

# SKETCHING SOLUTIONS:

## *Art Tackles Climate Change*

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At the invitation of our long-time friends Sanjay and Payal Molur, their daughter Elakshi, and the dynamic team at Zooreach, in April of this year we traveled to India for the first time. It was certainly a wonderful opportunity in itself, but additionally, we were asked to participate in one of an ambitious series of workshops devoted to the use of Art in the understanding and conservation of Nature, specifically to address the challenge of Climate Change, which is disproportionately affecting tropical countries, including India. Indeed, while we were there, the region of Tamil Nadu was experiencing record high temperatures.

Alongside other meetings concerned with Theatre and Story-telling, and their own potential role in conservation education, we ran the 3-day Illustration course, held in the Mani Mahal Building in downtown Coimbatore. The Workshops were financially supported in by the US Consulate General in Chennai.

We were also privileged to sit in for one day on the Story-telling workshop which opened our eyes (and ears) to the world of aural verbal communication, which we in the West often overlook as a powerful tool for promoting conservation.

Participants were encouraged to return home afterwards, and organize and run their own workshops, with the ultimate



goal of establishing a network of conservation educators across India, sharing experiences, techniques and innovations. They were also to prepare a finished piece of work for inclusion in an exhibition to be held in Coimbatore six months after the workshop.

The Illustration course had actually begun weeks before we arrived, with our assembly and emailing to the selected workshop participants of miscellaneous reference materials and examples of rendering techniques employed in the various fields of scientific illustration.

We also participated in the ordering and purchase of supplies, and decided to concentrate upon a few basic media - graphite pencil (tone), pen and ink (line), watercolor, colored pencil, and mixed media.

The monochrome media were included partly to address economic issues: printing costs are vastly different for black-and-white versus color, even today. For participants who came from areas of the country where printing costs are high, then monochrome printing of conservation education materials is preferred.

Our prior experiences with running similar workshops, in Peru and Brazil, had prepared us to make careful use of the limited time available.

The first day of the Workshop consisted of introductions: to each other, to the course structure and goals, and to the vast field of the visual interpretation of science, which includes biological, technical, medical, botanical, forensic, entomological and archaeological illustration. Participants were from various parts of India, and from a multiplicity of biologically diverse, ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds.

The first project, the production of sketched portraits of fellow-attendees, served to underline the collaborative nature of these workshops: no matter our circumstances, our geographical origin, and our individual skills, it is important, if not vital, to appreciate that we are all working together to address the challenge of climate change, which is the primary issue facing humanity today, and which will determine our future as a species, and as earthlings.

The subsequent meetings were dedicated to the history and demonstration of classical rendering techniques and their reproduction, and the realities of working as a freelance or institutional scientific illustrator, interacting with scientists, and acting, effectively, as intermediary and interpreter between the world of the researcher and that of the general public.

To our surprise, the strongest positive response to the introductions to the various media was to pen-and-ink, which some might consider to be rather archaic, but which, with the increasing popularity of Manga and the Graphic Novel as a format, and with its almost century-long links to American comic books, has actually become very convenient and economical.

Reducing everything in a picture to just black and white is a considerable artistic and intellectual challenge, but if successful, the sparse nature of pen and ink drawings invite the viewer to mentally “fill in” the missing details, resulting in a bond between artist and observer and an influence potentially stronger than when photo-realistic techniques are used. In a classroom situation, line drawings can be hand-colored by children, thereby making the lesson more memorable.

The importance of sequential art as a way to convey information also cannot be understated.

Nash, S.D. (2008). Some thoughts and reflections on the use of illustration in Biodiversity Education Campaigns. *Journal of Threatened Taxa* 1(1): 119–125.

Some of the oldest surviving artwork is sequential art, including the imagery on Hadrian’s Column, and arguably, on many petroglyphs created by indigenous artists around the world (See Nash 2008).

The Workshop students were a total delight: motivated, resourceful and eager to learn, their stories were very varied. Some were employed in research institutions, while others were at different points in their further education studies, and some were freelance illustrators.

Each had their own passions and were very willing to express their concerns about climate change, wildlife conservation and the environment. It was all very encouraging.

We hope we were able to aid them by recounting some experiences from our own careers.

