

Sowing Seeds for Conservation: Dr. Ajith Kumar and the Making of a Wildlife Master's Program

"He was evergreen, like the Western Ghats that he loved."
-Dr Jagdish Krishnaswamy.

Following the passing of Dr Ajith Kumar, a large group of people who had been touched by his life gathered at the National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bangalore (NCBS) on 15th March 2025 to remember and celebrate his life and legacy. They were all seated in the same hall where they had gathered, less than a year ago in 2024, to celebrate 20 successful years of the Postgraduate Course in Wildlife Biology and Conservation that he had played a vital and pivotal role in establishing and developing. Together, these two days, just shy of a year apart, offered a reflective space for the truly diverse and expansive impact that the Master's Program and, at its helm for several years, Dr Ajith Kumar, had made for conservation science in India.

What began in 2004 as an experiment in capacity building would grow into one of India's highly sought-after postgraduate programs in conservation science. At its core was, and continues to be, the conviction that wildlife conservation required not only passion, but professional training—training that was interdisciplinary, evidence-based, and embedded in ecological realities. Dr Ajith Kumar, affectionately and respectfully referred to ubiquitously as 'Ajith Sir' by nearly two hundred students and mentees, was an essential element in the team that shaped this ethos at NCBS, Bangalore.

The making of the NCBS MSc in Wildlife Biology and Conservation

Balancing India's developmental goals with conservation of wild species and habitats presents a paradox. The country harbours four of the world's

biodiversity hotspots, supports some of the largest viable populations of iconic large mammals, and has, at the time, set aside only approximately 5% of its land as protected areas. At the same time, it is experiencing rapid economic development, high human population pressures, and escalating ecological challenges. The need for scientifically trained conservation professionals—individuals capable of stewarding natural heritage in complex social and political landscapes—is critical. Yet, in the early 2000s, structured, high-quality postgraduate training in wildlife biology and conservation in India was limited. Conservation practice was often driven by commitment and field experience, but formal academic training that combined ecological theory, rigorous quantitative methods, and exposure to policy and practice were few. The idea of a master's program dedicated to wildlife biology and conservation emerged from this gap. It was as much conceived as an academic degree, as it was a mission: to build professional capacity for wildlife and wildland conservation in India through a rigorous, high-quality postgraduate training program, and to facilitate evidence-based conservation of India's wildlife and wildlands.

Dr Vijay Raghavan, one of the founding members of the program, recalled, *"The MSc course at NCBS began in a very interesting way. The connections trace back to Anindya Sinha, [...] who was an independent post doc at the time here, studying primates [...] Through him, the connection extended to Ullas Karanth [...] who came over and said that he had received a major award and that he wanted to use that to start and support a masters program in wildlife. And that was again discussed among the faculty, and the opinions on why we shouldn't have the program were plenty [...] Many people have said that when more than three quarters of faculty say not to do something, then it must be quite exciting and so*

it must be done [...] Anyway, the program began with great skepticism, and Ullas said that with someone like Ajith there, it will work. And truly, it has worked entirely because of him.”

The program took shape through an unconventional partnership. In its earliest phase, it was a collaboration between the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the Centre for Wildlife Studies (CWS) and the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS), with the National Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS), and contributions from the Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF). Founding individuals including K. Ullas Karanth, Ajith Kumar, Anindya Sinha, K. Vijay Raghavan, Jagdish Krishnaswamy, M.K. Matthew, K.S. Krishnan and others, worked to bring together academia, NGOs, and research institutions in an unusual model. NCBS and the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) contributed academic strength; organizations such as WCS, CWS, and NCF grounded the program in conservation practice. NCF, now a program partner, took on the responsibility of planning the design, curriculum and delivery of the program.

T. R. Sankararaman, co-founder of NCF and long-term supporter and friend of the program, reflected, *“Ajith brought not just his vision, calm temperament, and mentorship to the course, but effortlessly cultivated a huge amount of goodwill and support across institutions and individuals to run it so well.”*

This academia–NGO partnership was, at the time, relatively uncommon. It reflected a shared recognition: conservation science in India needed both intellectual rigor and real-world relevance. It also required flexibility—an openness within academia to engage with practitioners, and a willingness among NGOs to invest in long-term capacity building. Dr Ajith Kumar (AK) embodied these qualities as a mentor and in his vision for this program.

Uma Ramakrishnan, a Professor at NCBS, shared, *“I joined NCBS over 20 years ago, and literally one of the first people I met was Ajith. I was a total newbie: new to the Indian wildlife community and new to academia. But*

he always accepted me. He listened to my ideas, read my draft applications, connected me with people, and always, always rejoiced when good things came our way. He, Suhel [Quader] and I worked together to get the MSc program integrated into (yet differentiated from) NCBS.”

