

# Building Bridges for Wildlife: Dr. Ajith Kumar and the Story of IWECE

## IWECE: Inception and the need

The inaugural Indian Wildlife Ecology Conference 2024 (IWECE24) took place from 14-16 June 2024 at the National Centre for Biological Science, Bengaluru. This conference was several decades in the making. IWECE was conceptualized by Dr. Ajith Kumar and he managed to bring together over 500 ecologists from more than 40 institutions across India under one roof to converse, connect, and collaborate.

While there have been other platforms to showcase applied ecology and conservation research in India, in Dr. Ajith's words "*There was a long-felt need to have a platform solely for wildlife ecology researchers to share their work, network, and meet up*" (Bhaumik et al 2025).

Dr. Ajith once shared that he had brought up this idea more than 30 years ago, when he was working at the Wildlife Institute of India. At that time, the

field of wildlife ecology was still relatively nascent in India, with fewer institutions conducting ecological research. The idea was shelved, only to be revived several decades later, once it was felt that the wildlife ecology community was ready for such a platform.

## IWECE24: Beginnings, partnerships and collaborations

Being the long-term planner that he was, Dr. Ajith started mobilising the community and resources for this conference, two years before it actually came to fruition. He recalled making multiple trips to meet his contacts at major ecology and conservation organisations across India (who would eventually come together to provide key funding and institutional support for the conference) and broaching the idea of this conference with them.



**Figure 1: A Special Interest Group Meeting in session during IWECE24.**

Dr. Ajith's ability to get buy-in from the oft-polarised community of ecologists and conservationists was a true testament of his warmth and the respect he held in the community. By end of November 2022, the steering committee comprising 14 individuals representing 14 organisations was in place to provide institutional backing, funding, and strategic direction for the conference.

Following the first meeting of the steering committee, Dr. Ajith worked steadily in the background to execute the decisions taken in the meeting — from hiring a conference coordinator to holding talks with potential venues and sponsors, forming committees, and mobilising close to INR 55 lakhs in funds, generously provided by the Steering Committee institutions.

By June 2023, the venue (the National Centre Biological Sciences in Bengaluru) and the conference coordinator had been finalised. The next phase of the conference had begun — announcing to the community that the event was happening, putting together the website, forming the other key committees such as the scientific and organising committees, and developing the conference program.

Dr Ajith envisioned IWEC24 to be a place where Indian ecologists across career stages could come together to share and showcase the diversity of their research in ecosystems, taxa, geographies, and disciplines. He wanted IWEC24 to capture the significant advances in research on India's diverse wildlife ecology over the last few decades, with a special focus on ensuring representation from institutions and researchers from all parts of India.

## **IWEC24: Behind the scenes planning and preparations**

Dr. Ajith curated IWEC24's Scientific Committee which was instrumental in charting the scope and knowledge-sharing sessions of the conference. He chose nineteen senior ecologists specialising

in diverse ecological disciplines, landscapes, and taxa. They came together to set guidelines, review Symposia, Abstract, Poster, and Special Interest Group Meeting proposals. This dynamic committee reviewed over 400 abstracts and finalised about 250 presentations [1] in a span of three months, spurred on by Dr. Ajith's regular, polite but pointed, reminders!

The conference ended up showcasing research from all parts of India, with all the major taxa and ecosystems covered through 133 research talks in 18 different Symposia [2], 44 research talks in six thematic Open Sessions [3], 94 poster presentations [4], eight Special Interest Group Meetings [5], and three panel discussions on latest ecological concerns [6]. In addition to the scientific sessions, the conference also had workshops on nature journaling and art, and storytelling for conservationists [7].

Simultaneously, in the background, the logistical and administrative aspects of the conference were also coming together. Dr. Ajith and his organising team worked together, often very long hours, to organise the conference, ensuring no stone was left unturned in making this event a worthwhile experience for participants. The team worked through every weekend, morning to past midnight, and sometimes even through the night to make the conference happen. Many participants commented on how smoothly the conference was organised — again a testament to Dr. Ajith's thoughtfulness and keen awareness of every task pertaining to the conference. Under his guidance, the six-member organising committee was given the creative freedom to transform the still-abstract conference to a logistical reality.

