

# INTEGRATING SCIENTIFIC APPROACHES AND INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS FOR BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION: A ROADMAP TO ACHIEVE SDG 15

Dr. Ranjana Verma\*

Assistant Professor, Department of Zoology, Bherulal Patidar Govt. P. G. College, MHOW (MP).

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**\*Corresponding Author: Dr. Ranjana Verma**

Assistant Professor, Department of Zoology, Bherulal Patidar Govt. P. G. College, MHOW (MP).

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## ABSTRACT

Biodiversity forms the foundation of ecological stability by supporting nutrient cycling, soil fertility, pollination, and climate regulation. However, unsustainable land use, habitat fragmentation, and climate change are accelerating biodiversity loss, which threatens ecosystem integrity. SDG 15 (Life on Land) promotes the conservation, restoration, and sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, forests, and biodiversity. This work emphasizes combining modern scientific tools with traditional ecological knowledge to improve biodiversity management. From a scientific perspective, methods such as population genetics, molecular barcoding, GIS-based habitat mapping, and bioindicator monitoring offer accurate assessments of ecosystem health. Recent studies on pollinators, amphibians, and freshwater zooplankton show their role as early warning systems for ecological imbalance, making them essential tools in conservation biology. Habitat restoration, controlled reforestation, and sustainable agro-ecological practices are evidence-based actions that can halt biodiversity loss. Equally important is the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), which reflects centuries of ecological wisdom. Ancient texts like the Vrikshayurveda and Arthashastra describe sustainable forestry and wildlife management practices. Indigenous conservation traditions, such as sacred groves, community-led water harvesting, and the protection of keystone species like the cobra, peacock, and elephant, highlight the cultural reverence for biodiversity in India. Combining these practices with scientific strategies creates a synergistic conservation model that is both culturally rooted and globally relevant. This abstract underscores the need for a transdisciplinary approach that combines modern life science research with IKS-based ecological ethics. Such an integrated pathway strengthens not only SDG 15 but also interconnected goals, including SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), and SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation). By aligning science and tradition, India can offer a unique model of sustainable biodiversity conservation with global applicability.

**KEYWORDS:** Biodiversity, SDG 15, Indian Knowledge System, Conservation Biology, Ecosystem Restoration.

## INTRODUCTION

Biodiversity is fundamental to ecosystem resilience, as it ensures services such as nutrient cycling, water purification, and carbon sequestration (Cardinale et al., 2012). However, anthropogenic pressures, including land-use change, urbanization, and overexploitation, are driving species extinction at an unprecedented rate (IPBES, 2019). India, with its 10 biogeographic zones and over 100,000 recorded animal species, is recognized as a global biodiversity hotspot (MoEFCC, 2021). The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 15 (SDG 15) emphasizes halting biodiversity loss through conservation, restoration, and sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems (United Nations, 2015). While scientific advances provide innovative tools for monitoring and restoration, indigenous traditions in India—rooted in ecological ethics and cultural reverence—offer sustainable conservation models (Gadgil & Vartak, 1976; Raghavan, 2014). This paper argues for an integrated framework combining modern scientific approaches with Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) to achieve SDG 15.

India's rich legacy of IKS provides a profound ecological foundation that complements modern scientific approaches. Texts such as the **Mrugpada Shastra** by Hamsadev (13th century CE) detailed methods of identifying animals through their **footprints, gait, and stride patterns**, aiding species recognition and behavioral analysis while encouraging ethical human-wildlife coexistence. Similarly, the **Arthashastra** (Kautilya, 4th century BCE) advocated for wildlife reserves (*abhayāranyas*), regulated hunting, and sustainable forestry, foreshadowing modern conservation biology. The **Vrikshayurveda** (Surapala, 10th century CE) described principles of afforestation, soil management, and plant propagation, making it one of the earliest manuals of sustainable forestry. These traditions illustrate how ancient Indian society embedded **biodiversity conservation within culture, ethics, and livelihood practices**, evident in sacred groves, reverence for keystone species like the cow, elephant, cobra, and peacock, and sustainable water-harvesting systems such as *baoris* and *johads*. By integrating this legacy of ecological wisdom with modern tools like GIS-based habitat monitoring, molecular biodiversity assessments, and restoration ecology, a holistic pathway emerges for achieving SDG 15 and its interconnections with **SDG 13 (Climate Action)**, **SDG 6 (Clean Water)**, and **SDG 2 (Zero Hunger)**.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a systematic review of literature, policy documents, and international assessments on biodiversity conservation and SDG 15. References to Indian Knowledge Systems were examined through secondary sources. A comparative analysis was used to integrate modern scientific approaches with traditional ecological practices.

