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VRINDAVAN CONSERVATION - A PERSPECTIVE

A REPORT BY
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Radhe, Radhe.

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Abstract

Title : *“Vrindavan Conservation - A Perspective”*

A Report compiled by Joshua Nash

April 1998, WWF-India, New Delhi.

Introduction : The township of Vrindavan 150 km south east of Delhi is characterised by a rapid increase in population, unplanned urbanisation and many environmental problems. Poor infrastructure, the lack of public sanitation and other public facilities and increased pressure from religious tourism has taken its toll on the town. WWF-India has been present in Vrindavan since November 1991, when the Vrindavan Forest Revival Project began. Then in 1994, the project name was changed to the Vrindavan Conservation Project to reflect its focus on the entire environment of Vrindavan.

Objective : To collate and summarise data from WWF's project work in Vrindavan with respect to the three main focus areas: education, community and plantation. Successes and possible problems with programmes are outlined. Research into WWF's involvement with schools and community is done using an active dialogue of interviews and questionnaires.

Summary : Background information is given into the author's first impressions of the Vrindavan environment and how they were different from expected. A brief summary of the environmental problems facing Vrindavan is given followed by a description of the major stakeholders and players in Vrindavan conservation. The project objectives are outlined as recognised by WWF International.

The education programme is discussed with particular reference to number of schools conducting environmental education in Vrindavan. General focuses of environmental education are discussed and an in-depth interpretation of an environmental questionnaire distributed to 29 school children is given. A description of WWF-India's Riverwatch programme is presented with the aim of demonstrating practical learning of skills within environmental education in two Vrindavan schools. Nature Clubs, an integral part of the

VCP's education programme are described and evaluated within the whole context of the education division.

The main focus of community awareness programmes are described as too is the effect they have on the community as a whole. Plantation areas are listed as too are the types of plants and trees planted and distributed. Some positives and negatives of the plantation programme are outlined and the specific example of the Kumbha Mela site is given as an example of a setback felt by the VCP and the community as a whole.

To aim to achieve a broad perspective of the conservation efforts in Vrindavan, descriptions of the organisations Friends of Vrindavan and Vraj Seva Mandal are given. This is complemented by the results of a questionnaire distributed to religious and community people of Vrindavan. This leads to the penultimate statement made by the author that the future of Vrindavan conservation lies in:-

1. successful and thoughtful plantation
2. cooperation, liaising and active dialogue between government and non-government organisations.

"The cosmic religious experience is the strongest and noblest mainspring of scientific research....During that vision, in a clarified and unified view of the universe, I saw the pattern and integration of all things....And that is when peace came, and that is when conviction came, and with these things came an almighty calm that nothing could ever shake again."

- Albert Einstein

1. Introduction

The previous excerpt captures the essence of Vrindavan conservation. Based on religious experience, a scientific, holistic and integrated view of the universe is seen which is peaceful and calm yet strong and unshakable. So what does this mean? I would posit it meaning that we should facilitate the conservation and preservation of Nature with the result being peace and direction for the human race through the medium of religion.

Vrindavan, considered by some as a "human sanctuary", a place of timeless religious heritage and culture, is where one would hope this integration of religion and conservation has taken place, is taking place and continues to take place. This is the environment where Krishna spent his childhood pastimes. He spent time in its natural forests and pastures, herding his cows and dancing and playing with his boy and girl friends. These places and their innate inspirational character are timeless and eternal. Yet today these forests and indeed the whole environmental state of Vrindavan is seriously under threat. Therefore as human beings, Nature's special creatures, we have a duty to protect this sacred land of Vrindavan for the sake of preserving the sanctity of Nature and religiosity of humanity at large.

My first contact with Vrindavan was through the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). It was where Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, displayed his amorous childhood pastimes. A magical land of great culture and religiosity - a place where cows roamed and Nature was free and peaceful. People would come here to visit sacred and holy sites, speak and learn about Krishna and to meditate. On finding out that the World Wide Fund for Nature - India (hereafter referred to as WWF) had a conservation project in Vrindavan, I had a desire to come to this holy land and see these things first hand. However, my first impressions were not what has been described above.

My first remembrance of Vrindavan was that of traffic congestion on the Mathura Road. Countless tempos, buses and motorcycles, seen through a haze of dust, pumping out thick black smoke and obnoxiously loud noise. These vehicles, incident on the road for the most part of the day, made WWF's office situation far from one of peace and tranquillity. More positively however, WWF's presence was felt with trees, sign boards and tree guards of the like I had never seen before. It was apparent on traveling to the older regions of the town that municipal planning and infrastructure were massive problems with dire environmental

consequences, as too was over development in the more recent areas such as Raman Reti. The population of Vrindavan was obviously in excess of its holding capacity. This was expressed by the water and waste management, or lack of it, and the congestion of humans, animals and inanimate objects. Drains, sometimes running on both sides of the street, carry filthy, putrid water from households and storefronts out of sight but not out of mind. These drains, if not blocked by some mechanism such as solid waste, sludge or the resident pigs, are directly incident on the Holy River Yamuna, without any primary treatment whatsoever. The results can be seen along her banks. Polythene bags, countless other wastes and a stench which is unforgettable. I later found out that there is no landfill site in Vrindavan. That is, a place where waste is properly disposed of, or at least in the best possible way considering the circumstances. This really puzzled me. So too did the lack of rubbish bins. How is it that people can help the environment of Vrindavan if not given the resources and opportunity to do so? Piles of garbage, consisting of banana plates, clay tea pots and anything else left on the wayside is either left to rot, be burnt or rummaged by the cows, pigs and monkeys or to simply blow away at the mercy of the elements. Vrindavan as I found was not the place I had imagined it to be.