Accessibility was also a guiding principle in the development of this program. It offered full fellowships, enabling students from diverse backgrounds to enrol without financial barriers. In a field often limited by economic constraints, this commitment to inclusion expanded the social and geographic diversity of conservation professionals in India.

Anushka Rege, an alumna from the sixth batch of the program, shared, *“In a community that acknowledges inequities, yet still has much work to do in terms of breaking down hierarchies, where young researchers and scholars often find themselves feeling vulnerable, Ajith Sir had this rare ability to make everyone feel valued and heard. He stood for his students, he stood beside his students, and he ensured that they were seen, respected and empowered no matter where they came from or who they were.”*

Following detailed discussions among the founding members, it was decided to house the Master’s Program at NCBS and the first batch of students began their academic journey with Dr Ajith appointed as the Director of the MSc in Wildlife Biology and Conservation in 2004. The decision for him to lead the course towards its mission, while actively collaborating with various non-governmental and government institutions was an easy one for the members to take, given his academic background, drive to mentor young scholars interested in this field, and his social aptitude – all crucial skills to have as the director of a budding program that would go on to rely on the goodwill and support of a long list of faculty and institutions.

Anindya Sinha, another one of the pivotal founding members of the MSc program, remembers, *“When Ullas and I were discussing who could be the first Director of our pioneering Postgraduate Program on a*

cool Bangalore morning, possibly in December 1999, we unanimously and almost simultaneously decided on Ajith. We simply could not think of anyone else, who was, in equal measure, uncompromisingly passionate about wildlife conservation, a most open-minded, grassroots-level teacher, and above all, a truly empathetic, kind, and gentle individual. Essentially Ajith.”

L.S. Shashidhara, the current Director at the National Centre for Biological Sciences, added succinctly, “For a little man, he had such a towering personality. He’s one of the tallest scientists I’ve ever come across in India.”

Mahesh Rangarajan, Professor of History and Environmental Studies at Ashoka University, and faculty for the first seven batches of students, looked back on his time with the course, “Dr Ajith Kumar had no parallel in any sense of the word. I met him first in 1998, and much more often when the MSc was being planned. He had a naughty sense of humor but privately could map every student, present and past, their strengths, vulnerabilities, all. His own formidable scientific knowledge came with an extraordinary knack of keeping in touch with all, all kinds and classes of people. There was real professionalism and genuine generosity.”

From the outset, the program was intentionally small, with an intake of 15 students from India once every two years. Further, an executive decision was made to open the doors to students from a variety of academic backgrounds, doing away with the prerequisite for students only from scientific or biological backgrounds to apply. This meant that each cohort would be unique in their combined disciplinary training, experiences, perspectives and career paths, allowing for deeper peer-to-peer learning over the course of two years with the program.

Rhea Lopez, an alumna of the eighth batch of the program, recounts her journey with AK, “From the time that he cross-questioned me as a literature student trying to break into this MSc course at my interview, I was convinced that Ajith Sir disliked me and that we’d never get along, a notion that was solidified over our constant head-butting with his impeccable scientific rigour and my, I later realised, stubbornness and insecurity over my

approach to things. So much so, that in the following year when at the very last minute he became my thesis guide, for a very social science heavy thesis, I was quite terrified. Over the next few months of fieldwork, we bonded over fishing stories, seasonal alcohol and excitement over spotting otters [...] I realised that his seeming opposition to what I did was his way of getting me to engage more deeply and defend my ideas. When my confidence began to waver and imposter syndrome began to set in, he switched roles with a remarkable ease and defended not just my ideas but my abilities at a time when I most needed it.”

Rather than building a large permanent faculty, the program, by design, operated with a lean core team—typically a course director and coordinator—supported by a diverse group of guest faculty drawn from universities, research institutes, NGOs, and government bodies. This allowed students to learn from experts actively engaged in research, policy, and conservation practice across the country, while also having a couple of consistent and familiar faces guiding them through their Master’s at NCBS.

The curriculum was intentionally interdisciplinary, and continues to be, actively adapting with newer developments in conservation science. Students were trained in fundamental ecology, evolution and natural selection, taxonomy and natural history, population and community ecology, genetics, and historical biogeography. They were equally exposed to environmental law and policy, social sciences, environmental history, ecological philosophy, conservation practice and management, statistics, study design, and data science.