### Scientific Approaches to Biodiversity Conservation: Molecular and Genetic Tools

Advances in molecular biology and genetics have revolutionized biodiversity conservation by providing precise tools for species identification, population assessment, and management strategies. Among these, DNA barcoding has emerged as a powerful technique for the rapid and accurate identification of species, including cryptic, morphologically similar, or endangered taxa. This method relies on sequencing a standardized region of the genome commonly the mitochondrial cytochrome c oxidase I (COI) gene in animals, which serves as a unique genetic "barcode" for each species (Hebert et al., 2003). DNA barcoding has been instrumental in monitoring biodiversity in complex ecosystems, detecting illegal wildlife trade, and guiding conservation priorities by revealing hidden species diversity.

In addition to species identification, genetic diversity studies play a crucial role in conservation planning and management. By assessing the genetic variation within and among populations, conservationists can understand population structure, identify inbreeding risks, and develop strategies to maintain or enhance genetic health. For instance, research on the Asiatic lion (*Panthera leo persica*) has highlighted the importance of maintaining genetic variability to ensure long-term survival. Such studies have informed captive breeding programs, reintroduction efforts, and habitat management strategies, ultimately contributing to evidence-based conservation policies (Singh et al., 2017). The integration of molecular and genetic tools into biodiversity conservation thus provides a scientific foundation for preserving species and ecosystems, enabling targeted interventions and long-term sustainability. These approaches complement traditional ecological methods, offering a more comprehensive understanding of biodiversity dynamics in the face of environmental change and anthropogenic pressures.

### **Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Remote Sensing in Biodiversity Conservation**

Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and remote sensing technologies have become indispensable tools in modern biodiversity conservation. These technologies allow researchers to collect, analyze, and visualize spatial and temporal data on ecosystems, species distributions, and land-use changes, providing a comprehensive understanding of environmental patterns and threats. **Remote sensing**, through satellite imagery and aerial photography, enables continuous monitoring of forest cover, habitat degradation, and landscape fragmentation. This capability is crucial for detecting deforestation, assessing habitat quality, and identifying areas under anthropogenic pressure.

**GIS** complements remote sensing by integrating diverse spatial datasets to generate predictive models, map species distributions, and delineate critical habitats. It enables conservationists to identify biodiversity hotspots, plan protected areas, and prioritize regions for restoration. In India, GIS-based habitat suitability models have been effectively employed to support large carnivore conservation. For instance, studies on tiger (*Panthera tigris*) populations in Central India have utilized GIS to identify and map potential tiger corridors, facilitating landscape connectivity and reducing human-wildlife conflict (Jhala et al., 2020). Such applications demonstrate how spatial technologies can inform evidence-based conservation planning, ensuring that interventions are targeted, efficient, and sustainable.

Overall, the integration of remote sensing and GIS provides a dynamic framework for monitoring biodiversity, guiding conservation strategies, and mitigating the impacts of habitat loss and fragmentation. These approaches are particularly valuable in regions with high ecological sensitivity, where timely and accurate information is essential for protecting threatened species and maintaining ecosystem integrity.

### **Bioindicators and Habitat Restoration in Biodiversity Conservation**

Understanding and maintaining ecosystem health requires both accurate monitoring of environmental changes and proactive restoration of degraded habitats. Bioindicator species whose presence, abundance, or condition reflects the state of an ecosystem serve as vital tools in this regard. Amphibians, with their permeable skin and dual aquatic-terrestrial life cycle, are highly sensitive to chemical pollutants, habitat fragmentation, and water-quality changes, while dragonflies respond to alterations in freshwater vegetation, flow, and nutrient levels. Freshwater zooplankton, which are highly responsive to changes in nutrient concentration and pollutant loads, provide valuable insights into aquatic ecosystem health (Blaustein & Wake, 1995).

Recent studies in Indian wetlands demonstrate the utility of bioindicators for ecological assessment. Zooplankton diversity has been shown to correlate significantly with the trophic status of freshwater bodies, reflecting nutrient enrichment, eutrophication, or ecosystem stress (Sharma & Sharma, 2019). Such findings underscore the importance of integrating multiple bioindicator taxa to achieve a holistic understanding of ecosystem dynamics, which is critical for designing targeted conservation interventions.