All this aside, there are and have been many positive points in regard to Vrindavan's environment and its conservation. WWF is near enough to a household name so on describing my reasons for being in Vrindavan, people were quite recogniscent and interested. Community involvement is noticeable with direct plant distribution and an influx of local people such as administrators, teachers, students and Nature club members at the WWF office. However, it is felt by various community members, some WWF staff and myself that more could have been achieved in the seven years of WWF's presence in Vrindavan. This is the result of a number of reasons hopefully to be pin-pointed in this discussion. The lacking of a document culminating all of WWF's work in Vrindavan calls forward such documentation. Furthermore, a holistic, all-inclusive perspective of Vrindavan conservation and its various players such as active Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and their roles is also lacking. Negativity of both local and district government is also a big reason. It is hoped that this document offers something to all involved in Vrindavan conservation in the past and present and future focuses will be proposed, based upon an active community dialogue.

2. Vrindavan: Some background, much of which is no longer in the foreground.

On searching for background documentation on Vrindavan conservation, there was certainly no shortage. Therefore, it must be said from the outset that this discussion is one not based around religious dialogue. Rather it is a presentation of "hard" data and a gauge of community opinion from various sources concerning WWF's programme areas. However, it is certainly necessary for some background information to be given. As Shri Sevak Sharan, the coordinator of the Vrindavan Conservation Project (VCP) described to me: "Conservation without religion is not conservation and religion without conservation is not religion".

Vrindavan is a cultural and religious town 150 kilometers south-east of Delhi situated on the banks of the Holy River Yamuna. It is the centre of *Vraj*, the birth place and area in which Krishna, the Supreme Lord, spent his childhood and adolescence. It is a semi-rural town with a population of approximately 1,00,000 and a yearly influx of pilgrims of approximately 50,00,000. As mentioned previously, municipal planning and infrastructure is poor, leading to chronic sewage, sanitation and groundwater problems. Although environmental consciousness, caring and cleanliness is an integral part of traditional thinking and value systems, these have become absent in many people's daily lives, especially in the past few decades.

It seems rather ironic that although Vrindavan is the site of the most sacred Nature, presently it is in an advanced stage of environmental decay. Famous for its forest, bird and animal life, the pressure of housing and higher standards of housing construction and unnecessary tree felling has certainly changed this. The reduction in small animal life and bird life, especially peacocks, and an increase in the population of Rhesus monkeys, otherwise known as "Monkey Menace", has directly been the result of the development of Vrindavan. The human being, the only creature who is aware of right and wrong, has done wrong in Vrindavan. Regulatory action is necessary and this is what WWF's VCP attempted and is attempting to do.

A list briefly explaining the environmental problems faced in Vrindavan is given below followed by a description of the major players and stakeholders in Vrindavan conservation:-

1. Destruction of traditional forest cover, plant life and degradation of soil quality.
2. Contamination of the Yamuna River, Bathing Ghats, groundwater and water shortages in Summer.
3. High levels of rubbish pollution, complicated by the lack of a landfill site; untreated sewage and open sanitation problems.
4. Problems with overpopulation of cows, pigs, monkeys and dogs.
5. Poor sense of hygiene, health and environmental values; low quality and standard of education; contemporary education poor with almost no contemporary knowledge of environment with children, adults and teachers, although traditional knowledge is high.
6. Poor and/or old housing facilities due to low incomes of residents and municipality.
7. Poor roads, lack of recreation facilities such as parks.
8. A general and progressive isolation of religious ideals from everyday life.

Before considering those who have something to gain or lose from the Vrindavan environment, a conversation I had with some people makes us aware with what we are up against. On meeting some Western pilgrims in Vrindavan, I was asked what the reasons for my stay were. Describing my association with WWF, they then proceeded to explain to me that this was nice but that "what we see around us is all temporary" and that we should make a "Vrindavan environment in our heart". My understanding is actually not this. Vrindavan is an eternal place, both physically and spiritually. How can we make a divine environment in our heart with such a filthy external Vrindavan? If we think of this as a temporary place and merely concentrate on practicing spiritual life without thought at all for the environment of Vrindavan, perhaps it will be that there will be no Ashram or temple for pilgrims to come to. No place to practice spiritual life. This, I feel, is a common preconception of many outsiders coming to Vrindavan. We can take, but what do we give?

A compilation of the stakeholders in the conservation of Vrindavan starting from the most proximate to the most remote must begin with its residents and the city of Vrindavan as a whole. It is their own backyard. They will benefit and suffer the greatest from the environmental conservation and destruction of Vrindavan respectively. Within this group, it

is the younger generation, especially uneducated children, which have the most to lose. These are the people who need to be advised that their environmental behaviour is not appropriate; that it is destructive. There is definitely difficulty in trying to advise the older generation of the community, again particularly uneducated persons as old habits are hard to break. The residents are the group of people which are actually least likely to change. How can these people change their ways such as passing faeces and urine in waterways and dumping garbage on the street unless alternatives are given? Along side this is the question of money. Many of these people are not able to provide the finances to be environmentally sound or conscious. Thus, the next major group of players must take up this responsibility. These include relatively financially sound residents, local, state and federal government and relevant NGOs. This is where local people, temples, Ashrams, NGOs and municipality must lead by example both financially and in practice. Then in turn, international NGOs like ISKCON, WWF, Friends of Vrindavan (FoV), Sulabh and others could come forward to assist in the conservation movement. This is where *sewa* is for these players. Unmotivated service to the Holy Dhama of Vrindavan. Ultimately the beneficiaries would again be the residents. However, it is the responsibility of the benefactor bodies that delivery of services to the beneficiaries is done properly and efficiently. It is apparent that some delivery of services has been there in the past. Plant distribution programmes, plantation in houses and Ashrams and street cleaning no doubt have direct consequences. But considering the amount of time spent by WWF in Vrindavan and observing the results, it would be naive to suggest that delivery of services has been 100% effective.