This breadth of curriculum reflected the understanding that conservation problems could not be solved from a single disciplinary vantage point. Ecological processes are entwined with social realities, protected areas exist within political economies, and field data need to withstand quantitative scrutiny—the program aimed to train professionals who could move across these domains to tackle the plurality of conservation issues.

Fig. 1: Ajith Sir on a field trip in Periyar Tiger Reserve with the first batch of MSc students (2004-2006).



Field-based experiential learning was central, and this is also where having a Director like AK made a large difference to the students' understanding of natural history and the real-world applications of what they learnt in the classroom at NCBS. Extended field trips and immersive modules were not add-ons but foundational elements of a field-based pedagogical approach. Students learned to observe, to measure, to question, and—crucially—to cultivate a deep respect and concern for wild spaces and wildlife. And, as they did so, they gathered a trove of anecdotes that formed experiential lessons in ecology and humorous lived experiences, made more colourful and memorable with Ajith Sir's enthusiastic presence across batches.

Radhika Nair, an alum of the ninth batch of students, shared an assortment of characteristically amusing field stories collated from her batchmates at AK's memorial in 2025, *"Ajith Sir could become a part of any primate troop he came across. When we were at the NCBS field station in Pachmarhi, we were regularly harassed by a troop of rhesus macaques trying to steal our food. The first time they stalked us, I remember Ajith Sir immediately got up to shoo them away and exclaimed, to the monkey, 'Hey! There are three primatologists here!'*

referring to himself, Divya [Vasudev] and Jayashree [Ratnam]. Another time [...] a monkey approached and started showing his canines to the group, looking to intimidate them and steal some biscuits. The students were startled and unsure. Ajith Sir, however, was completely unperturbed and charged back at the monkey [...] When asked how he stayed so calm, he just said, 'With macaques, it's all about establishing dominance!'

Samira Agnihotri, part of the first guinea pig batch of the course, recounted how, *"Thanks to Ajith Sir, field trips (each more memorable than the other!) were not just about learning sampling and transects*

and how to collect and analyse data. They were equally about meeting other people from the larger wildlife and conservation community, from different stakeholder groups - forest department officials, founders of NGOs and field assistants. We understood the value of that much later in life. To give a tiny glimpse: we were having lunch at Tahr Trails in Valparai, visiting in 2024, close to two decades after Ajith Sir had taken us there. The owner came to greet us, and the moment I was introduced as Ajith Sir's student, his face lit up, and we got special treatment."

AK's enthusiasm and sense of wonder made him a lovable individual to these various stakeholders and his students alike, ultimately contributing to enriching the experiences that several batches of the program had through their coursework. Tarun Menon, an alumnus of the seventh batch shared an anecdote that his cohort remembers fondly, *"Our batch was on a field trip to Bharatpur, but due to a shortage of cash, we hadn't hired a guide for the day. Ajith Sir could see how some of us were trying really hard to see some rare birds like the sarus crane and the dusky eagle owl. But when we weren't able to find them, without any of us asking, without hesitating, he hired a guide on his own and asked him to show us all that we were trying to see. It really*

