

## Your turn!. ZOO Anniversary letters from our members and readers

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When the Zoo Outreach Organisation (ZOO) enters into the Silver Jubilee Year of its existence, and when I was invited by Ms. Sally Walker, the Founder/Secretary of ZOO, to write about what "ZOO has meant and done for me", several pleasant memories come to my mind. I have scribbled below some of them.

If I remember correctly it was in 1988 that I had first communicated with Sally Walker. That's immediately after my visit to the Mini zoo at Malampuzha Gardens, Palakkad district, Kerala. The Malampuzha zoo was in a pathetic condition. The animals were kept in tiny cages and mostly kept in unhygienic conditions etc etc. So I wanted someone to look into it and take some actions so that the living conditions of the animals are improved. During those times I had read about Sally Walker and her activities associated with the improvement of the living conditions of the inmates of the zoological gardens in India. The zoos in India were (many are even now) in a very pathetic condition. The only sincere and earnest voice that was heard on the improvement of the standards of Indian zoos was solely that of Sally Walker. Hence my letter to her. She then wrote me back immediately and that was the beginning of a long-lasting relationship that continues even today, after 22 years, with the very same zeal and warmth.

There have been several occasions where in I have been greatly benefitted out of my association with Zoo Outreach and Sally Walker. I was a regular reader of the ZOOS' Print, the monthly magazine of ZOO. The amount of information that ZOOS' Print carries is enormous. Apart from the various useful articles on different aspects of natural history, ZOOS' Print, also carries announcements on training programmes, workshops, symposia etc. I have been a beneficiary of these announcements from time to time. For example, I got the prestigious Mac-Arthur Foundation Fellowship to undergo the training on "Tropical Conservation Biology" at Chicago, U.S.A. in 1996. I came to know about such a programme through ZOOS' Print and several similar opportunities subsequently. During my stint at Chicago, I was working with Dr. Lawrence Heaney of the Field Museum of Natural History and one of the projects that I did there was the compilation of the Checklist of Indian Mammals. In 1997, while ZOO was organising the Conservation Assessment Management Plan workshop on Indian Mammals, Sally was bold enough to use the list compiled by me, a novice on mammals, for the CAMP workshop.

ZOO has helped to mould and fine-tune my career substantially. I have been introduced to the field of small mammals through the various training programmes organized by ZOO. Each of ZOO's training programmes has been unique in many respects. Right from the topic chosen to the resource persons brought for the training are all done with impeccable perfection so that the participants of the programme are benefitted to the

maximum. My first training experience with the ZOO's support was the "Practical Workshop on Field techniques, taxonomy and conservation of Bats of India and S. Asia" that I attended at Madurai during July 2000. The chief trainer was none other than Dr. Paul Bates. That was such a useful training programme to me to the effect that since then I have been closely associated with bat field studies.

Later in 2002 Sally gave me another unique opportunity to organise two international training workshops at Kerala Agricultural University, one on "Amphibian Hands-on Training Workshop on field techniques, identification and taxonomy" and other on "Field techniques and Taxonomy for Conservation of Rodents and Insectivores". Subsequently in 2003 I was given one more chance to organise yet another training workshop viz. "Field Techniques for Ecological Studies, Captive Management and Public Education for Chiroptera Conservation". These workshops not only helped me to improve my organisational skills but also helped in improving my understanding of the small mammals and their conservation. These workshops also gave me a chance to meet and get trained under some of the leading small mammal biologists of the world such as Mike Jordan and Prof. Paul Racey.

In 2004 while I was attending the "Training Workshop on Reintroduction, Welfare and Captive Breeding of South Asian Non-Volant Small Mammals" (again organised by ZOO), Sally told me two important things. She informed me that I have been appointed as the South Asian coordinator, *in situ*, of Conservation Breeding Specialist Group of IUCN. This has been a great recognition to me, another gift by Sally Walker. The second thing that she told me was that "you must attend the PHVA facilitation training workshop at Jersey Is., U. K.". When she told that to me in February 2004 at Coimbatore, I never thought that I had to leave for Jersey by May 2004. And to my pleasant surprise, not only that I was selected but I was a fully sponsored candidate of ZOO, for the "PHVA Facilitation Skills Training Workshop" at the International Training Centre, Durrell Wildlife Conservation Centre, Jersey Zoo, Jersey Island, U.K. from 29<sup>th</sup> May to 5<sup>th</sup> June 2004. Combined with this programme she also managed to arrange a fellowship from Chester Zoo, Manchester, UK, so that I could spend about one month at the Chester Zoo, learning various aspects of Zoo management, and gaining first-hand information on the "Conservation breeding and reintroduction of endangered small mammals", under the supervision of Dr. Mike Jordan. Soon after my return from the UK, she gave me another opportunity to accompany and assist the ZOO team to undertake the "Population Habitat Viability Assessment Workshop for Western Hoolock Gibbon"

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at Dhaka, Bangladesh in February 2005. I was also given a chance to act as a co-instructor in the "Small Mammal Field Technique training", for the Bangladesh researchers, which followed immediately after the PHVA workshop.

