing to traditional communities by recognising their customary rights over forests, including sacred groves. Moreover, Section 33 mandates that management plans for sanctuaries must involve consultation with local communities in Scheduled Areas.

#### 2. The Biological Diversity Act, 2002 <sup>83</sup>

The Biological Diversity Act, 2002 explicitly recognises sacred groves under the category of Biodiversity Heritage Sites (BHS). Section 41 of the Act mandates local bodies to establish Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs) for conservation, sustainable use and documentation of biodiversity which can be instrumental in protecting sacred groves at the community level.

The Act also provides mechanisms for Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) through Sections 3, 4, and 6 to regulate access to biological resources and ensure equitable benefit-sharing which can help prevent the commercial exploitation of sacred groves. Additionally, People's Biodiversity Registers (PBRs) serve as a means to document biodiversity including traditional conservation sites such as sacred groves.

### **3. The National Forest Policy, 1988 <sup>84</sup>**

The National Forest Policy, 1988 emphasises the conservation of forests and indirectly promotes the preservation of sacred groves. Section 2.1 highlights the need to conserve natural heritage, including forests with diverse flora and fauna, which aligns with the objectives of sacred grove conservation. Section 4.2 encourages afforestation on degraded lands, including village and community lands, which could facilitate the revival and protection of sacred groves.

The policy also acknowledges the relationship between tribal people and forests (Section 4.6), ensuring their involvement in the protection, regeneration and sustainable use of forest resources which directly pertains to the conservation of sacred groves.

### **4. The National Biodiversity Action Plan, 2008 <sup>85</sup>**

The National Biodiversity Action Plan, 2008 recognises sacred groves as vital components of biodiversity conservation. The plan recommends the formulation of policies to support the conservation and management of sacred groves alongside grasslands and pastoral lands. It also suggests updating databases on sacred groves and sacred ponds to actively document their bio-resources and associated traditional knowledge.

Additionally, the plan underscores that ancient sacred groves and biodiversity hotspots should be considered invaluable when conducting Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) for development projects.

### **5. Joint Forest Management (JFM) Guidelines <sup>86</sup>**

The National Biodiversity Action Plan, 2008 recognises sacred groves as vital components of biodiversity conservation. The plan recommends the formulation of policies to support the conservation and management of sacred groves alongside grasslands and pastoral lands. It also suggests updating databases on sacred groves and sacred ponds to actively document their bio-resources and associated traditional knowledge.

Additionally, the plan underscores that ancient sacred groves and biodiversity hotspots should be considered invaluable when conducting Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) for development projects. The Joint Forest Management (JFM) Guidelines encourage community participation in forest conservation, including sacred groves. The guidelines recognise sacred groves as an indigenous conservation method, highlighting their historical role in forest protection. They also note the association of sacred groves with water conservation as many such sites are linked to springs and function as local adaptive techniques for water management.

The guidelines further outline the role of Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs) in protecting sacred groves and sacred water bodies. These committees are responsible for conserving biological resources and regulating access to traditional knowledge.

## **6. The Maharashtra Biodiversity Rules, 2008 <sup>87</sup>**

The Maharashtra Biodiversity Rules, 2008 outline the state's framework for biodiversity conservation under the Biological Diversity Act, 2002. Although the rules do not explicitly mention sacred groves, they include relevant provisions. Local bodies are mandated to form Biodiversity Management Committees (BMCs) which oversee conservation efforts and maintain People's Biodiversity Registers (PBRs) documenting traditional knowledge and biological resources potentially including sacred groves.

The rules also allow the government to designate Biodiversity Heritage Sites (BHS) in consultation with local stakeholders. Given their ecological and cultural importance, sacred groves could qualify for this designation. Additionally, the rules provide for a Local Biodiversity Fund to support conservation efforts, which could be utilised for sacred grove preservation if recognised as important biodiversity areas. Restrictions on access to biological resources further enable the protection of endemic, rare or culturally significant species found within sacred groves.

## **7. The Maharashtra Village Panchayat Act, 1959 <sup>88</sup>**

The Maharashtra Village Panchayat Act, 1959 empowers local bodies to undertake conservation initiatives. The Gram Sabha, under Chapter II, has the authority to oversee and approve social and economic development plans which could include sacred grove conservation projects. Village Development Committees, formed under Section 49, can implement conservation efforts for sacred groves.

Sections 51 and 52 grant panchayats the authority to manage village lands which could be leveraged to protect sacred groves from encroachment. Section 53 provides powers to remove encroachments on public land which aids in the protection of these ecologically significant sites. In Scheduled Areas, panchayats hold specific powers for natural resource management under Section 54A which may include sacred grove conservation. Additionally, local taxation and fundraising mechanisms outlined in Chapter IX could be employed for community-led conservation efforts.

