

# ZOO'S PRINT

Communicating science for conservation

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**RHATC 24–25 Special Issue**

## **Editorial - Building Conservation Leaders: 40 Years of Zoo Outreach Organisation.**

Time flies. Zoo Outreach Organisation is 40 years old, and I have been with it for over 31 years! 2025 is special for all of us at the organization as we step into the 40th year of its founding by Sally Walker, who came to India to learn yoga but ended up dedicating her life to uplifting the image and functioning of zoos in India and later to the conservation of India's fauna, flora, and funga. Her influence was felt beyond the borders of India, reaching South Asia and the rest of the world.

Little did I know, as a school student visiting Mysore Zoo in the early 1980s and excitedly watching a white woman walking tigers, that two decades later I would be working with her on conservation. Having spent innumerable hours with Sally since 1993, I had the privilege of listening to her adventures, experiences, and conflicts—both personal and professional. These interactions not only helped me understand her as a person but also provided a solid foundation for viewing conservation actions from perspectives that transcend personal boundaries of ego and selfishness. When Sally asked me to join ZOO in 1993, I had no idea of the adventures I would undertake, nor did I imagine lasting this long in conservation. However, being thrust into conservation planning workshops just two months after joining (where I initially had no clue about what was going on) and the opportunity to grow through exposure to experts in the field significantly contributed to my development as a conservation biologist and practitioner.

When the opportunity for formal training in conservation arose, I spent two months at the Field Museum in Chicago. Dr. Larry Heaney, who initiated the Advanced Training in Conservation for interested candidates from around the world, became a pivotal mentor. I absorbed knowledge from him, his team of mentors, and Dr. Bob Lacy at the Brookfield Zoo like a sponge. During my U.S. trip in 1994, I also had the privilege of participating in the first advanced training in facilitation conducted by the Captive Breeding (now Conservation Planning) Specialist Group in Minneapolis. Dr. Ulie Seal's philosophy of conservation set me on a course that I continue to pursue three decades later.

The combination of these trainings has always remained at the forefront of my mind. When the first opportunity to establish an integrated training program for budding Indian conservationists arose, I seized it. Although it took over two and a half decades to come to fruition, it's never too late. India has had several courses in conservation, but these have often been narrowly focused. None compare to the Ram Hattikudur Advanced Training in Conservation (RHATC), now in its fourth year, which trains and upskills the latest batch of 10 Indian conservationists from nine states to become leaders in the field. The RHATC course is unlike any academic program in wildlife or conservation offered in the country, nor is it particularly long. The course has been designed to leverage the fellows' existing skillsets and organically foster their understanding and growth as potential leaders. It is informal in structure yet deeply rooted in serious activities, teaching, and training. Fellows are expected to make the most of the opportunities provided and to fully engage in exercises, assignments, case studies, field trips, and exposures, all of which are integral to their holistic training in conservation.

It gives me great pleasure to present yet another special issue this year by the RHATC batch four. The fellows have contributed in parts to previous issues of Zoo's Print, but this issue is dedicated entirely to RHATC batch four, allowing them to showcase their learnings, field trips, assignments, campaigns, mentor profiles, leader profiles, educational materials, discussions, posters, and more.

The Ram Hattikudur Advanced Training in Conservation is made possible thanks to the generous donations of the Mansukhani family, the Sanjay Manohar family and friends, and CSR support from Coromandel International. I extend my heartfelt thanks to the many mentors, experts, field assistants, leaders, and others who have contributed to this program's success. Finally, I thank my team of committed colleagues and conservationists from Zoo Outreach Organisation, without whom this dream would not have become a reality. To the fellows, I hope that all 40 of you do justice to the training you have received, having committed yourselves to the cause and joined the leadership program. My very best to all of you, and I reiterate my support whenever it is needed.

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