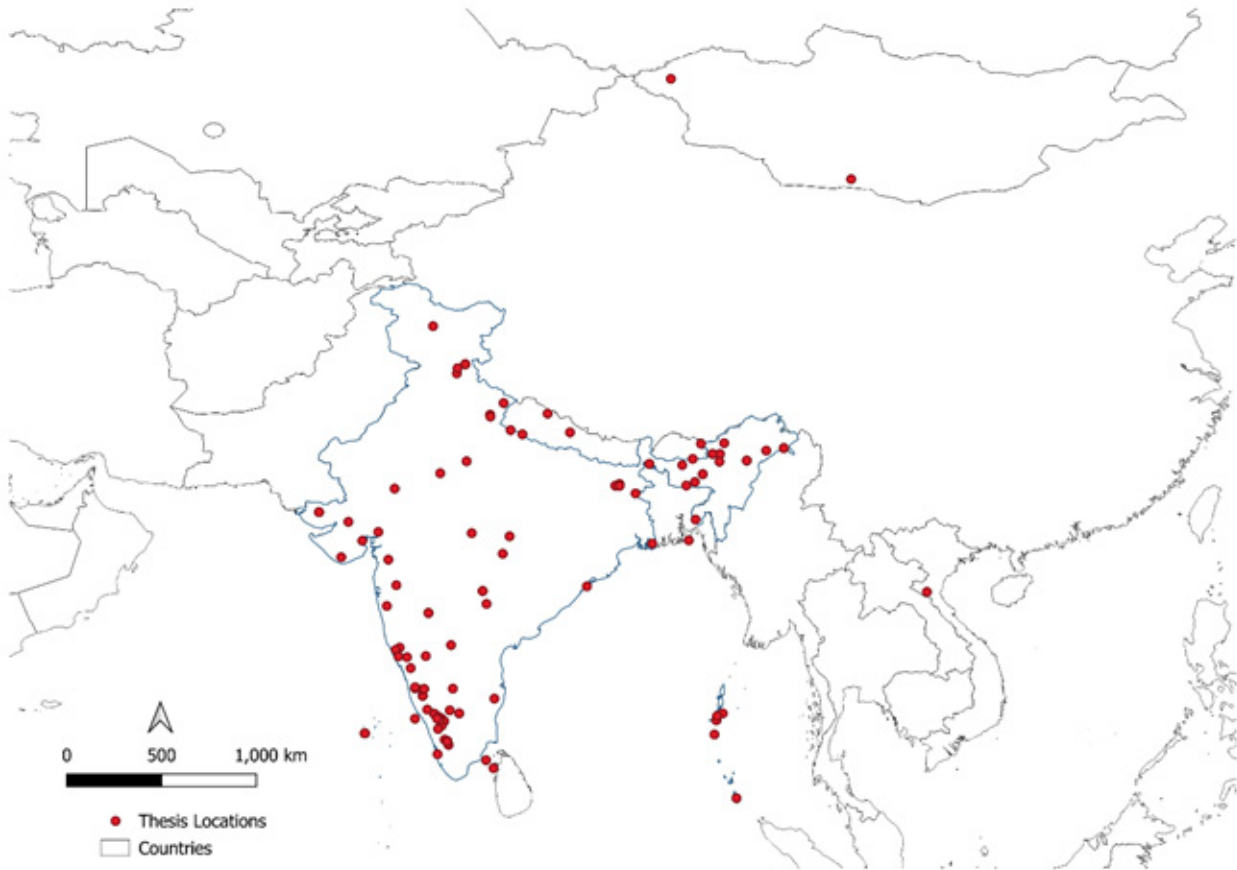


Fig. 2: Locations of students' theses across India, and beyond (till 2024)

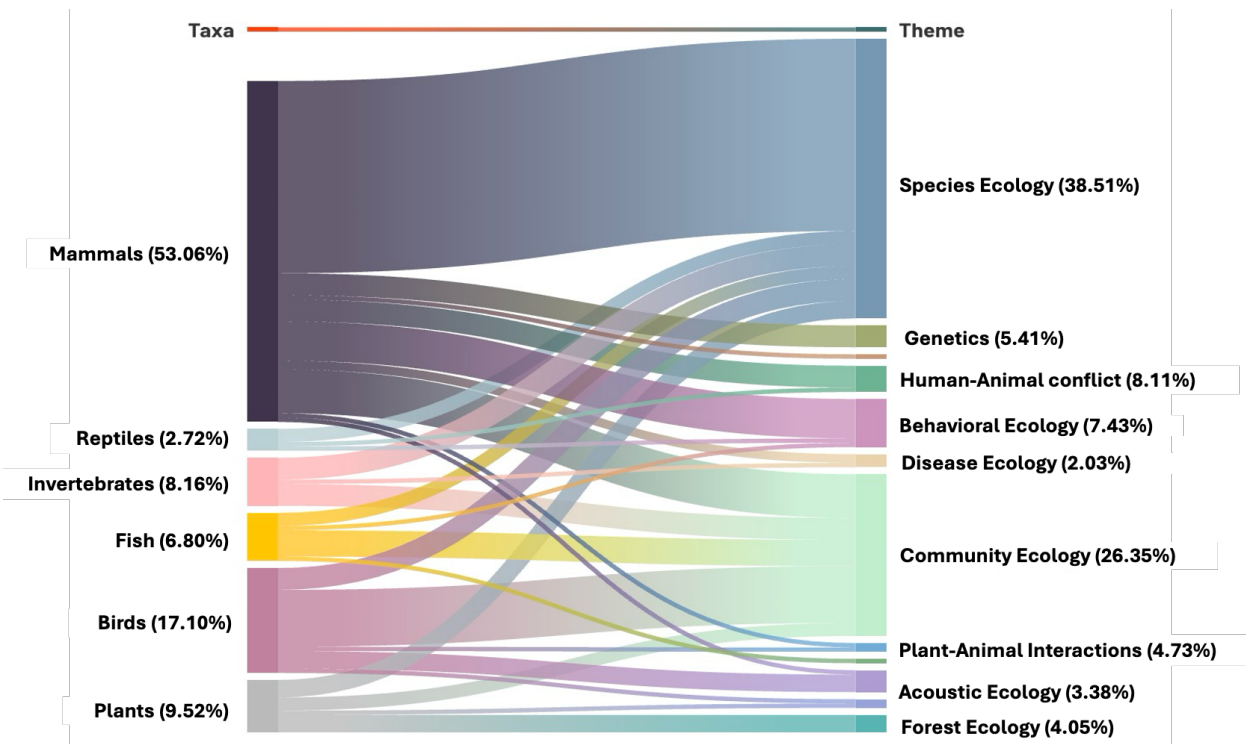


Fig.3: Diverse taxa and themes reflecting the scope of student theses emergent from the program