## **8. The Maharashtra State Forest Policy, 2008 <sup>89</sup>**

The Maharashtra State Forest Policy, 2008 does not explicitly mention sacred groves, but its provisions align with their conservation. Section 3.2 encourages afforestation on community lands which supports sacred grove protection. Section 3.3.4 promotes participatory forest management and village eco-development – potentially applying to sacred groves. Section 3.5 calls for the conservation of biodiversity-rich areas while Section 3.4 emphasises watershed development and soil conservation recognising the role of sacred groves in groundwater recharge and soil erosion prevention. Section 3.9 acknowledges the customary rights of local communities which can be leveraged to strengthen traditional sacred grove conservation. Additionally, Section 3.11 promotes eco-tourism and public awareness programs that can highlight the ecological and cultural significance of sacred groves.

# **POLICY SUGGESTIONS**

## **1. Strengthening Legal Recognition**

The Constitution of India could formally recognise sacred groves ensuring their legal protection. This would give it the most amount of legitimacy and encourage legislators to create laws specifically on it. While The Indian Forest Act, 1927 provides for reserve, protected, and village forests, it does not explicitly mention sacred groves.<sup>90</sup> This omission necessitates amendments to incorporate their recognition and conservation.

The Maharashtra Private Forests (Acquisition) Act, 1975 aims to conserve private forests by preventing their destruction and over-exploitation while promoting systematic and scientific management.<sup>91</sup> The Act contributes to soil moisture conservation, groundwater recharge and overall water regime improvement which would benefit agriculture and local communities. Additionally, it emphasises soil erosion control, afforestation and pasture development which would ensure the sustainable use of forest resources. It further supports rural livelihoods particularly for Adivasis and marginalised communities by promoting employment opportunities linked to forest resources and ensuring equitable distribution of forest produce. These provisions can be extended to protect sacred groves as critical ecological and cultural landscapes.

Under the Maharashtra Village Panchayat Act, 1959 possible actions for sacred grove conservation include utilising the Gram Sabha's powers to pass resolutions for their legal recognition and protection.<sup>92</sup> Additionally, a Village Development Committee can be formed specifically for sacred grove conservation. Panchayat authorities can declare sacred groves as protected areas to prevent encroachment and utilise local biodiversity funds, if available, to support conservation efforts.

## **2. Promotion of Eco-Tourism**

Ecotourism can transform sacred groves into educational and conservation hubs. Activities such as heritage walks, guided nature trails and scientific research visits can foster awareness while ensuring environmental stewardship. Meditation retreats and pilgrimage-based visits can highlight the groves' cultural significance while promoting eco-friendly tourism practices. Additionally, community-based tourism such as eco-stays outside the perimeters of groves and local handicraft promotion can provide sustainable livelihoods.<sup>93</sup>

To ensure that ecotourism does not degrade these fragile ecosystems, strict visitor management policies should be enforced. Limiting the number of visitors, establishing designated walking trails and regulating vehicle access can help mitigate environmental impact. Sustainable infrastructure such as eco-friendly pathways, composting toilets and rainwater harvesting systems should be prioritised. Local guides should be trained to educate visitors about the groves' ecological and cultural importance while ensuring respectful behaviour.

Revenue generated from tourism should be transparently reinvested into conservation and community development projects.<sup>94</sup> Setting up interpretation centres and educational programs can further instill the values of conservation among tourists and local communities. Special attention should be given to preventing waste accumulation and illegal resource extraction, both of which pose significant threats to the ecological balance of sacred groves.



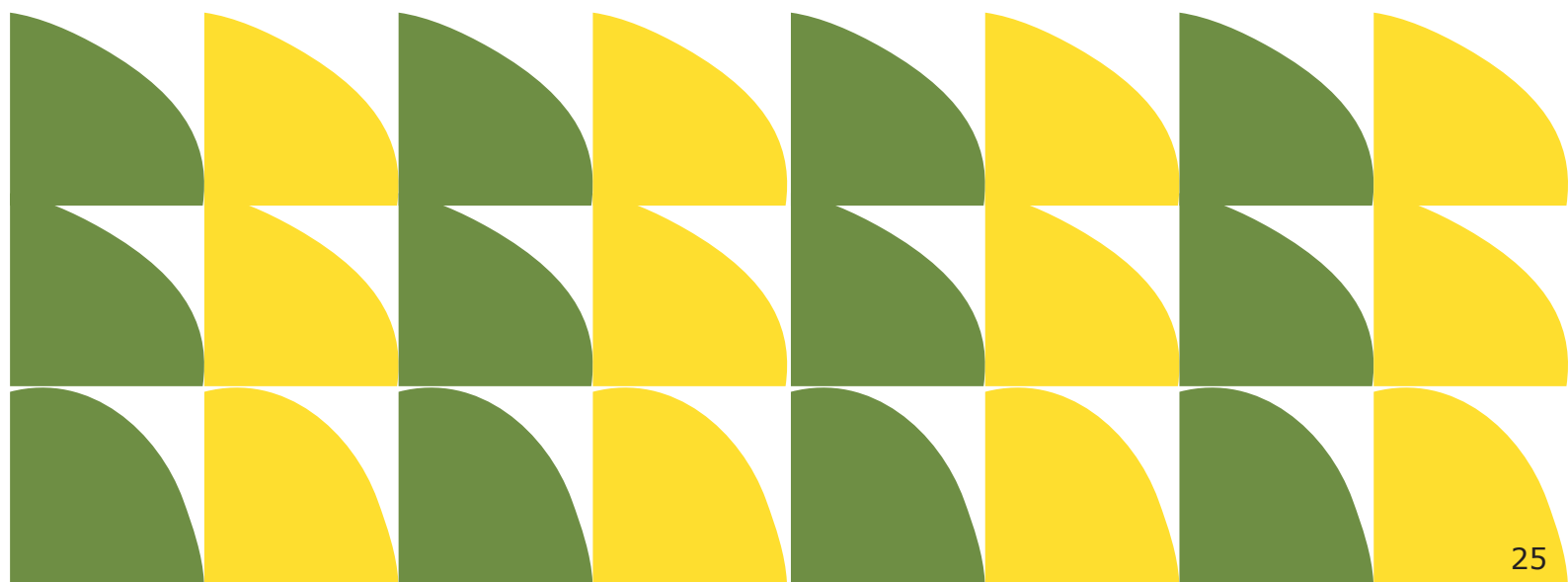
While ecotourism offers numerous benefits, it also brings potential risks. Increased footfall can lead to habitat degradation, waste pollution and disturbance to wildlife. Cultural commercialisation and the overuse of sacred sites may erode their spiritual significance. Furthermore, the economic benefits of tourism are often unevenly distributed with local communities sometimes receiving little financial gain. Sacred groves also face threats from urban expansion, land encroachment and infrastructure development which necessitates stronger legal protections and conservation policies.

