Title: Pedagogy for Sustainable Development at the Nilgiris Field Learning Center

Our paper will focus on a pedagogical experiment, the Nilgiris Field Learning Center (hereafter NFLC), a project of Keystone Foundation, based in Kotagiri, Nilgiris District, Tamil Nadu, and Cornell University, based in Ithaca, New York. The setting for this experiment, operational since 2014, is the sprawlingNilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR), a global ecological diversity and endemism hotspot, which contains a broad and complex range of ecological, economic, and socio-cultural landscapes. The conceptual framework for our boundary-pushing experiment is explained elsewhere. Here we focus on our bilingual (Tamil / English) program, which brings together Cornell-based researchers-educators and undergraduate students from across disciplines, Keystone staff rooted in practice, and Adivasi students from the communities Keystone works with in the Nilgiris. The NFLC is intentionally structured to cut across binaries that stymy the pursuit of sustainable development. At the NFLC, research meets practice; scientific theory engages indigenous ecological knowledge; biodiversity and socio-cultural diversity are not separate spheres; rural and urban are a linked continuum; and the health of the individual is understood as rooted in a healthy community. A community-engaged research and education experiment with two diverse groups of students allows us to simultaneously pursue short and long-term goals. As importantly, varied assessment efforts are built in to allow for critical reflection and course corrections. These collisions present us with opportunities for fundamental reflections on what constitutes valid knowledge, the fluidity of cultural norms, and the range of social and ecological interactions that structure opportunities and constraints to sustainable development.

Is the NFLC successful? Assessment results make us cautiously optimistic on student learning outcomes. On the research front, we are seeing collaboration on questions that have stared at us from the ground for some time including integrated healing systems with positive impacts for adivasi health; ecological planning for urbanization in the NBR; and tenural arrangements in response to newer legislation like the FRA. In this paper, we will share these and ongoing challenges we face in developing the NFLC.