showed us how much he valued curiosity about natural history, irrespective of taxa.”

The two-year program was designed to culminate in an individual research dissertation, often conducted in diverse habitats across India, where students designed and executed independent studies under mentorship.

The First Cohorts: A Leap of Faith

The first batch (2004–2006) entered uncharted territory. There was no alumni network to consult, no established reputation to rely on. What they encountered was intensity: demanding coursework, probing discussions, and a culture of critical inquiry. Students recall AK as a teacher who combined high expectations with quiet encouragement. He asked difficult questions—not to intimidate, but to sharpen thinking. He insisted on clarity in study design and honesty in interpretation. A poorly constructed argument would not pass unexamined; nor would an untested assumption. At the same time, he fostered curiosity, often urging students to look more closely at a pattern in the field, to read more widely, or to situate their findings within larger ecological narratives.

Meghna Krishnadas of the third cohort poignantly shared, *“He was among the pioneers in this research field in India, helping make the science more rigorous while being deeply curious and aware of the natural history that underpins the ecology we do.”*

Those early years were marked by experimentation and adaptation. As the program transitioned from its initial WCS/CWS–NCBS partnership to being housed fully within NCBS, it retained its core philosophy of being focused on field ecology, even while embedding itself more deeply in an institution dedicated to fundamental biology. Ajith wore many hats through these years – while retaining his role as Director right up to his retirement in 2020 with the 8th batch of students – he was an academic guide, life coach, confidant, philosopher, support system and all-round

calming presence to the many students who moved through NCBS’ corridors over two decades.

Swapna Nelaballi from the second batch, echoing words and sentiments of several students and faculty at AK’s memorial, shared, *“He did his best, and then some. He was fiercely protective of his brood, advocating for us in our darkest moments. He had a way of making space for people genuinely without pretense, whether it was over a meal at his home, or a trip to see *Strobilanthus* flowering, or in the midst of an academic crisis. He had a way of making you feel seen and heard. He led with generosity, whether in the form of a quiet recommendation, an unexpected check-in, or just holding the door open - literally and metaphorically - for those who needed it.”*

Growth in numbers and reach

Since its inception in 2004, the program has graduated 149 students, with a further 20 in the current cohort. Students’ master’s theses have spanned a diversity of habitats, taxa, and themes. As seen in Figure 2, students have conducted their field research across varied ecological landscapes of India—from forests and grasslands to wetlands and mountainous landscapes.

Chandni Gurusrikar, the course coordinator for eight years between 2012–2020, reminded us of the administrative challenges of running this enterprise and of the more mischievous sides of Ajith Sir as she navigated her tasks as someone learning the ropes of this field, *“He drove me up the wall on many occasions, we disagreed on many things, many views and threw a fit at each other often and argued about multiple wildlife issues. I coined a word to describe Ajith Sir - to describe the stress he gave me - ‘Ajith-ated’, which most of the time I would be! But with time, I would realise that he was only trying to make me better and bring out the best in me. He was a man with a big heart, and was always just a call away when he was needed.”*

Figure 3 shows the breadth of inquiry that has emerged from the program. Spanning multiple taxonomic groups—birds, fish, invertebrates,

mammals, plants and reptiles, both within and outside protected areas—the research has spanned a diversity of questions and themes in the ecological and conservation sciences: from acoustic and behavioural ecology to disease ecology, from plant-animal interactions to forest processes and communities, conservation genetics and human–environment interactions.

Taken together, these projects traverse scales—from genes to ecosystems, from individual behaviour to landscape-level processes, and move across traditional disciplinary boundaries. In this way, the program has encouraged students' independence in their choice of research and willingness to engage with conservation questions from multiple vantage points.

The program's emphasis on rigorous training – from conceptualisation of research questions to fieldwork and analyses – has also translated into tangible scholarly output. About 70% of students (not including the most recently graduated cohort) have published their thesis findings in international peer-reviewed journals. As of February 2026, this has resulted in 97 publications—a significant contribution to conservation science from a master's program.