The smooth flow of the conference would not have been possible without the infrastructural support offered by NCBS. All requests — catering, accounts, arranging accommodation and transport for participants, arranging for the catering tent, AV set up, and so on — was immediately and efficiently arranged by the NCBS administration.



**Figure 2: Day 2 group photo with the conference participants and organisers**

It significantly cut down operating costs and logistical planning that the organising team had to do. Dr. Ajith often joked that the NCBS Meetings and Administration team was so efficient in arranging everything required for the conference, the IWEC24 organising committee had to meet only once before the conference, for a brief one hour meeting!

Whether it was the expertly curated, highly interesting conference sessions or just Dr. Ajith's far-reaching reputation and charm — the conference registration list was oversubscribed from the beginning. Many eager participants sadly had to be turned away, simply because of lack of venue space. There was a period when the registration portal had opened for the last 40 places and within 20 minutes these spots were also booked. This brought in a flurry of frantic emails from unlucky participants asking why the registration form had shut down mid-booking! When the conference finally came around, there were 502 registered participants and another 50 more who gatecrashed!

## **IWEC24: The event**

After a year of preparation, the conference was set to begin. Guests started streaming in, the IWEC24 team was busy ensuring everyone was housed, fed, and watered. The word of the conference had spread so far and wide, there was even a public session to introduce the relevance of ecology to the wider public [8]. Three days of scientific sessions, networking, and events went by in a blur.

The conference provided a much-needed platform for a diverse group of ecology researchers to come together and share their work, bridging knowledge gaps and enabling peers to network and collaborate. Before we knew it, the conference was over with a promise from the supporting partners to once again steer a second iteration of the conference. In addition to that, the community suggested the formation of an Indian Ecological Society, like the British Ecological Society or Ecological Society of America.

The event was momentous enough to be picked up by [The Hindu](#) and the proceedings of the

conference published in [Nature, Ecology, & Evolution](#) scientific journal.

Beyond the curation of sessions and ideating the conference, what stood out was Dr. Ajith's commitment to equality, diversity, and enabling access for ecologists across the country to attend the conference and share their work. Whether it was ensuring diversity among committee members or mobilising funding for conference participants coming from underrepresented regions or communities of India, Dr. Ajith made sure every voice counted in this process. More than his organisational ability or his networking capacity, the thoughtfulness in ensuring diversity and ease of access was at the forefront in the conference structure and participant composition.

He even personally sponsored the travel of some participants who were coming from the Northeast, Western Himalayas, and Central India when the conference funding did not fully cover their travel costs. His reasoning was that more than ever, we needed to have voices from the Northeast, Central India, Western Himalayas to be represented in ecology.

## IWEC26 & beyond

Dr. Ajith also laid the groundwork for the next edition of IWEC in 2026 before his untimely demise. In early February 2025, he travelled to Ashoka University in New Delhi to kickstart the process of the next IWEC — getting a commitment from Ashoka University to host the next conference and liaising with IWEC24's partners for fundraising. With the kind of energy and passion he brought to IWEC24, his legacy will no doubt echo in every session of the next conference.

## Reminisces by Varsha Sathish Kumar (IWEC24 Coordinator)

Dr. Ajith hired me as the IWEC24 coordinator in May 2023. I had never heard of him and my Google searches yielded few results, with the only source of information about this enigmatic man being an article written by his former students on the event of his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday [9]. Reading that article struck a strange chord with me because the article was obviously written with a lot of affection. I was curious to meet him.

I had been introduced to him by Dr. Jayashree Ratnam in early January 2023 when I had interviewed for the course coordinator position



**Figure 3: The poster session gave many early career researchers an opportunity to showcase their work.**

at the Wildlife Masters Office in NCBS. Although I did not get that job, Dr. Ratnam had suggested I work with Dr. Ajith instead. A single phone call towards the end of January '23 with him was all the information I got about this role and the conference. It took a few more months before I officially joined the IWEC24 team.

