



Gupteswar forest in Odisha declared as Bio-Diversity Heritage site

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The pristine Gupteswar Forest, adjacent to Gupteswar Shiva temple in Odisha's Koraput district has been declared as the fourth Biodiversity-Heritage Site (BHS) of the state, a government notification said. The site is spread over 350 hectares of demarcated area. Along with its sacred grooves traditionally worshipped by the local community, the site is bestowed with a wide range of flora and fauna, the notification said.

The biodiversity inventory and survey conducted by the Odisha Biodiversity Board shows the presence of at least 608 faunal species including 28 species of mammals, 188 species of birds, 18 species of amphibia, 48 species of reptiles, 45 species of [piscines](#), 141 species of butterflies, 43 species of moths, 41 species of odonates, 30 species of spiders, six species of scorpion, and 20 species of lower invertebrates, it said.

Significant faunal species like mugger crocodile, kanger valley rock gecko, sacred Grove Bush Frog, and avifauna like black baza, Jerdon's baza, Malabar trogon, common hill myna, white-bellied woodpecker, and banded bay cuckoo and others have also been documented.

The limestone caves of Gupteswar are adorned with eight species of bats out of the total 16 species found in southern Odisha. Among them, two species *Hipposideros galeritus* and *Rhinolophus rouxii* are under the near-threatened category of the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

This site also has a rich floral diversity embracing 182 species of trees, 76 species of shrubs, 177 species of herbs, 69 species of climbers, 14 species of orchids and threatened medicinal plants like Indian trumpet tree, Indian snakeroot, Cumbi gum tree, Garlic pear tree, Chinese fever vine, Rohituka tree, Jodpakli, Indian jointfir, a number of wild crop relatives of ginger and turmeric.

In addition to this, many agriculturally and industrially important micro-organisms have also been indicated to exist in this primeval ecosystem.

Declaration of Gupteswar as BHS while boosting the cultural attachment of people with this forest will also lead to the conservation of its precious biodiversity. With this declaration, the state has now four BHSs. The other three are Mandasaru BHS in Kandhamala district, Mahendragiri BHS in Gajapati district, and Gandhamardan BHs in Bargarh and Bolangir districts.

The state government has asked the Odisha Biodiversity Board to prepare a long-term plan for intensive conservation and development of these sites through direct participation of the local communities. An amount of Rs 35 lakh has been provided for preparation of an action plan and awareness-building activities in the localities, an official said.

The nature lovers, intelligentsia, and local populace while welcoming such a decision of the government expressed satisfaction that this forest in the long run would add to the livelihood of the people through eco-tourism and minor forest produce.

Chairperson of the Board Meeta Biswal, and Member Secretary Nihar Ranjan Nayak congratulated the bio-diversity management committee of Haladikunda (Gupteswar) Gram Panchayat along with scientists and researchers of the board for this achievement.

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