The least proximal of all players by means of physicality and direct potential loss are the many pilgrims to Vrindavan each year. As visitors, they have an immediate responsibility to Vrindavan's residents and environment and to themselves to live and stay in harmony with the environment. This can and must be done at many levels. From the grass roots level, this can include limiting the use of polythane bags when purchasing food and attempting to reduce one's waste disposal in inappropriate areas and by inappropriate means. As a "Western pilgrim", I myself found this extremely difficult. The lack of rubbish disposal units and the persistence of street vendors to put even the smallest purchased item into a polythane bag demonstrates the need for education. This can be done in a number of ways. Encourage the use of cloth shopping bags by pilgrims and residents, encourage street vendors to use *lifafa* (paper bags) and also to minimise the use of polythane bags. This has been attempted

and encouraged by FoV. On the macro level, it is the pilgrims responsibility to inform others of the problems associated with coming to and staying in Vrindavan and not do as was done to myself by other Western pilgrims. We all have a responsibility to Vrindavan. Actually, it is our duty to humanity.

3. WWF's relationship with Vrindavan

The Vrindavan Conservation Project is an integral part of WWF's programme on "Religion and Conservation". It was designed to emphasize the fundamental link between Nature conservation and Vrindavan's religious traditions. Initiated in November 1991 as the Vrindavan Forest Revival Project, with a name change to the Vrindavan Conservation Project in 1994 to reflect a more holistic focus, it was directly the result of a commitment engineered by WWF International between major religious and conservation bodies in 1986 at Assisi, Italy. The mission which emerged was to help save the world's environment through the Earth's sacred beliefs and traditions which advocate ecological principles. It is a model project for WWF - India, WWF International and any conservation organisation for that matter. This was probably the first such project ever started representing the alliance of religion and conservation.

The project's main mission was to ascertain how sacred ecological beliefs and traditions in Vrindavan's religious community could help contemporary conservation efforts. Furthermore, it aimed to create a "people based" conservation project, one with active community involvement to arrest Vrindavan's deteriorating environment. From a number of different sources, various objectives were described but a summation of the major objectives of the project can be drawn:-

1. To promote an awareness and understanding of the environmental values contained in the Hindu tradition and to provide a practical example of Hindu conservation efforts as part of the WWF Conservation and Religion network.
2. To involve and mobilise the community in green cover restoration by distribution of trees and plants and demonstration of tree plantation in various areas such as roads, parks, houses, ashrams and the Parikrama path which encircles Vrindavan.
3. To gain for the VCP, the support and active participation of the community, in a manner which enables them to carry on working on the restoration and protection of Vrindavan's natural environment after the duration of the current project.

4. To develop educational programmes for schools and the youth of Vrindavan, aimed at developing their awareness and understanding of environmental practices linked to Hindu religious tradition resulting in their practical action to protect the natural environment of Vrindavan.
5. To train educators to carry on this process in the future and to generate education tools and packages for this purpose.
6. To publicise the above activities and raise funds to support them.

These objectives can be divided into two major project areas: awareness programmes and plantation programmes.

4. Awareness Programmes

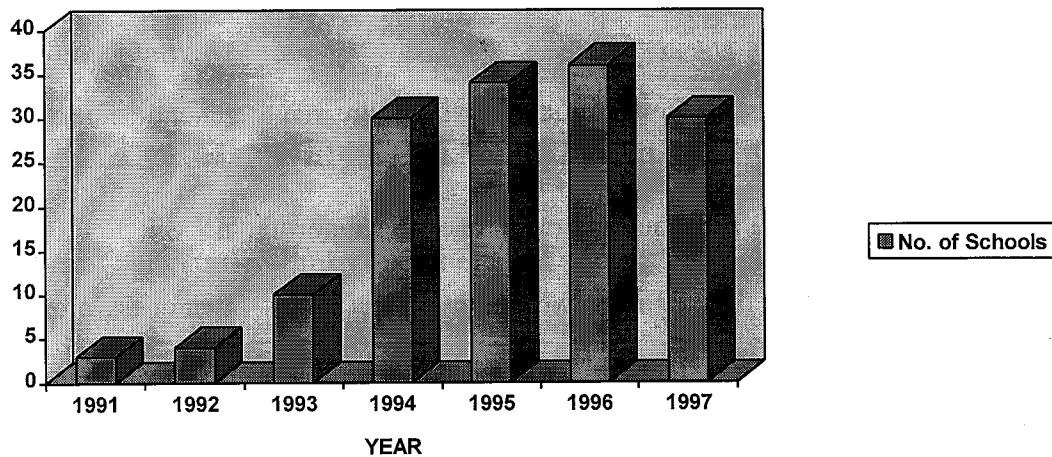
WWF's involvement in educating the community has two major focuses:- educational institutions and the community at large. These will be dealt with independently.

4.1 Awareness Programmes in Educational Institutions

According to the *Proceedings from the Seminar on Education and Awareness* held at WWF - India in November 1994, the aim of formal education should be "to prepare young people into becoming environmentally conscious citizens" (p. 17). This environmental education (EE) should be included at all levels of schooling even into tertiary level. This has many facets. Initially teacher training must be undertaken, then incorporation of suitable EE material into the current curriculums, then the follow up of specific programmes such as seminars, lectures and field trips with the interaction of environmental organisations. Education programmes have been an integral part of WWF's work in Vrindavan and without doubt they have proven to be successful. But environmental dialogue with the religious and cultural community has not yet started.

