

ATREE — The Research Institution That Lives in the Forest

Most environmental research in India happens in the academy and stays there — published in journals, cited by other journals, read by other researchers. ATREE was explicitly designed to break this cycle. Founded in 1996 by ecologist Kamaljit S. Bawa, it was built on a specific an...

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The result, twenty-eight years later, is an institution that has discovered over 100 new species across India, published research cited in top international journals, run Community-based Conservation Centres in five Indian ecosystems, pioneered rights-based approaches to NTFP management, and trained a generation of scholars who go on to do the same. ATREE is simultaneously a university department, a field station, a community development organisation, and a policy advocacy body. This combination is rare enough in Indian civil society to merit understanding in detail.

Who They Are

ATREE — Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment — is based in Bangalore with research and field presence across the Western Ghats, Eastern Himalayas, and increasingly across India's diverse landscapes including grasslands, wetlands, forests, and peri-urban zones. The Department of Science and Technology has certified ATREE as a Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation — a recognition that places them alongside India's premier research institutions.

Their mission as stated: to generate rigorous interdisciplinary knowledge for achieving environmental conservation and sustainable development in a socially just manner, to enable the use of this knowledge by policy makers and society, and to train the next generation of scholars and leaders.

The phrase "socially just manner" is doing significant work in that mission statement. ATREE's environmental conservation is explicitly linked to the rights and livelihoods of communities who depend on the ecosystems being conserved. Conservation achieved by excluding communities is not conservation ATREE recognises as legitimate. Conservation that strengthens communities' rights over and stake in healthy ecosystems is.

The 100 New Species

Over the last twenty-eight years, ATREE researchers have discovered more than 100 new species across India. This is a striking figure — not because discovering species is the organisation's primary purpose, but because it reflects the depth of field engagement that underlies ATREE's work. You do not discover new species by reading existing literature. You discover them by spending years in specific ecosystems, building the botanical and zoological knowledge that recognises what is genuinely new.

The new species discoveries are a proxy for something more important: the quality of ecological knowledge ATREE has generated from sustained field presence in India's most biodiversity-rich landscapes.

Community-Based Conservation Centres

ATREE operates five Community-based Conservation Centres (CCCs) — field stations embedded in specific ecosystems that serve simultaneously as research hubs, community engagement spaces, and conservation education centres. The CCCs are in Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Tiger Reserve in Karnataka, Agasthyamalai in Tamil Nadu, Vembanad in Kerala, Male Mahadeshwara Hills in Karnataka, and Kanakapura in Karnataka.

Each CCC anchors long-term ecological monitoring, student and intern research, collaboration with communities on sustainable livelihoods, and conservation education. They are not temporary project offices. They are permanent institutional presences that accumulate ecological knowledge and community trust over decades — exactly the kind of institutional capital that a three-year project cycle cannot build.

The Soliga NTFP Pioneer

ATREE's most documented community engagement is with the Soliga indigenous community of the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Tiger Reserve in Karnataka. ATREE pioneered the legal recognition of the Soligas' access rights to forest and NTFP resources — community rights that predated the Forest Rights Act but that the FRA later enshrined in law. This work preceded and contributed to the policy framework that now applies across India.

Alongside rights recognition, ATREE built Soliga capacity for sustainable NTFP harvesting — conservation practices that maintain productivity rather than mine it. They established value-addition units for NTFPs, enabling Soliga families to earn significantly more from their forest produce by processing it beyond the raw material stage. The model combines rights recognition, ecological science, and economic development in a way that most conservation organisations choose only one or two of.

The Forests and Governance Programme

ATREE's Forests and Governance Programme focuses on improving forest governance in South Asia by studying the combination of governance regimes, economic policies, cultural changes, and biophysical measures that lead to sustainable, equitable, and livelihood-enhancing outcomes. The specific research areas: rights, institutions, and governance mechanisms; ecological and sustainable use of natural resources; and economic and cultural dependence on forests.

For Odisha's civil society — where forest rights, PESA implementation, and CFR claims are active programmes — ATREE's research outputs are directly relevant. The evidence on what governance conditions produce good forest outcomes is exactly what NGOs facilitating gram sabha forest rights decisions need.

The Training Mission

ATREE offers a unique interdisciplinary doctoral programme combining coursework and field research. The explicit goal: train the next generation of environmental leaders who can bridge ecological science, social science, and policy engagement.

The doctoral graduates from ATREE go on to become the researchers, policy advocates, and civil society leaders who carry the rigorous-science-plus-community-engagement approach into institutions across India and beyond. ATREE's training mission is its longest-term contribution to the environmental sector.

Contact and Further Reading

Website: atree.org | **For research partnerships and Knowledge Commons**

collaboration: contact via website

Key evidence:

- ATREE website: atree.org — programme descriptions, CCC locations, research areas
- Nature Index: ATREE's international research ranking — nature.com/nature-index
- CSRBox ATREE profile: documentation of Soliga NTFP rights work — csrbox.org
- GuideStar: ATREE institutional profile including 20-year geographic expansion documentation

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