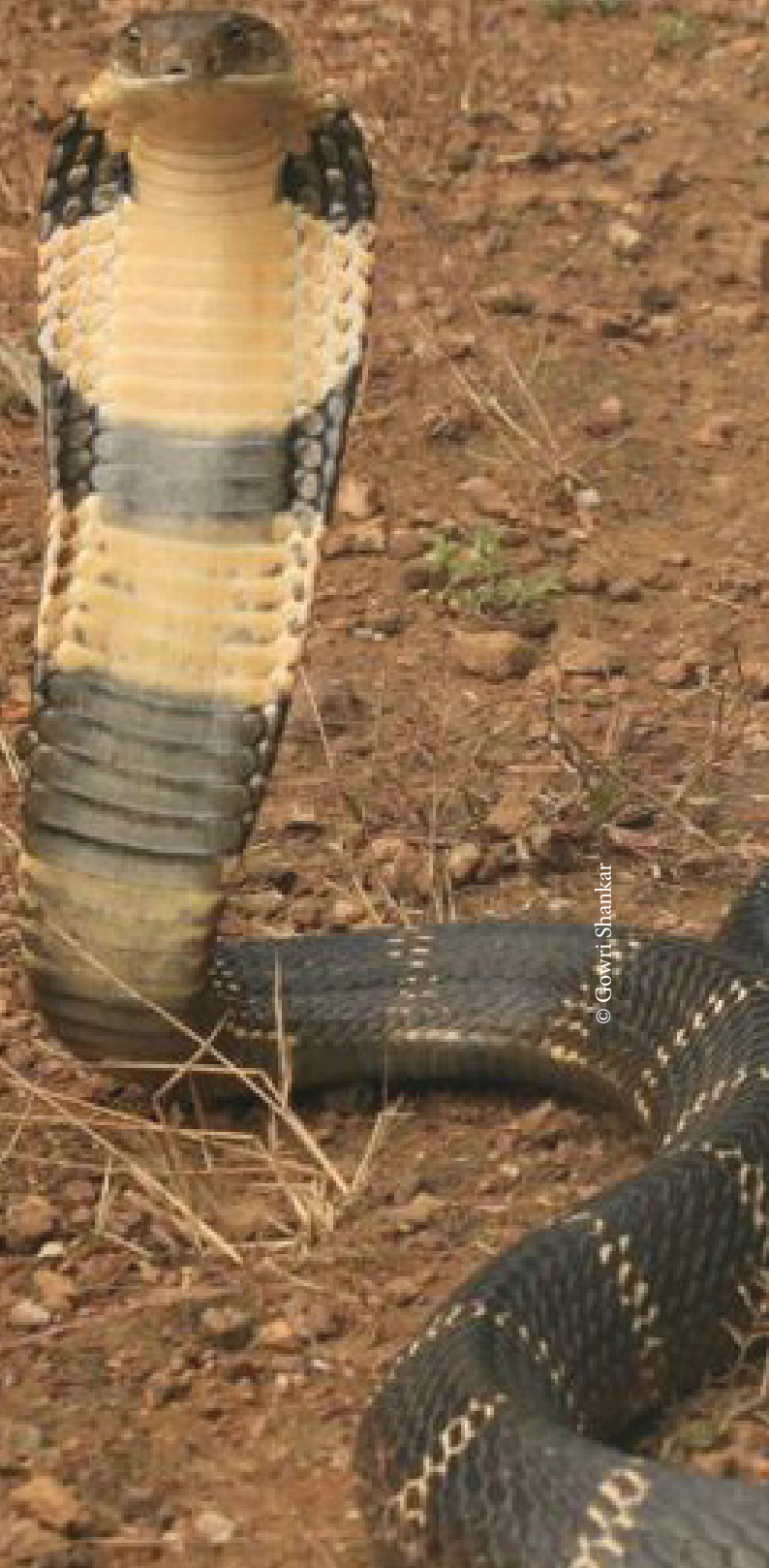


# Gowri Shankar and the King

We all assembled in our classroom eager to finally hear from Gowri Shankar on his adventurous journey of more than two decades in conserving the vulnerable, endemic, apex predator species of India, the king cobra.