The number of schools and thus the number of school children involved in EE has steadily increased over the evolution of the VCP. This information is given overleaf:-

FIGURE 1 - NUMBER OF VRINDAVAN SCHOOLS CONDUCTING ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION (1991-1997)



The total number of schools in Vrindavan is 48, with 21 being government and 27 being private. In 1996, EE featured in three out of every four schools in Vrindavan. The fall in the number of schools from 1996 to 1997 was the direct result of school closures, not a withdrawal of EE. The exact number of school children engaged in EE at each school or for the whole of Vrindavan was not available at the time of reporting and it would be difficult to ascertain such a figure. However, it is speculated to be in the vicinity of thousands. Schools are divided into four sectors each with eight or nine schools. In the years 1995, 1996 and 1997, the sectors were *Kalindhi, Kadamba, Gaumata and Peacock*. One person, generally an environmental studies teacher from a school within that sector is appointed by WWF to supervise the happenings of their sector's schools, give lectures guidance and report back to WWF. This has proven successful in the past with liaising exposing problem areas and the needs of the school community. The training of teachers in EE is also very important with eight teachers from primary, junior and secondary levels being trained in the VCP's seven year history.

The teaching of the EE programmes is through various means. These range from cultural programmes incorporating environmental drama, folk dance and songs, video displays, plantation programmes in schools and other areas, "Riverwatch" programme, environmental quizzes, competitions, poster making, field trips, teacher training seminars and formal environmental examinations. It is certainly the case that certain schools have a stronger representation of EE in their curriculum than others. Porter Buchard Methodist English School (PBM) is a relatively large school which does have a strong programme of

environmental studies as a result of its direct association with WWF. It has been taught for about eight to ten years and is taught from Classes IV onwards. On speaking with Mr. Lesley Clarence, the main EE teacher at PBM, insights were given into the background and methods of teaching EE at PBM.

4.1.1 Focus of Environmental Education at PBM School

Awareness to environmental problems and what can be done about them is the principle emphasis of the education programme at PBM. The school nursery gives practical application of this awareness with children being involved in different tasks such as watering, weeding and cleaning. In a different area of concern, the "Riverwatch" programme, an initiative of the WWF-India's Secretariat, gives further practical application through testing the water quality of the Yamuna River at Vrindavan, with dialogue given on the problems associated with its various contaminants and hazards (background on the Riverwatch programme will be subsequently presented). The methods of theoretical teaching is through various means such as those listed previously but at this point there is no formal syllabus or text for EE. Nonetheless, the use of various sources and texts has proven to be very effective, a conclusion drawn from the results of an environmental questionnaire conducted at PBM.

4.1.2. Results from environmental questionnaire distributed to Porter Bucharth Methodist English School

The questionnaire was distributed to 29 students from Classes VII to X, with the average age being 12.7 years. It should be stated that this was not a standardised questionnaire with the desired outcome being strong scientific data. The wording of questions was again not standardised, with various questions insinuating answers or subtly moving the responder in the wanted direction. However, as a gauge cum survey of the attitudes of the students in regards to the environment, certain environmental behaviours and WWF's association with the Vrindavan environment, it has proven invaluable. Key questions will be outlined with an attempt to collate a general student response to each question (see Appendix A for a copy of questionnaire sheet).

Description of trigger terms generally achieved consensus. "Environment" was described as one's surroundings. "Conservation" was depicted as the preservation and

protection of the environment. "Trees" were seen as our friends, without which we cannot live and breathe properly. "Pollution", "Garbage" and "Cruelty to animals" were all generally seen in a negative way as problems which are harmful for the environment and often interrelated. When asked, "How would you like to help make the environment better?", responses were generally of two kinds:

1. To plant more trees.
2. To make others aware of the problems associated with pollution, tree felling and the importance of a clean and pollution-free environment.

It is very encouraging to see these responses. They can be directly extrapolated to the two major focuses of the VCP: plantation and community awareness/involvement. Three questions aimed at describing the different types of pollution, the pollution found in the river at Vrindavan and how pollution occurs yielded varied yet comprehensive answers. This I would suggest is the result of theoretical education, practical and first-hand education such as the "Riverwatch" programme and day-to-day living in Vrindavan respectively.

It is the last two questions which WWF must take heed from and place in the context of future education and plantation programmes in Vrindavan. "Do you think that WWF has been good at helping the environment of Vrindavan?" conveyed a very positive response. The plantation work, awareness programmes and general presence of WWF in Vrindavan was commended. WWF has had a long and in-depth association with PBM school so it is good to see this in student's responses. It is the response to the last question, "What else could WWF be doing for the environment?", which really gives some food for thought. Almost unanimously, the consensus was that WWF should be opening more nurseries for the procreation and propagation of various trees and plants. Although some did say that more trees should be planted, it was the calling for development of more nurseries by the students which stood out in the responses. This fundamental point will be discussed subsequently with further insight from particular community members as to where the future lies for the VCP. There is no doubt that gathering this data was a valuable exercise.

4.2. WWF - India's *Riverwatch* Programme in the Vrindavan area

WWF's Riverwatch is a water quality monitoring programme aimed at schools and community. Each Riverwatch group identifies a suitable stretch of river and designs a sampling programme with the help of WWF. Its objective is to provide results that are analysed and an action plan drawn by the group to persuade local authorities to undertake relevant measures for improvement of water quality. Riverwatch has been undertaken by two schools in the Vrindavan area: PBM and Delhi Public School in Mathura.