The National Strategy for Ecotourism, 202295 aligns with several abovementioned aspects but can be enhanced. One key recommendation is strict zoning and the creation of no-go areas within groves. The national strategy suggests restricting ecotourism in ecologically fragile zones such as breeding grounds and erosion-prone sites. For sacred groves, such restrictions should be even more rigorous to ensure that core spiritual areas remain off-limits to tourists. These no-go zones should be determined in consultation with local communities and religious leaders to balance conservation with spiritual traditions.

Sacred groves need a clear code of conduct for visitors which should prohibit activities like photography, loud noises and non-religious commercial enterprises within sacred zones. Training local guides to enforce these culturally appropriate tourism guidelines will help maintain the sanctity of the groves while educating visitors about their spiritual significance.

The national strategy emphasises creating ecological corridors that link protected areas to enhance biodiversity conservation. Sacred groves should be integrated into these broader conservation landscapes to prevent them from becoming isolated pockets and ensuring long-term ecological connectivity.

Instead of encouraging high-footfall tourism, these sites should promote quiet, immersive experiences like silent walks, meditation retreats and eco-spiritual workshops that connect conservation with traditional beliefs. This approach aligns with the principles of responsible ecotourism while preserving the intangible cultural and spiritual values of sacred groves.



# The Way Forward

Sacred groves in the Northern Western Ghats are significant biodiversity hotspots traditionally protected by local communities. However, they lack formal conservation status which makes community engagement essential for their long-term protection. These groves serve multiple ecological functions such as reducing human-wildlife conflict, supporting soil and water conservation, and preserving cultural heritage. Local communities have historically managed these groves through joint stewardship, blending traditional and formal conservation approaches. Yet urbanisation and demographic shifts have led to a decline in community involvement particularly affecting women's participation.

Conservation efforts must balance the perspectives of different stakeholders. While tourists are drawn to aesthetically appealing and rare species, locals value species for their cultural, religious or practical uses such as medicinal applications or weather forecasting. Selecting flagship species that resonate with both groups can ensure conservation initiatives align with community needs while also promoting ecotourism as a financial incentive for conservation. However, some species that attract tourists may be viewed negatively by locals due to issues like crop damage or livestock predation. A well-chosen flagship species would bridge this gap and help minimise conflicts while supporting conservation goals.

Education and awareness play a crucial role in sustaining conservation efforts. Sacred groves can function as biodiversity learning centres and integrate traditional knowledge with scientific research. Training programs for students, teachers and youth can help document traditional ecological practices to ensure intergenerational knowledge transfer. Engaging religious and cultural organisations as well as leveraging digital media can further strengthen conservation messages and encourage youth participation. Additionally, structured engagement of various stakeholders comprising of local communities, researchers, government agencies, and forest departments can enhance conservation efforts through capacity building and governance support.

Tourism and outreach initiatives like designated trail paths, interactive signage and educational publications can enhance visitor experiences while promoting conservation awareness. However, modernisation efforts like that of clearing vegetation for ritualistic cleanliness can sometimes contradict the ecological purpose of sacred groves. Addressing these conflicts requires a balanced approach that preserves both cultural traditions and ecological services. Multi-stakeholder collaboration is crucial for sustainable management with religious institutions, community trusts, researchers, and environmental organisations working together to ensure these sacred spaces remain protected.

Legal and institutional mechanisms must be strengthened to safeguard sacred groves from commercialisation and land encroachment. A pluralistic legal framework integrating religious customs with forest conservation laws is necessary. Community trusts and religious institutions should incorporate conservation principles into their management strategies while government agencies and environmental institutions should collaborate to enforce protective measures. With the right combination of community-driven efforts, policy support and education, sacred groves can continue to thrive as vital ecological and cultural landscapes.

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