“As a Master's student, after being berated with his usual statement, “All that is ok, but what about your paper?”, I got flustered and asked, “Why should you use scientific publication as a measure of anyone's scientific contributions?”. He responded with characteristic equanimity, “Ok, I agree scientific publications may not be the best indicator. But can you think of something better? If you find something better, I will use that”. I was caught completely off-guard, as I was expecting a lecture about my impertinence. His ability to disarm with charming innocence made him one of the best collaborators in the conservation sector”, shared Divya Karnad, from the 2006–2008 batch (First published in a tribute to Dr Ajith Kumar by Mongabay India, 10th March 2025).

Yet the impact of capacity building unfolds over time. As AK often acknowledged, the true measure of such a program is not immediate, but cumulative. It lies in

the trajectories of its alumni and collaborators, the institutions they join and build, and the academic and conservation-oriented questions they continue to care about, ask and pursue.

Jagdish Krishnaswamy, added, *“For students whose futures belonged more with activism and the practice of conservation rather than academics, he was equally effective as a mentor, because he had partnerships across the country and very good relationships with Forest Departments and Government officials, and in that way, he was quite different from many of us.”*

AK served as Director of the Master's Program during its formative years, shaping its philosophy and operational culture. His leadership combined academic rigor with administrative pragmatism.

He navigated institutional constraints, cultivated partnerships, and ensured sustained funding through diverse sources, including the Wildlife Conservation Society, core funding from the Department of Atomic Energy through NCBS-TIFR, the Department of Science and Technology, the Wildlife Conservation Trust, the Tata Trusts and The Habitats Trust among others

In 2016, the program tentatively experimented with the addition of 2 international students to each cohort, to test its relevance in the wider Asian region. Over time, this scope has expanded. and as of 2024, through the Fonseca Leadership Program of Global Environment Facility, the program supports 5 international students from developing countries in Central, South, and Southeast Asia in each cohort. Thus far, seven students—from Nepal, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Mongolia—have graduated. Four are currently enrolled in PhD programs in Australia, Canada, and the United States.

After years with AK at the helm, leadership was passed on to Dr. Jayashree Ratnam in 2020, who continues to run the course at present. Under her leadership and with timely support and advice from AK, the program continues its work, with the present cohort (2024–2026) including five international

students: two from Laos, and one each from Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and the Philippines. This expansion reflects the program's growth and its efforts to reach beyond India to the wider Asian geography.

This is a natural extension of the founding mission to build conservation capacity across the biodiverse, developing tropics.

Alumni trajectories

More than 60% of alumni have gone on to pursue PhDs in ecology, wildlife, and conservation at leading universities in India and abroad. Alumni from the first three cohorts (2004–2010) now occupy leadership roles in research and conservation programs within NGOs in India and overseas. Others hold faculty positions in some of the country's premier institutions.

Over the years, a number of alumni have returned to the program to serve as affiliate faculty, teaching subsequent batches in the classroom and the field, and guiding or co-guiding student research. This continued engagement of alumni with the program creates a vibrant network that enables the younger cohorts and builds effective collaborations.

Beyond formal roles, alumni are engaged in conservation action on the ground: designing protected area management strategies, leading long-term ecological monitoring, advising on policy, and working at the interface of science and society. In this sense, the program's legacy is dispersed- in universities, government departments, and civil society organizations across the region. Capacity building is slow work, but with time, the seeds sown

under AK's stewardship have sprouted across the conservation landscape in India.

Two decades on, the numbers have added up: 149 graduates, 97 publications, international cohorts, alumni in leadership and academia. But beyond these metrics lies something more meaningful and less easily quantified: cross-generational conservationists who are working collaboratively to engage with wildlife and nature conservation.

Anish Andheria, an alumna from the first batch reflected, *"The MSc program in itself is an inanimate thing, something that we are attached to but cannot interact with. And Ajith is the proxy that gives it its form."*

The Master's Program in Wildlife Biology and Conservation stands as an enduring testament to AK's vision: that conserving nature demands not only love for the wild, but the disciplined cultivation of knowledge, skill, and responsibility.

AK also intuitively recognized the importance of an alumni association as a neutral platform for the alumni to engage collectively as a community. AK first floated the idea in 2008, and was instrumental in supporting the process which culminated in the formal creation of the first iteration of the Master's Program alumni association in 2012. The organization was fairly active from 2012 - 2016 in terms of advocacy, communicating to both central and state policy makers on matters pertaining to wildlife and habitat conservation. A renewed effort to revive the alumni network is currently underway.

