

Your Turn!

Payal B. Molur*

When Sally invited me to write about my association with Zoo Outreach Organisation to celebrate 25 years, I thought it would be easy. But when I actually started framing sentences I realised that my full life today is because of Zoo Outreach and there was so much emotion and overwhelming thoughts that I didn't know where to start.

I first came to know of ZOO when I was doing a short film in 2000 for the environment series 'earth matters' on the status of zoos in India. Sally was travelling and I only managed to get her interview via email. A year later when I finally realised I wanted to get into Zoo education in India, I contacted her again via email. She told me that making a living by wildlife education may be difficult in India and perhaps I should consider looking abroad. I insisted that India was the only place for me and persisted, maybe even badgered her for a solution. Then one day she said that she was coming to Delhi for a Zoo Architecture and Planning workshop and I could meet her if I liked. What transpired was quite funny. I phoned her and we talked about zoo education for almost 20 minutes. Then she said 'you know there is one "other boy" in Delhi who has been asking me the same questions as you have - his name is Paya something...' It was me! With as much dignity as I could muster I corrected her and explained that that boy was me and I was a girl and I still wanted to work in India in Zoo education. But it was finally in 2003 that Sally set me on a life-changing path with 'Teachers for Tigers,' a pioneering teacher training program with Wildlife Conservation Society.

Sally then invited me to come to the ZOO office in Coimbatore and help design a primate packet and items for a new Bat Club Initiative that she was working on. And this was the beginning of my life... I was hooked - "hook, line and sinker" and have never looked back.

At Zoo Outreach the world of Wildlife Education & Zoo Education takes on a whole new meaning. At ZOO they really have a feel for what works and for what doesn't.

Their education packets are legendary and my programs, and I know several other educators' programs too, would be incomplete without them. I have been an intern or trainer with 10 of the 11 Teachers for Tigers workshops conducted across India and abroad, where in at least 1000 teachers have been trained and the manual translated into 6 languages. The workshops taught me how to be professional, how to treat participants and colleagues. Using the 'Teacher's for Tigers' model they have developed the Hoolock Gibbon program

and manual - making "every teacher a conservationist and every conservationist a teacher", and now a challenging teacher training program to help reduce the strain of the ever increasing human-elephant conflict entitled HECx (Human- Elephant coexistence).

ZOO's exploits in the fields of conservation, networking and education are well known, but what is not so widely known are the behind the scenes that keeps this organisation at the top. I couldn't believe that this small office with just 15 people did so much work for wildlife conservation all over South Asia! They not just did it - it was done with a dedication and cheerfulness that was as refreshing as it was inspiring.

Even something as simple as the education packets that ZOO prepares and sends free of cost to 100's of Zoo's and educators has a personal touch - I have seen this efficient team collate over 45,000 items in a week or less to ship the packets out in time for Wildlife week or Environment day to places as far as Indonesia. I have also seen these people stay back late and put in overtime before a conference or workshop, without being asked just to ensure that the job is done professionally and that everything runs smoothly. I have seen them rally around one another to help in medical emergencies, weddings and helping each other with family issues. And I have been fortunate enough to have been adopted by this remarkable team as Sanjay's wife. One of the most important things that ZOO ever did was to introduce me to my husband.

Twenty-five years of ZOO. Thirty-five years of Sally dedicating her life to wildlife conservation in India and South Asia, Over 15 years for most of the staff of ZOO pledging their support and lives at ZOO. 1000's of people trained in wildlife research and conservation. 1000's of individuals connected and networked with, and dozens of zoos enriched by being associated with ZOO.

Who wouldn't be proud to be a part of the ZOO family. Congratulations and here's to another 25 years J!

***Conservation Education Consultant, GO WILD Workshops, Coimbatore.**
Email: payal.bmolur@gmail.com