4.2.1. Riverwatch programme for PBM School and Delhi Public School

Ten students from PBM School between the ages of 12 to 14 years took measurements on four different dates and at three different locations. The locations of measurement were:-

- Upstream (U) - Jugal Ghat
- Midstream (M) - Keshi Ghat
- Downstream (D) - Akrur Ghat

The dates of the measurement were 18th December 1996 and 15th February, 30th April and 31st August 1997.

Ten students Delhi Public School in Mathura took measurements on four different dates and at three different locations. The locations of measurement were:-

- Upstream (U) - Masani Ghat
- Midstream (M) - Virmani Ghat
- Downstream (D) - Gokul Baisaj

The dates of the measurement were February, 30th April, 30th September and 25th December 1997.

The Riverwatch programme has created awareness regarding making the River Yamuna pollution-free amongst these two schools. It has helped students practically apply the knowledge and principles learnt in the classroom into the field situation.

4.3 Nature Clubs in Vrindavan

The Nature Clubs of India movement (NCI) is a youth programme coordinated by WWF - India in Delhi intended to indoctrinate an appreciation of Nature among youth and to motivate concern for participating in conservation action. Members of Nature Clubs (NCs) are generally school and college students.

The role of a NC is to spread conservation awareness in the geographical area in which it is based through activities such as awareness campaigns, exhibitions, rallies and Nature walks. There are 12 NCs in the Vrindavan area and their presence is definitely felt at the VCP and throughout Vrindavan itself. A list of the clubs and their activities is given below:

Name	Started (1997)	No. of Members	Ages (years)	Activities
Surabhi	January	10	13 - 18	maintenance of trees, parks and gardens
Durga	January	25	10 - 13	production of posters, poems and dramas on how we can use waste materials
Awareness	March	25	10 - 12	four programmes per year based around waste material and plantation
Peacock	May	8	11 - 12	reusing and recycling of waste material
Tiger	June	17	11 - 12	watching certain animals and birds and their habitats
Kadambha	August	10	12 - 13	"making green campus" programme, health and nutrition programmes
Army (Mathura)	April	15	15 - 17	water conservation
Shyama	July	16	8 - 12	tree adoption schemes, health and environment
Solar	October	10	17 - 18	cleaning and greening of Vrindavan, collection of polythane bags, poster making
Creation	July	10	17 - 23	exhibiting Nature paintings, plantation and cleaning programme in Man Sarovar.
Stars	June	12	11 - 12	seed and polythane bag collection
Earth	September	10	15 - 20	conserving sacred ponds and waters

On discussing the relative successes of different NCs with various NC leaders, responses were mixed. This success can fluctuate. If one person has been motivated by the work of a NC, it has been a success. This can then have a snowball effect with others following suit and other areas becoming the focus of conservation work. An example of "hard" success is with Solar NC which feel that they have been 50% effective with the case of reducing polythane bag usage and the recycling of these bags and garbage.

The year 1997 definitely proved to be successful with the opening of these 12 NCs. They will continue to consolidate and work on their own and in conjunction with projects of WWF. The fact that nearly all NC members are students puts time restraints on the involvement with their respective club. However, it is a success that people are becoming aware about the importance of the environment, whether it be merely the members of the NCs themselves. If they can just influence someone, their job has been very successful. The NC programme is one of the success stories of the education wing of the VCP.

4.4 Awareness Programmes in Community

As a community based project, the VCP intended to gain community-based support and involvement in various environmental projects and programmes. The types of awareness programmes have developed over the years and many of them are incorporated with plantation and school-based education programmes. These include teacher training workshops, environmental rallies, *Rasa leela* and other types of environmental drama, exhibitions of environmental art, school and college cleaning and greening programmes, field trips, seminars on water pollution, video shows, prayer lectures, meetings with teachers and Nature clubs and environmental art and cartoon competitions.

But the role of the community at large is of utmost importance to sustain most of the programmes initiated by WWF. The thrust of the community-based programmes of the VCP is to put onus on the community to become more and more involved in the environmental matters and conservation of Vrindavan. On being asked, "Are they willing to do anything?", within a very limited educated community, the answer seemed to be yes with some teachers and local members such as teachers and temple priests becoming involved in various plantation, cleaning and seminar programmes. However, once these people had been targetted and support received, the focus should then have shifted to a broader cross-section of the community comprising of big priests, big Ashram wallahs, big *Rasa leela* troupes and

holy men delivering sermons on scriptures. These are the people who have a strong influence on a large number of people. This is definitely a future focus of the VCP.

So the objective of establishing a community-based programme has been in some ways successful with the VCP. Nevertheless the establishment of such a programme where the community "takes the reins" so to speak with the VCP "spreading its wings" in other directions has not. This could be due to a number of reasons which I am not really in a position to comment on, due to the fact that I only witnessed the happenings of the VCP for a short time. But for the VCP to flourish in the future, successful interaction with the community and the involvement and cooperation of all the people, especially those with their "feet in the ground" in areas such as plantation, cleaning and recycling is the only way.

Now after a series of meetings arranged by Coordinator Shri Sevak Sharan, a community conservation forum has been registered on 30/3/98. As a public charitable trust with seven local trustees on board, it is assisted by nearly 30 members in an advisory council represented by local NGOs and individuals. This local body will make sure of active community involvement in ways of generating the finances, maintenance of work done by WWF thus far and to interact with the larger section of the religious and spiritual community.

Another important aspect of community involvement could be through the recent association with the State Institute of Rural Development to involve the rural population of Vrajbhoomi in the conservation movement. This is in accordance with WWF-India's Mission: "The promotion of Nature conservation and environmental protection as the basis for sustainable and equitable development".

