

## **Certification of non-timber forest produce to enhance income and incentivise restoration of lands with Community Forest Resource Rights**

## BACKGROUND

In the agriculture sector, certification is increasingly being adopted as a tool that enhances social and economic outcomes for producers while providing higher levels of quality and safety for consumers. Certification involves producers adhering to a set of defined standards, in exchange for which they can realise a premium price for their products. Certification revolves around five pillars: (i) a standard developed by a certification agency; (ii) producers willing to be certified under this standard; (iii) external auditors who evaluate adherence by producers to this standard; (iv) buyers who procure certified products; and (v) consumers who ultimately generate the demand for these certified products.

The principles of certification can also be applied to non-timber forest produce (NTFPs). Like other standards, NTFP certification standards include social equity, economic gains, product quality, and product safety. However, they also incorporate a crucial additional component: ecological sustainability. Ecological sustainability components related to the products themselves include limits



Fruit of Aegle marmelos (Indian bael)

to the quantum and frequency of collection, restrictions on the methods used for collection, and reduced wastage of collected products. Ecological sustainability standards also apply more broadly to the land from where these products are collected, and may include components such as prevention of anthropogenic fires, avoidance of tree-felling, and supporting assisted natural regeneration of the forest understory. Thus, certification can positively impact the particular species that produce the NTFPs as well as the land as a whole from where these products are collected. If used appropriately as part of a holistic system of forest management, NTFP certification can incentivise conservation and restoration by aligning socio-economic gains to people with ecological gains to forests.

Such models may be particularly relevant to lands where communities have been granted Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights under The Scheduled

Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. Such lands are often of high value for NTFP collection, but also face competing economic pressures. Increasing the value of sustainably-harvested NTFPs from these lands could lead to a win-win for both the communities and forests. However, there are relatively few examples of NTFP certification in India; the few that exist are typically at small scales (a few hectares), rather than the scales relevant to CFR lands (often hundreds of hectares). The Nature Conservancy (TNC), therefore, collaborated with Applied Environmental Research Foundation (AERF) and Nature Connect India Pvt. Ltd. to implement a pilot in Uttar Bastar Kanker district, Chhattisgarh. The goal of this pilot was to evaluate whether NTFP certification could potentially be implemented under the current institutional and management systems prevalent on lands under CFR rights in Chhattisgarh.



Fruit of Terminalia chebula (Haritaki)

Fruit of Terminalia bellirica (Bibhitaki)

Biswal Ashok |

## **FIELD PILOT**

Based on scoping visits that included inputs from civil society organisations, *Gram Panchayats*, and frontline staff of the Forest Department, four villages in two blocks were selected to pilot NTFP certification: Mandri and Kanagaon in Kanker block, and Masulpani and Khadarwahi in Narharpur block.

From the perspective of forest conservation and restoration, FairWild certification (which establishes both ecological and socio-economic benchmarks) is the standard of high relevance. However, FairWild provides greater value when it is combined with organic certification. Therefore, USDA Organic NOP certification (which facilitates access to USA markets) and APEDA Organic NPOP certification (which facilitates access to European markets) were also considered for this pilot.

The concept of certification, the general requirements to obtain certification, and the overall approach of the pilot was explained to the *Gram Sabha* of each village as part of a process of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent. Following this, a detailed assessment was undertaken of the types and volumes of NTFPs being collected from the lands under CFR rights; the prevalent practices for their collection; social and economic equity in collection and procurement; and the general state of degradation, existing management practices, and potential for regeneration of the CFR areas. These assessments indicated that the prevailing institutional and management conditions were broadly favourable for achieving minimum certification standards.

Based on collection volume and demand assessment, the following NTFPs were proposed for certification from the four villages: *Terminalia arjuna* (Arjuna) bark, *Terminalia chebula* (Haritaki) fruit, *Terminalia bellirica* (Bibhitaki) fruit, *Boswellia serrata* (Salai) gum, and *Aegle marmelos* (Indian bael) fruit. A series of capacity building sessions were then held with the NTFP collectors, *Gram Panchayats*, CFR Management Committees, and local NTFP buyers to fill in gaps and enable them to meet the minimum standards



Sites where certification of NTFPs was piloted.

## **KEY FUTURE NEEDS**

This initial pilot – the first undertaken on land granted under CFR rights – demonstrated that the existing institutional and management systems are conducive to the certification of NTFPs collected from CFR lands in Chhattisgarh. In turn, certification can increase price realisation for NTFP collectors and thereby incentivise sustainable management over the long term. While these early results are encouraging, the following aspects require further evaluation:

**Replicability:** It would be beneficial to develop standard criteria; hence identify other areas with high potential for rapid certification of NTFPs. These criteria may include size of the land, number of different NTFPs collected, collection volume, and the existing level of sustainability followed in collection practices.

**Scalability:** The existing market for certified NTFPs is a relatively small proportion of the NTFP market as a whole. Therefore, a detailed market assessment would help quantify and define the opportunity for Chhattisgarh.

**Ecological impact:** A set of both short-term and long-term ecological indicators would help evaluate the ecological impact of certification. It may be particularly useful to explore certification in regions that adjoin protected areas or other areas of high biodiversity value, such as buffer zones, corridors, or eco-sensitive zones.

**Financial sustainability:** Certification incurs annual costs, although these costs reduce with scale. Nevertheless, sustainable mechanisms for funding these costs – such as via synergies with existing schemes – require further exploration. required for certification. These sessions focused on sharing best practices associated with traceability and record-keeping; sustainable harvest practices in extraction of NTFPs as well as more general conservation activities; and implementation of social equity in market access as well as profit distribution.



Bark of Terminalia arjuna (Arjuna)

Following the successful completion of audits by independent third-party auditors, certifications have been received for the above five NTFPs for a total CFR area of 1,830 hectares in the four villages. The cost of these audits (a significant component of total certification cost) was approximately ₹600 per hectare. Notably, the per-hectare cost reduces with larger areas due to the sample-based approach followed by the third-party auditor. Certified Arjuna bark has now been procured at a rate of ₹40/kg (roughly double the local rate of ₹21/kg) for export to international markets.





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