



USAID | **INDIA**
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

SUCCESS STORY

A Fire Campaign in Shimoga

USAID uses village street theater to recruit community help in controlling damaging forest fires



[V. Dakshinamurthy]



[V. Dakshinamurthy]

HUMAN-CAUSED FIRES HAVE DAMAGED THE ECOSYSTEM HEALTH AND PRODUCTIVITY OF BIODIVERSITY-RICH, TROPICAL, DECIDUOUS FORESTS OF SHIMOGA DISTRICT, IN THE SOUTH INDIAN STATE OF KARNATAKA. PARTICIPATION BY LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN CONTROLLING FIRES WILL RESTORE AN ANCIENT FOREST.

Every year fires burn through the biodiversity-rich, tropical, deciduous forests of Shimoga District, in the south Indian State of Karnataka. Few of these fires are natural - intentionally or not, people cause most. These yearly flames have undermined the function, structure, and productivity of a forest whose origins are in the flora of the ancient Gondwanan mega-continent. Among other measures of damaged ecological health, the carbon stored in these forests' biomass is half what it once was.

The Karnataka State Forest Department is responsible for controlling forest fires, but it must depend on local communities to avoid, spot, and fight fires, and to restore charred forest. These communities' willingness to help depends on active goodwill and widespread understanding that ecologically healthy forests yield more abundant livelihoods. Smita Bijjur, Chief Conservator of Forests, wanted to spread this message through Shimoga District and USAID offered to help.

The USAID/Forest-PLUS program created a communication campaign that used indigenous street theater to bring Bijjur's message to Shimoga's village squares, market crossroads, community centers, and schools. A local theater troupe acted stories of cultural ties to forest plants and animals, created new words for traditional songs to celebrate forest beneficence, and danced the terrible drama of a fire raging through a wailing forest after a *bidi* carelessly tossed into dry litter lit its destruction. All was in the Kannada language and performances always ended with audience joining actors in singing and dancing a commitment to prevent fires. At least 30,000 people have seen, heard, and joined.

The Karnataka Forest Department now has street theater videos, song recordings, campaign posters, banners, and pamphlets. KFD has taken over the campaign in Shimoga, expanded it to other districts, and intends to continue it next dry season. Though some fires will always occur in Shimoga when dry season droughts create ready tinder, now there is stronger hope that many fewer will ravage Shimoga's vulnerable forests.

Telling Our Story

U.S. Agency for International Development
Washington, DC 20523-1000
<http://stories.usaid.gov>