4.5 Public hearing on environment and development

A public hearing on environment and development was held in Vrindavan on 16th September 1995. This is a reflection of WWF's approach of networking with NGOs and institutions for implementation of its programmes. This also highlights the focus on community participation for field level conservation activity.

This very important event generated interest amongst a large number of people and institutions. This can be seen from the list of participant organisations. Few of them are WWF-India, People's Commission on Environment and Development (PCED), Shri Chaitanya Prema Samsthana, District Magistrate of Mathura, Mathura Vrindavan Development Authority (MVDA), Municipal Councillor, Sulabh and Mathura Refineries.

4.6 Concluding remark for awareness programmes

The education institution programme is a long term programme which will show its results after a long time. However, it is not the children and younger population but the elders of the community who are more responsible for the deterioration of the environment. Awareness programmes in community focussed on this population did not create the required impact and this was the first and immediate impact needed.

5. Plantation Programmes

WWF's relationship with Vrindavan began with a very strong emphasis on plantation. The major focus of the Vrindavan Forest Revival Programme was the restoration of the sacred Parikrama pilgrimage path around the town. Since then, plantation has expanded greatly and there is almost no area in Vrindavan spared from the influence of WWF. However, although many plants and trees have been planted, it is actually the survival rate of these which is paramount. Reporting from the July 1997 - December 1997 period put success rate of plantations in the Parikrama path at 90% and at sacred groves 70%. This being the case, an alive tree does not necessarily mean a healthy tree and therefore the size and the micro-environment of the tree also must be considered.

WWF has plantations in the following areas of Vrindavan:

- Parikrama Path
- Mathura - Vrindavan Road
- Gandhi Road
- Kailash Colony
- Mathura Roadways Workshop
- Raal village
- Narad Kund
- Nandagaon
- Madhav Van (and Madhav Van behind Sripada Baba's Vraj Academy)
- Rang Ji Mandir
- Yugal Ghat
- Bharat Seva Shramsangh

The following trees are planted and distributed by WWF in Vrindavan, some of which are considered sacred by the local community, for example Kadamba, Tamal-etc. Around 30 other varieties of trees listed during this period were as follows: Arjun, Siraskawa, Kathagon, Kanji, Papadi, Neem, Sweet Neem, Shisham, Blackberry, Maulshri, Gulmohar, Amaltas, Mango, Guava, Pomegranate, Amla, Belpatra, Falsa, Rose, Kateli Champa, Elephant's Palm, Raibel, Hibiscus, Sadabahar, Rajani Gandha, Money plant, Chuka Palm, Creeper, Chhuimui and Night Queen.

Trees are also planted in Ashrams, temples and schools in Vrindavan. Ten nurseries have been established. These include four school nurseries, one temple nursery, three Ashram nurseries, one village nursery and one main office nursery. In all, about 1,50,000 trees have been planted under the VCP Programme since inception.

The impact of plantation on the environment of Vrindavan is supposed to strengthen the community's values and traditions since Lord Krishna was closely associated with the natural environment. To some extent, the community has upheld these traditions but on the whole they have not yet been able to rise to the occasion.

On travelling the various areas of plantation in Vrindavan, there is a mixed reaction. I only saw one instance where a tree or a group of trees were looked after directly by one or a group of community members. Of course, this would definitely not be an isolated example and one would have to look deeper into this. However this was the only one which came to my eyes and it is these impressions which do count. Even after the large scale undertaking of plantation, the plantation programme has not had the maximum effect expected from the amount of trees planted. Metal and bamboo tree guards are removed by miscreants, new plants are eaten by monkeys and cows and watering is either neglected or totally absent, thus resulting in a high mortality rate. Some future direction in this regard is subsequently given in the discussion section with religious and community members.

An example where municipality, community and WWF failed with respect to plantation was earlier this year with the preparation for the Kumbha Mela on the Yamuna River Bank at Vrindavan. Over 900 trees were cut from Keshi Ghat to Durgapuram. Of these, 278 fully grown trees were felled and 300 premature trees planted by WWF in the years 1993 up to 1997. Iron tree guards, the property of WWF were also destroyed and stolen from the area. This caused a great dissatisfaction and shock within the community. But according to an assurance given by Swami Maheshanand, a community leader and A.K.

Singh, Secretary of the MVDA to Shri Sevak Sharan, Coordinator of WWF-Vrindavan, these “unuseful trees” were cut solely for the purpose of clearing and levelling the area to make way for the Kumbh. This rather weak and funny excuse was not believed by the people who know that these very sacred trees give shade, fruit and pleasure and in no particular way did they interfere with the Kumbh site. On the contrary, the site is now a wasteland devoid of all trees and shrubs. This has definitely been an eye-opener for WWF and the community of Vrindavan. If this is the way in which the MVDA, one of the major district administrative bodies and one you would hope is looking after natural and cultural development is going to treat its land, then we really have to think about the future welfare of the Vrindavan conservation movement.

6. Friends of Vrindavan (FoV)

In trying to give a broad perspective of the conservation efforts in Vrindavan, it is important to include the work of FoV. FoV is an NGO which has supported the WWF VCP project for the past 4 years. Started in the United Kingdom by Ranchor Prime, FoV's aims are “to preserve and enhance the sacred forests and ecology of Vrindavan in order to protect its culture and traditional way of life for the general good of the community”. Educating the general public, in the UK and India, particularly in Vrindavan and the Vraj region, by and through improving the environment and ecology of the sacred forests of Vrindavan is fundamentally what FoV is about. Teaching by example.

