

Legacy

It is a tricky word, legacy. In the tomes you find it written, it is a small yet dense polysyllabic object that appears easy enough to pick up, but surprises you with the weight it bears. Once in your palm, it demands that you state its measure, as though the very act of holding it is a rite of appraisal. It traces a path of time on your hand, anchored in the past, spreading out into the future. And it draws a geography around it, mapping the coordinates over which it operates. Your evaluation done, you can set it gingerly back down again. Its gravity settles around it, creating rippling contours that from now on will define how we speak of the one who left this legacy behind for us to contend with.

I'm sitting here, holding this object in my hand, doing my best to reconcile it with the person that Dr. Ajith Kumar was. Perhaps I'll have to ask him himself. Reconstruct him from his ashes. I'm transported immediately to a dimly lit Kodava joint in Mysore, Ajith nursing his rum while ordering another fire pork. He looks at me quizzically, a question and a hint of mischief in his eye. I try to

explain: *"We are building an edifice, here, Ajith, from the pieces that remain of your life. A legacy".* Ajith breaks into an unexpected guffaw, and the entire serious enterprise comes tumbling down. *"What do you think I am? A guess-my-weight fairground attraction? Drink your silly tonic and lime. And let me tell you the perfect recipe for natural hair dye – not that you are going to need it much longer, from what I can see".*

What frustrates this careful legacy project is Ajith himself. Given a choice between leaving a legacy and sharing a drink with his pals, I think I know which Ajith would choose. And yet his spirit looms large and there must be some accounting for its enduring impact.

Being a wildlife ecologist in India today is not for the faint of heart. In our lifetimes we have watched helplessly as the careful safeguards of natural systems we fought so hard to secure are being actively dismantled to make way for a certain brash version of modernity. The species we love retreat further into oblivion, the habitats they live in,



Ajith Kumar at the Student Meet on Ecology, Evolution and Conservation Science (SMEECS) Bangalore, 2008.
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**Ajith Kumar at sea, on the
Big Eyes Research Cruise, 2013.
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fraying and tattered. The climate crisis has forced us to relearn everything we thought we knew about the resilience of the natural world as it struggles to cope with this new normality. The wilds themselves recede from many of us, walled off by a hobbling permit bureaucracy, while an increasingly authoritarian dispensation does its best to snuff out what remains of democratic dissent. Our institutions of wildlife knowledge and conservation action, hemmed in by funding restrictions and governmental hypervigilance, have been reduced to being brokers of shallow optimism or, worse still, simpering service providers. If there was a crisis at hand thirty years ago, today we see our coupled natural and human systems spiralling in a free fall, and we are somehow even less equipped to arrest it than we were a generation ago. Small wonder then that most of our lot are weeping philosophers, filled with righteous indignation and a rising sense of the futility of the task ahead.

It wasn't as though Ajith was unaware of the magnitude of this challenge. Yet, in the face of

it all, he maintained an indomitable joyfulness that was difficult to fathom. His was a ministry of creative mischief. Of evangelical playfulness.

The world, he seemed to suggest, was created in play, and for those of us who love the natural world, play should be at the heart of our enterprise. Otherwise, Ajith would say, what point is there to what we do? There is something of the radical genius in this framing of the enterprise. To counter the catastrophes looming around us, we have been told by our ever-so-wise conservation leaders, that we need more heroes, courageous wildlife biologists, struggling against the elements and the agents of evil, taking on epic quests to save the world. Ajith's advice is different. To be effective, he seems to say, we need fewer heroes and more court jesters. Because the jester is a sage with a harlequin hat, and can speak truth to power more effectively with a pratfall than a drawn sword. Play is not merely a way to maintain joy. It is a way to navigate power.

Ajith spent most of his career in research and conservation institutions big and small. And he was an advisor, counsellor and friend to many others, not least our own. Yet, somewhere inside I think he was deeply wary of the process of institutionalisation. Institutions are spaces where ideas come to die. Regardless of the soaring goals with which they are created, in time, institutions fall victim to the dangers of professionalism, where compliance, bureaucracy and productivity take over to make subjects of their members, so they can more easily be managed. Vocation becomes purpose, purpose becomes means, means becomes ends, and ends becomes self-preservation – of the institution, not the vocation.

Sitting at the heart of these institutions, Ajith still managed to escape this corrupting influence, always clear headed and pragmatic about what he was doing. Moribund as they are, institutions have their purpose if you use them well. For Ajith, the institution was a convenience. A space he could use to accomplish his real life's work – fostering a community. If play is central to the life of the wildlifer, then doing it in company is key. His gleeful love for wild nature was unquestioned, but it was trumped by the utter joy he felt in the company of people who loved nature as he did.

He placed his trust in something fundamental to the way knowledge is generated, spread and made effective in the world, where it is mediated through simple human interactions. While these interactions can sometimes be contained within the confines of institutional structures, they flourish much more naturally when you are out in shola grasslands complaining about tick bites, or seasick on an ocean-bound vessel, looking for whales, or in a toddy shop in Kerala, eyes streaming from a particularly spicy beef fry.

Knowledge generated by this community is thick with shared experience: somatically embedded knowledge, rich in anecdote and full of laughter. In the wake of his passing, there has been an outpouring of this precious anecdotal record,

multiple rich seams of memory-making that connect us with Ajith, with each other, and with the natural world we shared with him. You can, of course, subject this happy, unruly trove to an analytical process, and you can formalise this within the confines of an institutional procedure, but you will have captured the least interesting or useful part of this collective experience. The community, in Ajith's framing, is the convivial counter, keeping alive everything institutions were built to serve but forgot how to do so along the way. If Ajith had a creed, it was this. The power of our community lies in company. Company is where stories of the world are shared. Where ideas are formed together. Where the energy to shape those ideas into projects is generated. Where creative dissent is born. And where change can begin. So, what can we say of the legacy of this man?

He was sage. He was jester. He was friend. He reminded us always of what is true and what is important. He showed us the subversive power of relationship. He made us look beyond ourselves and our own little battles.

He gave us play. He gave us community. He took us back to the wild. These are ours to keep alive.

Ajith's impact on our lives can never be defined with such a sombre word as legacy. I'll place it back into the tome where I found it and head out for a swim among the rocks near my house, along with my wife, Teresa. We are on the lookout for young-of-the-year groupers, that sometimes hide in the crevices. The house wine in the fridge is rotgut enough for Ajith to enjoy. And my mum has made some tongue *moile* that I think he would have liked.

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Citation: Arthur, R. (2026). Legacy. In *Zoo's Print* 41(8): 03–05.