I remember every detail of my first meeting with Dr. Ajith clear as day and I remember going home excited about working with him. His warmth, charisma, and wit came as a pleasant surprise in that first meeting.

Over the next few months, I got to know Dr. Ajith Kumar more closely. Being an avid traveller, he would give me the vaguest possible instructions on what to work on and left me for weeks on end to figure things out. After years of being micromanaged by neurotic bosses, Dr. Ajith's hands-off approach was refreshing. I was touched that he trusted me enough to handle the organisational and administrative aspects of the conference and this pushed me to work harder to not disappoint him. Looking back, it was entirely Dr. Ajith's trust in my abilities, gentle yet firm guidance, and his ability to make people feel valued that made me want to give my effort to the conference and not disappoint him. A true leader without making himself seem like one, he had this unique skill in knowing how to bring out someone's abilities.

Having just moved to India from Singapore, I was homesick and lonely. Dr. Ajith instantly picked up on this and made an effort to check up on me frequently. When I fell sick with dengue, several bad bouts of flu, and recurrent allergy flare-ups, he would always make sure I consulted a doctor and would bring me nourishing meals touting dubious wisdom on the health benefits of fried fish. From day 1, I was never treated as an outsider. He put me at ease, as he did with everyone else. On my first day of work, seeing my anxious face, he asked me about my family. Having ascertained that I had Kerala roots, he smiled twinklingly at me.

A few hours later I would know the reason behind the mysterious smile. As we walked to the lunch hall, he pointed to a tree and asked me to name it. I took a hesitant guess and called it a cashew tree. Instantly, his eyes bulged out, veins in his temple pulsing he exclaimed — *“How can you say that being from Kerala! That is a jackfruit tree!”*. Very sheepishly I apologised saying that I liked trees but had no clue how to identify them. The next day, he came in carrying seven different books on botany and plonked it on my desk, instructing me to finish reading them by the next two weeks. A teacher to one and all indeed!

He was someone who never believed in hierarchy. My suggestions were treated with equal consideration and respect as the suggestions of senior committee members. He would tell me what needed to be done and trusted me to deliver. Apart from working from the office, we would often also work from his home, where I would be finishing IWEC tasks, while he whipped up a homely meal of rice, dal...and fried fish.

As the conference drew closer and work got hectic, he worked alongside me through the long hours without a single complaint. I remember an incident, about 3 weeks before the conference, when the workload was at its highest, I had been working for 36 hours straight without even bothering to go home. When he came into the office, he was surprised to see me still there. Seeing his face, I burst into tears because of how overwhelmed and exhausted I was with the never-ending list of tasks. He immediately sent me home to sleep and took over my work until I was sufficiently rested. He banned me from checking emails or my phone for the next 10 hours!

We also had our moments of disagreement, when both of us would insist on doing things a certain way but with characteristic Ajith sir aplomb, he would collaboratively brainstorm on a mutually agreeable solution. The moments of frustration were rare, far outweighed by our shared laughter, teamwork, and his infectious energy.

After the conference, when I moved back to Singapore, he continued being a close friend and mentor. I would frequently call him and tell him how much I missed working for him. He would laugh in his self-effacing way and say that now it was time for me to look for new adventures and with a mock-glare, scold me for not applying for a postgraduate degree.

Little did I know that he would be gone in less than a year after IWEC24. A day does not go by when I don't miss him. But I am forever grateful for that one brief year I spent working with him for IWEC24. He helped me believe in what I was capable of, built up my fledgling confidence, and showed me what true leadership looks like. Our last conversation stays with me. I was confused, wondering how to shape my career, and he, with

his pragmatic but gentle wisdom, urged me to try different things — but to always show up with joy and energy. His exact words “*Find something you're passionate about and stick to it. May bring you money, joy, sadness, frustration, accomplishment. At least you will be satisfied doing what you want*”.

## References

**Bhaumik, V., Kumar, A. & Ratnam, J. 2025.** Indian wildlife ecology comes of age. *Nat Ecol Evol* 9, 187–189. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41559-024-02622-2>.

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