The first year of FoV India has been a successful one. FoV's presence is felt throughout Vrindavan and Secretary Michael Duffy hopes that this will only snowball in the future. “The scale of the environmental crisis here in Vrindavan is one of many, many thousands around the globe. It just so happens that I live in Vrindavan,” says Michael. “We employ 30 people now to clean the streets and we have been concentrating on a sacred grove called Man Sarovar which is a lake sanctuary with vibrant bird life which we cleared of water hyacinth and helped rejuvenate”. FoV is waiting to “spread its wings” so to speak. But to do this, more community involvement is needed. For this to happen, municipality have to play their part by giving “power to the people” - providing better facilities to the public and leading by example. This is where the municipality of Vrindavan has failed in the past. *Vraj Seva Mandal*, a national NGO core group created by FoV is attempting to change this.

7. Vraj Seva Mandal (VSM)

VSM has grown out of the recognition that one organisation alone cannot take on the challenge to recreate Vraj as a model pilgrimage region and achieve results on a large scale. VSM is a pooling of resources and expertise from a number of different partners focussing on the conservation, planning and development of the region. A cooperative coexistence where accurate and comprehensive data and resources can be gathered into a simple nodal point will create an active forum where constructive interaction with municipality and government can take place. The larger the representation, the more leverage VSM has.

At present, the partners of VSM are:

- ARC
- FoV
- Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA)
- Indian Oil Corporation (IOC)
- Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH)
- Society for Promotion of Wastelands Development (SPWD)
- Sulabh International
- WWF- India
- State Rural Development Institute (SIRD)

So this is the future of Vraj and Vrindavan conservation. Cooperation. But how is it that it will be achieved? The success of VSM will rest on the ability of all these partners to coordinate an active dialogue and lobby government and municipality based on the needs of the people and the land of Vraj. It is generally accepted that this cooperation is welcomed in by the community. Let us hope that it will be there and will continue to be there in the future.

8. Questionnaire distributed to religious and active community persons of Vrindavan

A final task in the compilation of this report was the collection of information from important religious and community persons via the medium of a comprehensive, in-depth questionnaire. This certainly did not prove to be an easy assignment. Of the 16 questionnaires distributed,

only nine were completed and returned. Of these nine, one was in Hindi so this left eight in a language which could be used for reporting. A copy of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix B. Questionnaires were completed by the following people:

- Srivatsa Goswami - Active community member in environment and conservation of Vrindavan
- Mahaman dasa - Temple President, International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Vrindavan
- Padmanabh Goswami - Priest from Radha Raman Mandir
- Dr. Y.N. Gupta - Local medical practioner
- Bhakti Visash Padmanabha Swami - Sannyasi
- M.R. Virmani - Media person
- Robyne Beeche - Friends of Vrindavan
- Lesley Clarence - Environmental studies teacher from PBM School

It was agreed quite unanimously that the environment of Vrindavan was in a bad state. However it was also considered by one respondent to be simultaneously in a good state due to the religious practices and the spiritual life people are carrying on here. This is the thing which is saving Vrindavan. This is what needs to be used to save its environmental situation.

Responses to the question of how we should be behaving towards Vrindavan according to respondent's religious beliefs drew various answers. Again, unanimously, Vrindavan was considered a place which should first and foremost be clean. That is, there should be no pollution of any kind, including noise pollution, atmospheric pollution and water pollution, both of underground and surface water. As the name Vrindavan suggests, it should be a forest or "van", a heavenly garden of green groves and parks which is beautiful and attractive. But this is not the Vrindavan which respondents see around them. They see a place where people have forgotten about their religious duty according to their religious beliefs. The fact that it bears no relation to what is seen in pictures and descriptions is testament to this.

On being questioned in regards to Vraj culture and how we should preserve it, answers were quite varied ranging from "thinking before we act and destruct" to "declaring it as world cultural heritage" to "walking on the right path". But one thing which is felt through all these answers is that Vraj culture is something which is very important to humanity. Promotion to the general populous to create an understanding and awareness of the importance of Vraj must be done. This can be done through education of the people,

especially the youth, inspiration, motivation and by the enforcement of stringent measures to ensure cleanliness and its maintenance.

Stopping the cutting of trees and over colonisation is something which definitely needs to be enforced here in Vrindavan. However, at the present time there is no legislation as such which help us do this. Respondents felt that this was indeed a problem and we should go about changing this in a number of ways. Firstly, these laws need to be created and then enforced. This can be through an number of means such as public interest litigation and writing letters to authorities documenting the problems and having them act on this. It was also felt that in this Indian society, this type of action is difficult to achieve. But we must start somewhere - at the grass roots level.

Questions relating to the condition of the Yamuna River certainly drew no mixed responses. It is a completely polluted water body, one unfit for bathing, let alone drinking. As the "Queen of Krishna", its state certainly harms and hurts the religious sentiments of the respondents. It should be the emblem of purity and sanctity but this is not the case in either Delhi, Vrindavan or anywhere else along the river for that matter. "It can help purify one's self if they are sincere enough but by depositing wastes and wastewater into the Yamuna we disregard its spiritual qualities and treat it as mundane," writes Bhakti Vikash Padmanabha Swami. Again it was felt that law enforcement is very necessary in regards to the future condition of the Yamuna River.

Since its inception, the Parikrama plantation has been a very important part of the VCP's plantation programme. This being the case, respondents did not feel that it was in a good state at present. Regular cleaning of the Parikrama Marg was suggested, as too was the taking away of electricity poles and all other encroachments to it. Areas of tarmac along the Parikrama were not seen in a good light as this does not provide comfort for the many pilgrims walking the path every day. M.R. Virmani suggested that "...tress which are massive and strong and have a long life such as pipal should be grown". He then suggests that "the height of the trees should not be less than seven feet and they should be planted just before the monsoon". The statement by Srivatsa Goswami that the present path walked by pilgrims on parts of the Yamuna Bank not being the original Parikrama path is another thing which needs to be considered.