Hi All

Yesterday (30th June) I stepped down from the MSc Wildlife program, something that I have been planning for some time.

This is not a good bye of any sort! Just informing you that I am stepped down from the MSc Program. That's all! Otherwise, nothing changes. I would continue to write reco letters; my home is open, with corners for people to crawl into for a night or two! If you want to stay for a several days in Bangalore (not months!) and can't find a place, please let me know in advance. I can take off, leaving the cat with you at home!

It's you guys who made my life in the last decade and half a most enjoyable one! I hope it would remain so!

Best regards

Ajith Kumar

Fig. 4: Ajith Sir's email to all the MSc program alumni after he retired as course director in 2020

A Mentor, A Guardian, A Family Member

To speak of Ajith Sir only as a teacher or program director would be to miss the essence of what he meant to those around him. Across years and cohorts, he became far more than an academic guide—he was a steady presence in moments of doubt, a source of quiet reassurance, and, often, the person students turned to first when life felt uncertain or overwhelming.

“When I had a health scare, one of the first people I reached out to was Ajith Sir. ‘Just eat fish,’ he said. He proceeded to narrate a story about his relative whose response to a heart condition was to become fitter than he ever had been. He also added that the person continued to have a drink every night! ‘Come home, I will make you fish. Everyday!’”, he said. In 10 short minutes, he’d disarmed my fears, brewed hope and extended help unconditionally. My friend, Avishkar Munje calls Ajith Sir, ‘Dumbledore’. He swears he has heard Ajith say, “help is available at NCBS if someone needs it”. I believe him!” shared Akshay Surendra, an alumna from the seventh cohort (First published in a tribute to Dr Ajith Kumar by Mongabay India, 10th March 2025).

Such moments—simple, disarming, deeply humane—defined his relationships with students. He had an intuitive ability to recognise vulnerability, and to respond without judgment or fanfare. Support came not as grand gestures, but as thoughtful, timely interventions that restored confidence and steadied resolve.

Uttara Mendiratta, from his first brood at NCBS, spoke of early challenges after joining the course, *“When I joined the M.Sc. program, I was terrified. After having a job for nearly seven years, the thought of returning to subjects like Math and Statistics (never my strong suit) felt overwhelming. Ajith immediately recognized my struggles and handed me books with titles like ‘Maths for 11th Graders,’ gently reassuring me while we laughed—we still teary-eyed from a meltdown. He had this rare gift of offering support without making you feel embarrassed or*

judged.” (First published in a tribute to Dr Ajith Kumar by Mongabay India, 10th March 2025).

His mentorship extended far beyond academic guidance. It lay in the relationships he chose to build—individual, attentive, and enduring. He took the time to know his students not just as researchers, but as people, understanding their fears, their aspirations, and the often unspoken uncertainties that accompanied both.

Rhea Lopez, shared in quiet reflection at the memorial, *“What has always stood out for me was his ability to form personal relationships, meaningful ones, with individual people he met and worked with. Maybe that’s what made him such a great primatologist. He took the time to get to know you, understand you without bias and see value in you when you didn’t see it in yourself.”*

K. Ullas Karanth, a friend of several decades and close collaborator through the program, shared in his memory after AK’s passing, *“Dr. Ajith Kumar [was] my friend from 1983 when he was studying lion-tailed macaques in the Anamalais. He has been my colleague and collaborator between 2004 to the present day, after I recruited him into CWS to lead the Master’s Program in Wildlife Biology and Conservation at NCBS. Ajith was a passionate wildlifer, a deep scholar, and incredibly affectionate and entertaining friend. Ajith inspired generations of young researchers and students, becoming their wise guru, funny uncle and even at times an agony aunt or a matchmaker.”*

AK had a knack for knowing just when he was needed, reflected through timely check-ins across over 150 students. He never neglected a student who was struggling, nor did he only champion those who shone. He modified his approach with each student based on their needs and always believed that people deserved second chances.

Rohit Chakravarty from the fifth batch spoke of how AK always knew when to provide support and when to push, *“We’ve all had a lot of falls and faced failure. That’s usually when a course director may abandon you for bringing shame to the course, but instead, that was when*

Ajith Sir adopted us more [...] in the end, after adopting us when we were taking falls, he helped rebuild all of us. That's something that only he could have done. For all the rebuilding that he's done, I'm very thankful to him, and a lot of us have gone on to do many things even after falling to our lowest."

There was, too, an immediacy to his generosity—a willingness to step in, without hesitation, when his students needed him most.