While monitoring provides essential data on ecosystem health, active habitat restoration ensures the recovery of ecological structure and function. Scientific reforestation using native plant species has emerged as a highly effective strategy for restoring degraded forests, particularly in ecologically sensitive regions like the Himalayas. Native species are adapted to local climatic and soil conditions, facilitating successful establishment, supporting native fauna, and enhancing ecosystem services such as nutrient cycling, carbon sequestration, and hydrological regulation (Chazdon, 2008). Reforestation projects in degraded Himalayan landscapes have shown measurable improvements in soil quality, including increased organic matter, moisture retention, and microbial activity, thereby creating conditions conducive to natural recolonization by plants and animals.

Integrating bioindicator monitoring with habitat restoration strategies creates a complementary framework for biodiversity conservation. Continuous assessment of ecosystem health through bioindicators informs restoration priorities, while scientifically planned reforestation and rehabilitation enhance habitat quality, biodiversity, and resilience. Such a combined approach not only supports the recovery of threatened species but also strengthens ecosystem services and promotes sustainable environmental management.

### **Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Biodiversity Conservation**

India's rich cultural and ecological heritage has given rise to a variety of traditional knowledge systems that play a significant role in conserving biodiversity, integrating ecological sustainability with spiritual, social, and economic values. Sacred groves, preserved by communities across regions such as Meghalaya, Maharashtra, and Kerala, represent one of the oldest forms of community-led biodiversity conservation, harboring endemic and rare species while serving as genetic reservoirs for long-term survival and restoration programs (Bhagwat & Rutte, 2006). Complementing this, Vrikshayurveda, an ancient Sanskrit text on plant science, documents organic manures, intercropping, crop rotation, and natural fertilizers, practices aligned with modern agroecology that sustain soil fertility, enhance productivity, and promote habitat heterogeneity, thereby maintaining ecosystem health (Raghavan, 2014). Similarly, indigenous water harvesting structures such as johads in Rajasthan and baolis in Madhya Pradesh exemplify the integration of water management with biodiversity conservation by recharging groundwater, sustaining wetlands, and contributing to climate resilience (Agarwal & Narain, 1997). Cultural and religious practices also reinforce biodiversity conservation, as seen in the reverence accorded to species such as the cobra (Nag Panchami), elephant (Ganesha worship), and peacock (national bird), where symbolic protection discourages exploitation and fosters stewardship (Dwivedi, 2003). The integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into contemporary biodiversity strategies offers valuable insights for community-based management, sustainable agriculture, water security, and species protection, with case studies providing tangible evidence of these synergies. For instance, the Mawphlang sacred grove in Meghalaya conserves over 400 plant species, including medicinal herbs, through cultural taboos (Khan et al., 1997); Kaziranga National Park in Assam demonstrates the successful recovery of the one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) through scientific monitoring and local engagement (Talukdar, 2004); and GIS-based mapping of the

Western Ghats reveals significant overlap between biodiversity-rich regions and sacred sites, underscoring the convergence of IKS and modern conservation science (Nagendra & Gadgil, 1999). Together, these examples illustrate how traditional ecological knowledge, when harmonized with contemporary scientific methods, enhances biodiversity conservation and ecological resilience while preserving India's cultural heritage.

## DISCUSSION

While scientific approaches provide precision, scalability, and predictive models, IKS ensures cultural acceptance and long-term sustainability. For instance, sacred grove conservation aligns with ex situ and in situ conservation methods, while traditional agroforestry reduces monoculture-driven biodiversity loss. An integrative framework should therefore:

1. Map sacred groves using GIS to incorporate them into conservation policies.
2. Validate traditional practices like organic composting through molecular soil microbiome studies.
3. Involve local communities in citizen science-based biodiversity monitoring.

Such integration supports SDG 15 and interconnected goals like SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 6 (Clean Water).

## CONCLUSION

Biodiversity conservation in India requires bridging modern science and indigenous traditions. Molecular genetics, GIS, and bioindicators must be complemented with sacred groves, traditional agroecology, and cultural reverence for species. This holistic approach not only ensures ecosystem stability but also strengthens India's contribution to the global SDG agenda. By combining empirical science with the wisdom of Indian Knowledge Systems, India can present a globally replicable model of sustainable biodiversity management.

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