Gowri treated us with the reminiscence of his first ever participation in a professional workshop on amphibians which was organised by the Zoo Outreach Organisation. The transpired knowledge, wisdom he says, has been instrumental to him in various ways, be it about organising the workshops or the ways of life.

Gowri was part of the Radio telemetry of king cobra research by ARRS(Agumbe Rainforest Research Station). The extensive studies on King cobras were all from the ones living in the wild. To name a few, the nesting & mating behaviour, habitat & dietary preferences, and the geographical distribution of all various species across the world. Another very fascinating aspect of his research work was about the home range of the King cobra. His study showed how translocated individuals move much more and haphazardly than



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those that are released into their original site, providing evidence against moving of snakes as a means to mitigate human-snake interaction. Also, it was fascinating to know that the King cobra is the only species of snake in the whole world that build nests which are 75–90 cm tall from the ground and are so well built that not even a single raindrop can permeate even though Agumbe receives 7,000+ mm of average annual rainfall.

While he shares the methods he used to track the King cobra's movements in the wild and their corresponding challenges, he attributes the privilege of acquiring data with relative ease due to the immense cooperation and reverence the local community had for the snake. He compares for instance on how a researcher in Thailand had radio tagged more King cobras (found in their region) but could fetch only a little data as the locals would end up killing or eating the snakes, whereas, similar challenges are not encountered in Agumbe as a result, Gowri could collect lots of data from radio tagging only five of them. To add to this, the locals went as far as waiting for an entire day for the snake catcher to arrive at their place to ensure an injured/ displaced King cobra was rescued and released back in its wild home. Considering how snakes are feared commonly, the evidence of coexistence was a pleasant and welcoming surprise.

It was a moment of thrill, suspense, and deep gratitude for us when Gowri shared his moment of life & death situation when bitten by the King cobra. He says he survived because the King injected very less venom and mainly being calm throughout helped him a great deal. He remained hospitalised for three days while the bitten hand remained swollen for a month. Despite this, he rushed to another King cobra rescue right on the day of his discharge. He says, "Well, they





are one of the most sensitive, intelligent creatures on Earth and are only defending themselves when cornered. If at all there has been a bite case so far, it's only because of our wrong way of interference or mishandling them". Considering how he has rescued and released nearly 350 King cobras and monitored over 50 King cobra nests, one cannot help but fathom the gravity of his words.

Well, for a man coming from a non-wildlife background, to build such regard for nature and wildlife, make us understand their ecological importance, to help break our irrational perceptions, and educate us, the local communities, the local schools, and the visitors with various workshops and outreach programs is commendable.

The richness with which Gowri spoke about this fascinating life, the King cobra, his past research works and recent findings, it's invigorating to know that there is so much more that needs to be explored and to study on these beautiful limbless animals. We look forward to his next



research on Malabar Pit Vipers. We are certain that Gowri Shankar's work inspires more and more young minds to conserve wildlife which is an important chunk of our lives.

Around the end of Gowri's talk, the classroom burst into a plethora of discussions, sharing pictures, videos of reptiles around, browsing up a few articles on King cobra, sharing personal experiences and so on of bustling activities. All in all, Gowri's talk left us all exhilarated, sensitised, and lots of wonder-ponder worms in our heads started to move around, in analysing our journey in conserving the wildlife.

## About Gowri Shankar

P. Gowri Shankar has spent over two decades researching king cobras as a wildlife scientist, now affiliated as a PhD scholar with the North Orissa University, Odisha, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore. A number of wildlife documentaries have featured him, like Secrets of the King cobra, King cobra and I, Wild India, Wildest India, Cobra King etc. The Swedish Herpetological Society awarded him Herpetologist of the Year in 2015. He is also a TED Fellow. He is an educator of wildlife and conservation and the co-founder of Kalinga Foundation, an NGO and Kalinga Centre for Rainforest Ecology (KCRE) in Agumbe, Karnataka.



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