Swapna Nelaballi endearingly recounted how he made grand gestures seem insignificant, and how he would truly go above and beyond to support his students' careers, "In 2015 when I was offered a PhD position, my first call was to Sir. He was overjoyed, his excitement matching my own, if not exceeding it. But soon reality set in [...] I would have to leave the country, and how on earth would I take my baby cat with me? I scoured the internet looking for ways to transport a cat to America. [...] the logistics, the cost, it was impossible [...] I began to wonder, was the PhD worth it if it meant losing my baby. One afternoon as I sat with Ajith Sir over one of our many lunches at the NCBS cafeteria, I told him about my predicament, half hopeful half desperate, I asked if he or

anyone from our wildlife community would be willing to take him. Without batting an eyelid, he said yes."

Taken together, these recollections speak to a form of mentorship that was deeply relational. Ajith Sir did not simply teach or advise; he invested—in people, in their journeys, and in their well-being. In doing so, he created a community bound not just by shared training, but by care, trust, and an enduring sense of belonging. And it is this community, still-growing, that now stands by each other through moral support, professional collaborations and joint initiatives, and contributes to shaping the next generation of wildlife biologists and conservationists.

Carrying Forward a Rich Legacy

Legacies are often spoken of in terms of measurable achievements, but Ajith Sir's legacy resists such neat accounting. It lives instead in the culture he cultivated, the values he embodied, and the many lives he touched. In a voice that captured the significance of Ajith Kumar in his life, Jagdish Krishnaswamy closed with his final memories of him, "Till the very end, he was a wildlife scientist. [Fig. 5] This was 1st March [2025], and those are Sherman traps being set by the students.



Fig. 5: The last picture of Ajith Sir, on a field trip in Pachmarhi with the 11th batch of NCBS MSc students, courtesy, Dr Jagdish Krishnaswamy.

We had several gerbils coming out, they were all being measured, tails being marked and so on, and there was one shrew! One of the Gerbils had its ear punched, and Vivek [Ramachandran] mentioned that it was probably from 2-3 years ago. Ajith said, 'Wow, that must be a really long-lived one, since usually they get predated upon...' and he went on to say that it was quite an interesting find! [...] He was active as a wildlife scientist until the very last day."

Even at the very end, his engagement with the natural world remained undiminished—an enduring reminder that for him, science and natural history were not merely his profession alone, but a way of being.

Herman Ramesh, an alumna of the 10th batch, shared how humbling it was to interact with AK given that he had already retired by the time this cohort joined the program, *"We were very lucky as a batch because we got to witness Ajith Sir amongst his NCBS cubs at the 20-year reunion of the MSc program. At NCBS, we call all our faculty by their first names, but Ajith Sir was always Ajith 'Sir' and that reunion really showed us why. Seated in that room of about 150 people, all of whom had come before us, was a testament to his legacy."*

That legacy is perhaps most visible in the community he helped build—a network of students, collaborators, and colleagues whose lives intersect through the program, and whose work continues to shape conservation science and action across the country.

Vijayaditya Singh Radhod, a current student with the ongoing 11th batch of the program that was with AK on a field trip when he passed on, closed the memorial in 2025 with, *"We were the last batch to be fortunate enough to spend time with Ajith Sir, but in just a short period of time, it became abundantly clear that he was brilliant, benevolent and boldly witty. Even in his last moments in Pachmarhi with us, he was clicking pictures with flora while trekking up on a hill in search of vulture nests [...] it was a reminder that if this doyen of the field hasn't stopped learning, why should any of us?"*

His example—of genuine curiosity, of joy in discovery, of humility before knowledge—continues to guide those who follow.

Krithi K. Karanth, a faculty associated with the program and a long-term mentee and friend of Ajith Sir's summarised collective sentiment by sharing, *"We all have a huge bar to uphold. [...] I hope in some small way, each of us can take his spirit of endless love, ridiculous humour and friendship forward. Each of us were very lucky to have known you, Ajith, and now we all have to up our human game."*

To carry forward his legacy, then, is not only to pursue excellence in conservation science, but to uphold a way of engaging with the world that is generous, curious, and empathetic. It is to recognise that the most enduring contributions are not only those that advance knowledge, but those that support and enable others on their journeys.

Note

Some of the quotes in this article were given to Divya Karnad for an obituary written for Mongabay-India (<https://india.mongabay.com/2025/03/an-ode-to-joy-remembering-ajith-kumar-obituary/>).

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Citation: Ramakrishna, I., Y. C. Krishna, V. Ramachandran & J. Ratnam (2026). Sowing Seeds for Conservation: Dr. Ajith Kumar and the Making of a Wildlife Master's Program. In *Zoo's Print* 41(3): 14–24.