Finally, questions relating to the past and possible future work of WWF here in Vrindavan provided encouraging answers. There is no doubt that the community feels that

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WWF have contributed to the conservation of the Vrindavan environment. Respondents said that they have become more aware of the importance of preserving Vrindavan for future generations and that they appreciate the involvement of WWF in the local community. However, Padmanabh Goswami writes that "...the contributions made by WWF are not up to the mark. The improvements did not come up to our expectations, not as much as we had hoped. For these shortcomings, there are many reasons". These must be deciphered by WWF and worked on.

It was my interaction with M.R. Virmani which really gave me and hopefully the VCP some insight into where plantation should be heading. He suggested that no plantation on roads and public areas occurs for the next three years. Rather, the VCP should develop more nurseries for the propagation of plants and trees until they get to a reasonable height (this is in accordance with future focusses suggested by students from PBM School). The nursery situation has many advantages over plantation in the field. Time and money is saved in regards to planting and watering and growth is at a faster rate. Once these trees have reached the height of six or seven feet and are sturdy enough, plantation on a big scale should then occur, a few months prior to the monsoon. Plantation based around this principle certainly has its advantages. Firstly, protection measures such as metal or bamboo tree guards are not necessary as the plants are passed the "hazardous" stage as far as survival is concerned and therefore survival rate will be much higher. What should then remain are a smaller number of successful and sturdy trees rather than a large number of poorly maintained, sick or dead trees. Sevak Sharan agreed with this point. This is was the initial objective of the VCP. Somewhere along the line though it lost its way a little.

9. Other important parameters of Vrindavan conservation

In the conservation of Vrindavan there are two more main obstacles to be considered on a very high and influential level. One is the construction of a Trans-Yamuna bridge considering the basic parameters economically, environmentally, socially, culturally and politically. The second is the proper masterplanning of Vrindavan considering its environmental and cultural conservation and the creation of a satellite township for its modern urban development which could be sound for the economic upliftment of Vrindavan. Without having the right solutions for these obstacles, the conservation of Vrindavan's land and culture may be jeopardised.

10. Summary and conclusion

During my two month stay in Vrindavan, I witnessed many things. The work of WWF-India's Vrindavan Conservation Project was one of these. I was very involved in its functioning during my stay and was involved in its activities first hand.

Initially beginning as the Vrindavan Forest Revival Project but later being changed to the VCP, it is now heading towards broader areas of conservation and interaction with local, national and international NGOs. During this period, this project has had field plantation of approximately 1,50,000 plants and trees, establishment of 10 plant nurseries and free distribution of about 60,000 plants to temples, houses and Ashrams and the revival of sacred forests.

Environmental education has been established in many schools through theoretical teaching, seminars, competitions, rallies and other means. It has an advisory body of senior citizens to advise on environmental and cultural matters.

The future focus of WWF-India's Vrindavan Conservation Project is successful and thoughtful plantation, cooperation, liaising and an active dialogue between government and non-government organisations. If this can be done and achieved, Vrindavan will be viewed as a real model of the religion and conservation alliance which can set an example to be followed by all the religious centres of India and abroad.

ENVIRONMENTAL QUESTIONNAIRE

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1. Describe the following terms:

a) Environment -

b) Pollution -

c) Conservation -

d) Trees -

e) Garbage -

f) Cruelty to animals -

2. How would you like to help to make the environment better?

3. If you see someone cutting a tree, what are your feelings and what would you do?

Please turn over

4. What do you think about the environment and what do you do for the environment?
5. What is river pollution and what are the different pollutants you see at the river in Vrindavan?
6. What are the different types of pollution?
7. How does air get polluted?
8. What is noise pollution and how does it affect you?
9. Do you think that WWF has been good at helping the environment of Vrindavan? Why?
10. What else could WWF be doing for the environment?

Thankyou.

W.W.F. - Vrindavan Conservation Project
Environmental Conservation & Plantation Questionnaire for
Religious People of Vrindavan - April 1998

1. Do you think that Vrindavan's environment is in a good or bad state at the moment ?
2. According to your religious beliefs, how is it that we should behave towards the environment of Vrindavan ?
3. How is the environmental state of Vrindavan at present different from what your religious beliefs would want it to be ?
4. How can we preserve our Vraj culture ?
5. How will you help W.W.F. & all of Vrindavan regain this Vraj aspect ?
6. Will you help stop more cutting of trees & colonisation here in Vrindavan ? In what way ?
7. Have you ever thought about the condition of the Yamuna River ?
8. Does the present condition of the Yamuna harm your religious beliefs ? In what way ?
9. As the name suggests, Vrindavan means the "Forest of Tulsi". Do you think we should develop Tulsi plantations in protected areas to get back the essence of Vrindavan ?
10. What do you think about the state of the Parikrama at present ? How do you think it could be improved ?

11. Explain what your understanding of the term "Seva" is.

The following questions are for people who know about W.W.F. here in Vrindavan and have trees or plants in their houses/Ashrams given to them by W.W.F. Please feel free to answer these questions if this does not include you & please leave out questions which are not relevant to you.

12. How did you first learn about W.W.F. & the Vrindavan Conservation Project ?

13. Was it your idea to get a tree put in your house/Ashram or area or was it someone else's ?

14. Have you been looking after the plant or tree ? What condition is the tree in ?

15. Do you think that W.W.F. has contributed towards the conservation of the Vrindavan environment ? Has your attitudes towards trees, conservation & the environment in general changed as a result of your association with W.W.F. ? In what ways ?

16. What other ways do you think conservation could be achieved here in Vrindavan ?

17. What is your age ?

Thankyou for your help.