Then in October 2005, I was asked to accompany and assist Dr. Paul Racey and Dr. Mike Jordan to Randanigala, Sri Lanka for the "Training in Field Techniques for survey of Volant and non-volant small mammal Conservation" to the Sri Lankan field biologists. In May 2006, I was selected as a consultant to the Govt. of Bangladesh. My responsibility was to train the Research Associates working on the mega Govt. of Bangladesh sponsored project on the preparation of the "Encyclopaedia on Flora and Fauna of Bangladesh". My selection as the consultant was primarily based on the recommendations of Sally Walker.

The list goes on and on. Those are some of the benefits that I have had because of my association with ZOO, Sally and Sanjay. I would also like to take this opportunity to scribble down few things about the influence of the ZOO on Indian/South Asian wildlife conservation.

Zoo Outreach Organisation during its initial stages has focussed primarily on the *ex situ* conservation. The Indian zoo's were in a very bad condition. Sally Walker has played a pivotal role in improving the standards of Indian zoo's. Her regular outreach programmes and consistent lobbying played a very strong role in the creation of the Central Zoo Authority (CZA) in India during 1992. Since then CZA has been doing commendable works to improve the standards of Indian Zoos. Moreover, by 2000 due to the consistent efforts of Sally Walker founded the South Asian Zoo Association for Regional Cooperation' (SAZARC) in 2000. Later in 2004, SAZARC became a member of the World Association of Zoos and Aquaria (WAZA). SAZARC collaborates with WAZA to raise awareness of good zoo management, good zoo ethics, and good animal welfare, all of which would be to the advantage of the captive wildlife in South Asian region. I would say that this has been one of the primary contributions of Sally Walker towards wildlife conservation in India. At this juncture I remember the slogan promoted by the ZOO on zoos, "Zoo's give the wild animals with no chance a last chance".

Another important contribution that Sally, Sanjay and their team at ZOO have done towards wildlife conservation in India/South Asia has been to promote and bring to the limelight the lesser known and less-charismatic wildlife. Apparently Sally had it in mind as a few articles on invertebrates had appeared in ZOOS' PRINT, but she was not really committed until Sanjay came into the organisation and pushed it. Then she hired an entomologist (Daniel) and for next few years they divided the neglected groups among themselves and went to work. In India "wildlife conservation" primarily meant the charismatic mega-vertebrates such as the tiger, elephant, lion, rhinoceros etc., and the conservation focus has mainly been centred around

the mega-vertebrates. It is at this juncture that ZOO boldly, firmly and systematically promoted the creatures such as bats, rats, frogs, lizards, spiders, bugs etc. The methodological manner in which it was achieved is worth mentioning. Sally and ZOO team first conducted the CAMP workshop on various Indian taxa, including invertebrates, amphibians, reptiles and mammals (inclusive of small mammals) during 1997. Then, since 2002 CAMP was focused on different groups such as primates, bats, non-volant small mammals, amphibians etc, but this time at the South Asian level. Thus these faunal elements were brought to the limelight. One of the significant outcomes has been that during 2002, it was possible to elevate the status of two species of bats to schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, which were until then in the *vermin* category.

Later a series of training workshops were conducted on the less known group of taxa on the taxonomic and ecological aspects, not only in different parts of India but in the other South Asian countries too. The interested field biologists were then provided with financial assistance and equipments to carry out rapid status surveys on the less known species. Different networks and directories were created for the different faunal groups such as Chiroptera, Invertebrates, Primates, Rodentia, Conservation Education, Hoolock Gibbon, Pollinator etc. This has enabled the cooperation, collaboration and sharing of information between the network members. Not only that networks were formed ZOO also has developed newsletters for the different networks such as Bat Net – *Bits about Bats*, *Bugs 'R All*, *Frog Leg*, *ProtoEch*, *Rat-a-tattle*, *Reptile Rap*, *CBSG*, *South Asia News*, *IZE Asia*, *SAZARC*, *Reintro Redeux*, *Small Mammal Mail*. Through these programmes and activities ZOO could sensitise hundreds of young field biologists across the South Asia. This particular activity will be having a long-standing positive impact on the biodiversity conservation of this mega-diversity region. This is another significant contribution of Sally Walker and ZOO towards wildlife conservation. Sally is quick to say nothing could have been done without her team ... Latha, Saroja, Geeta and Marimuthu came first, then Sanjay, Daniel, Pravin, Ravi, Arul, Radhika, Raveendran and others ... members, friends, colleagues, including the Coimbatore family, the Rangaswamys who helped her move to Coimbatore and the Coimbatore business community who supported till ZOO could get on its feet.

The list is unending, but I will stop by stating one last thing, that has also made a positive impact on the biodiversity conservation in South Asia. That's the peer-reviewed journal, created and edited by Sanjay Molur, Sally's right and left hand man which ZOO is regularly bringing out – the Journal of Threatened Taxa (JoTT) since 2009.

I conclude by wishing ZOO, ZOO crew and Sally Walker all the very best wishes in their Silver Jubilee celebrations and I sincerely wish and do hope that they continue their excellent services that would benefit the biodiversity conservation in general and South Asia in particular.