



Restoring Rivers - Organising an inaugural “India Rivers Week” (IRW), 2014 as the first of an annual / biennial conclave to enable learning and promote river restoration skills and actions from sharing and exchange of ideas, experiences and practices.

Background:

Rivers are key ecological systems on earth. They regularly drain their catchments of precipitation (rain, snow, hail) as well as erodible sediments and provide fresh supplies of water, sand and silt to lands on their path (channels and flood plains) till they converge with another river, water body or sea. Sometime, although not often, they could go underground and disappear. In the process they have created eco-systems and habitats that have provided sustenance to a multitude of life forms, plants, animals and microbes.

To us humans, they have served as sites of early settlements, sources of supply of fresh water (both surface and ground), of food, transport, recreation and spiritual enrichment. Of late, they have also been meeting our domestic, industrial and farm needs of water and acting as carrier of our refuse, both solid and liquid.

Modern age has not been kind to the rivers. They have been dammed, diverted, channelized, encroached and polluted no end. Rivers, as ecosystems, have been poorly appreciated and hence legal measures for their protection and safety have been far and few.

The Indian sub-continent is blessed with 7 major rivers systems and more than 400 rivers. Many originate from glaciers (Himalayas) as well as forested catchments (highlands of central, western and eastern regions) and find their way either to the Bay of Bengal (east flowing rivers) or to the Arabian Sea (west flowing rivers). The Indian mythology and scriptures abound with references to rivers and most of them have been traditionally revered. Paradoxically most rivers in the country are today in bad shape. Bereft of their flows, dammed, channelized and their flood plains encroached or choked with waste, they present a pitiable state.

Launch of Ganga Action Plan (GAP) in 1984 and Yamuna Action Plan (YAP) in 1994 exemplified the state’s efforts at river restoration. Unfortunately over the decades the two action plans did not bring about the desired improvement in the health of these rivers, while the health of other rivers too began a downwards slide. Since 1980s there has been a nationwide generation of civil society consciousness for river/s safety and restoration followed by petitions, actions, agitations, protests, launch of court cases etc by various groups in different parts of the country. Beginning with protests against large dams, and problems associated with the rehabilitation of affected people, the civil society movement for rivers has progressed to tackling pollution, loss of biodiversity and rampant encroachments into river flood plains. How dammed and encroached rivers can prove devastating was witnessed in June 2013 in the state of Uttarakhand, when an extreme climatic event turned catastrophic and thousands of people lost their lives.

Over a period of time, people and groups in different parts of the country have gained useful knowledge, experience and skills with which they are trying to work for the revival and restoration of their rivers. There are also new groups that are emerging with a keenness to learn and practice.

The time is thus now ripe to organize a (possibly an annual) conclave, where river practitioners including scientists, experts, advocates, activists, river people, enthusiasts and policy makers could meet, share, exchange and deliberate on experiences and ideas for arriving at workable approaches and actions for rivers restoration.

Objective:

Mainstreaming the cause and campaign for river's restoration and conservation in the country by bringing together river experts, enthusiasts and decision makers at a common platform for engendering a cross learning of ideas, experiences and river restoration techniques

Planned outputs from the inaugural IRW:

- a) Launch of a National Charter for Rivers
- b) Launch of a National Forum for the restoration of Rivers
- c) Release of river related books & reports etc
- d) Institution and award of 'Bhagirath Samman' to 1) outstanding river researcher/advocate; 2) outstanding organization with a track record of rivers restoration/research/advocacy

Organizing consortium:

Group of NGOs, including INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art, Culture and Heritage), Toxics Link, SANDRP (South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People), WWF India, PEACE Institute Charitable Trust, led by Sri Ramaswamy R Iyer.

It is also planned to invite eminent river practitioners from different parts of the country to form an IRW National Advisory Group.

Place & Venue:

New Delhi (WWF India)

Duration:

4 days in the last week of November 2014.

Target participants:

River experts, activists, researchers, enthusiasts, community representatives, NGOs, media personnel and decision makers

Number of participants:

Around 100 out of which 40 shall be outstation invitees from different parts of the country.

Theme for the IRW:

"Rivers in Crisis"

Tentative program:

Day one: **Understanding Rivers** (Rivers as quintessential 'commons')

Day two/three: **Rivers Narratives** (Cross learnings through experience sharing)

Day four: **Rivers Futures** (Planning for future)

It is proposed that the event shall be '**web cast.**'

Time Lines:

January – March, 2014 : Planning meetings of the Consortium partners; Formation of Advisory Group; Formation of an expert committee to prepare the draft National Charter for Rivers; Formation of Jury and its terms of reference for the Bhagirath Samman; Finalisation of IRW budget and fund raising; Reservations of event venue/s and boarding, lodging arrangements.

April – June, 2014 : Identification, outreach and invites to participants; Planning / follow up meeting of Consortium partners; Communications (online) with the Advisory Group; Initial outreach to media; Long listing of Bhagirath Samman nominees;

July – September, 2014: Planning / follow up meetings of Consortium partners; preparation of event material/s; Finalisation of Bhagirath Samman nominees; Finalisation of draft National Charter for Rivers; Deadline for receipt of summaries of talks/presentations by the invited participants.

Oct – December, 2014: Planning / follow up meetings of Consortium partners; finalization of event materials; Media outreach; Holding of the event; Launch of National Forum for Rivers; Compilation of findings; Preparation of event report.