

Dr Ajith Kumar: primatologist, educator, leader

This essay is a modified version of an article that first appeared in the Centre for Wildlife Studies' "Rewilding India" book celebrating 40 years since its inception.

Dr. Ajith Kumar's passion for primate wildlife biology ignited soon after his Master's degree in Zoology. He participated in a government survey from 1977 to 1980, aimed at assessing monkey populations in South India. There were reports that monkeys had been exported to Europe and the USA in the late 1950s, as a result of which, their populations had plummeted. In 1977, Prime Minister Morarji Desai was told that these monkeys were being used for military research, to test the effects of nuclear radiation. Dismayed by these reports, the Government of India launched a project to assess the population of monkeys nationwide. Dr. Kumar traveled to several hundred villages in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu, to estimate urban and rural populations of monkeys. During this time, he developed an interest in the ecology and biology of Lion-tailed macaques (LTMs) that he studied as part of his doctoral research at Cambridge University (Box 1). In 1981, Dr. Kumar began his field research on LTMs at the Anamalai National Park in Tamil Nadu.

It was here, in the Anamalais in 1984, that Dr K. Ullas Karanth, tiger biologist and founder of the Centre for Wildlife Studies, first met Dr Ajith Kumar. Dr Karanth's visit was prompted by his own interest in the species. Earlier in 1978, the American biologist Steven Green suggested, after a survey, that there were practically no LTMs in Karnataka. But Dr. Karanth had observed LTMs in Karnataka before. The second time the two met was in March 1988, when Dr. Karanth was conducting a survey of LTMs in the Bhagamandala Range in Karnataka (Box 2). Contrary to Steven

Green's findings, Dr Karanth's surveys suggested that a significant population of LTMs, about 10,000, existed within Karnataka.

Despite the lack of email or phone, Dr. Kumar and Dr. Karanth maintained a connection and followed each other's work. After obtaining his Ph.D. degree, Dr. Kumar joined the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) in 1989. From 1992 to 2003, he worked at the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON) in Coimbatore. In August 2003, Dr. Karanth approached him asking if he would be interested in leading a Master's programme in Wildlife Biology. Dr. Karanth had planned a multidisciplinary course grounded in ecology and biology, and with subjects such as advanced statistics, needed for analysing field data.

In 2003, Dr. Ajith Kumar joined CWS, and WCS – India, with the specific task of launching

Box 1

I wondered why LTMs were so rare. So, I started looking at their life cycle, birth rates, survival rates, and food habits. (I found that) their population cannot increase very fast as they give birth only once in two and a half years. They also start giving birth late in life, around five to six years of age, compared to three years for other monkeys. I found that they primarily eat fruits, and need large areas to forage for fruits which are difficult to find throughout the year.

- Dr Ajith Kumar

MSc Wildlife students with Ullas Karanth, AJT Johnsingh, Ajith Kumar and other faculty.



Ajith Kumar, Ullas Karanth and other faculty with outgoing students of the second batch of the M.Sc. Wildlife Programme, 2008. © From the WhatsApp group, Ajith Kumar, In Memoriam.



Box 2

The local range officer in Bhagamandala did not take me seriously until Ullas arrived in his Gypsy. As we finished planning our survey, the Range Officer passed me a slip of paper gesticulating to pass it on to Ullas. In it was written ‘Sir, please, I want three more years in this range!’ Only then did I realize the influence that Ullas had in the bureaucracy then. In the evening at the forest rest house in Talakaveri, the same Range Officer arrived with a bottle of McDowell Premium whiskey which Ullas promptly declined. The next morning this officer informed his Forester in Mundrote over the wireless that Ullas Karanth and his friend were coming down to the forest, and that he should show them LTMs and a tiger! Ullas said the tiger was not needed! That day we saw one male LTM!

What Ullas and I share(d) is a deep interest in species ecology and biology, an important element in wildlife conservation. His work has improved the understanding of several species, such as the tiger. That is something I appreciate, being a biologist myself.

- Dr Ajith Kumar

the Master’s programme that Dr. Karanth had envisioned, and to direct the programme. An MoU had already been signed among the partners – CWS to fund, NCBS to host, NIAS to advise, and Manipal University (MAHE) as academic host. In December, they advertised the course and received many applications within a short period (Box 3). Dr. Ajith Kumar was first Director of the Master’s programme in Wildlife Biology and Conservation, initiated by Dr. K. Ullas Karanth and founded by CWS, and now run by the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS).

The Master’s programme started in June 2004, selecting 15 passionate and stellar students. Their tuition was waived, thanks to funds raised by Dr. Karanth from the Wildlife Conservation Society, New York; he had also donated his \$200,000 J. Paul Getty Award received for Conservation Leadership. An academic committee was set up to design the course. Along with Dr. Kumar, the committee included several eminent scientists such as Dr. Karanth, Dr. Mahesh Rangarajan (now a Professor of Environmental Studies and History at Ashoka University), Dr. Anindya Sinha (professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies), and Dr. Jagdish Krishnaswamy (now the Dean of the School of Environment and Sustainability at the Indian Institute of Human Settlements). They discussed the syllabus and structured the programme to offer multiple courses: courses included statistics, social science, environmental history, ecological history, mammalogy, vertebrate ecology, GIS and remote sensing, plant-animal interactions, ecosystem ecology, and science communication, among others.

The program was offered once every two years. It had a distinctive structure that set it apart from other universities and institutions in India. The course began with three semesters of coursework, and ended with a research project in the final semester. Research projects could be undertaken anywhere in India, with full funding provided. Students were required to submit and defend a project proposal in a public seminar. Each student

was assigned two or more advisors to guide their research. A distinguishing feature of this programme has been that more than 75% of the dissertation projects were published in high quality peer-reviewed journals.

As the programme gained repute, other institutions showed interest in supporting it (Box 3). The Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR) was affiliated with the programme in 2008, and supported it with fellowships. The Government of India's Department of Science and Technology, and the Tata Trust, supported it from 2014 to 2019. As of 2024, 135 students have graduated from the programme, and over 100 dissertations have been published in reputed journals. Dr. Kumar and Dr. Karanth jointly mentored students who studied unusual species such as goral, musk deer, and woodpeckers in remote locations. Many graduates of the Master's programme went on to do their Ph.D. and established themselves in premier research institutions such as NCBS, IISc, Krea University, and Ashoka University. Some joined conservation NGOs such as ATREE, Dakshin, International Snow Leopard Trust, NCF, The Habitats Trust, and Wildlife Conservation Trust.

In 2020, after a successful stint of 16 years, leading the program, Dr. Kumar stepped down as Director of the program.

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Box 3

There was only one Master's programme in Wildlife Biology at that time offered by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII). But the WII faculty was in-house and they did not have expertise to teach certain subjects like environmental history or statistics. Because the structure was so interesting, it attracted faculty from CWS along with ATREE, Dakshin, IISc, NCF, NCBS, and WCS-India. Bangalore is very ideal that way because there are many institutes here.

This made it possible to run the programme with faculty from many different backgrounds, which is otherwise difficult in one single institution. When we started the Master's programme, there was no wildlife biology research at NCBS. The primary focus was molecular biology research. The programme became so well known that wildlife biologists started applying here for faculty positions. It (has) fostered a new generation of wildlife biologists with critical thinking skills, and a fundamental understanding of wildlife biology and ecology, and the implications of that for conservation.

- Dr. Ajith Kumar