

Ajith: the go-to person

I first met Ajith on my second day at Zoo Outreach Organisation (Zooreach). Sally Walker, the founder of Zooreach, and I, were visiting the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON) campus, then a rented office in Kalampalayam. We were on a two-day visit to work on the Red Data Book for the Birds of India. We were greeted by Ajith's typical caterpillar upper-lipped smile and I, a greenhorn in wildlife and conservation, felt immediately welcomed and comfortable. The combination of Ajith Kumar and Ravi Sankaran (another stalwart of the discipline), were highlights of my first foray into wildlife biology and conservation.

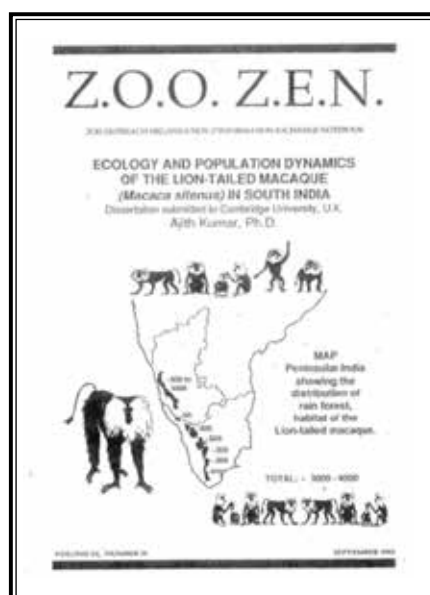
Three months in, I had another opportunity to spend time with Ajith. It was at a workshop on the Population and Habitat Viability Analysis (PHVA) of Lion-tailed macaques (LTMs) *Macaca silenus*. Zooreach had organised this workshop in collaboration with Arignar Anna Zoo in Chennai, the Central Zoo Authority, and scientists and conservationists from various institutions, at Vandalur in Chennai, in October of 1993. At the workshop, I was stuck with the working group that compiled demographic information, patterns in reproduction and migration, and threats to LTMs.



Ajith Kumar with Mewa Singh and Rauf Ali at the South Asian Primate CAMP workshop in Coimbatore in 2002.

Ajith was the go-to person for this information: he had completed his PhD on the topic and had published his thesis in an issue of ZOO ZEN, a monthly technical compilation of Zooreach. Ajith's thesis on LTMs, and his personal observations of LTMs, in particular, were tremendously important for the working group to model overall and subpopulation-level extinction probabilities (on Vortex software) as a response to ongoing threats to the species. Ajith's contribution to the breeding biology of wild LTMs (along with forester Mangalraj Johnson), and knowledge of captive breeding of the species by Don Lindburg and team from the San Diego Zoo in USA, were instrumental in strategising the first coordinated captive breeding program for LTMs in India. The proposal was to repatriate viable captive individuals from member institutions of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums in the USA to facilities in India. What happened (or not!) subsequently is another story, but I was very influenced by Ajith's contributions in the workshop. The outcome of the workshop was published as a report in 1994.

The cover of the September 1993 issue of ZOO ZEN published by Zooreach with Ajith's PhD Dissertation.





The first CAMP workshop with the BCPP in Kukrail on Himalayan medicinal plants.

After the PHVA workshop, a few of us participants had the opportunity to visit Valparai plateau and its various rainforest fragments in the southern Western Ghats with Ajith. We were in search of those elusive primates hiding high up in the canopy. It was magical to be amidst a 40+ strong troop of LTMs at Puduthottam Estate. In the relatively dense canopy of native shade trees in the coffee estate, many of the LTMs sat just above us; they were occasionally visited by Great Indian Hornbills *Buceros bicornis* and Malabar Giant Squirrels *Ratufa indica*. All through our visit, we were regaled by various stories from the field by Ajith. This visit fills me with solastalgia each time I visit Valparai now and see LTMs in Puduthottam, their population burgeoning and overflowing in a highly degraded habitat.

Ajith was a big fan of what Zooreach used to do, especially its use of new tools and processes introduced in the India chapter of what was then the Captive Breeding Specialist Group (now called Conservation Planning Specialist Group) of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)'s Species Survival Commission. By 1996, we had conducted six PHVAs for single species action planning, and three Conservation Assessment and Management Plan (CAMP) workshops to assess multiple species as per the IUCN Red List.

One morning in August 1996, Ajith dropped by our office and asked Sally and me if there was any way to prioritise species for conservation. He went on to introduce us to the planned national undertaking called the Biodiversity Conservation Prioritization Project for which different organizations were given the responsibility to look at ecological, social, and species attributes.

Ajith, through his association with SACON and with him, being a "species" person, was given the responsibility of species prioritisation. He knew Zooreach had done species assessments before, and had approached us for help with the effort. Sally and I were ecstatic to hear this; we had



Ajith delivering the welcome address to the participants of the Indian amphibian assessments at Utkal University in Bhubaneswar in 1993.

assessed the IUCN status of 100 medicinal plants in three workshops. We presented the entire CAMP process to Ajith, and he was excited.

He jumped at this opportunity for collaboration between our organizations. Later, in October 1996, Sally and I presented our prioritisation process to a gathering of decision makers at World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). Our conservation prioritisation process was adopted. Ajith, Sally, and I spent a lot of time together, planning the various workshops, putting together experts and compiling checklists. We eventually conducted seven workshops, one workshop almost every month, from January to October, 1997. The output from these species prioritisation exercises was the first to be compiled and published as part of the Biodiversity Conservation Prioritization Project.

It was a proud moment for us all. Of course, it was also interesting to see the way Ajith handled various bureaucratic hurdles, financial hiccups, and other red tape that marred the entire process. He made it easy and smooth for Sally and me to work through the workshop processes; there were no glitches and we marched through the various assessments.

I used to visit Ajith at his home in Kovaipudur, now in the outskirts of Coimbatore. It was usually in the evenings, several of his colleagues would be there, and the atmosphere was quite jolly, raucous, and highly spirited. Those insightful and shoulder-jerking laughter sessions were typical for any such meeting with Ajith, irrespective of location and situation. Be it CAMP workshops across the country, or Gangtok during Ajith's work on small mammals of the eastern Himalaya, or primate assessments in Coimbatore, Phnom Penh, and Singapore, or in Bangalore after lectures to postgraduates on IUCN Red List trainings and small mammal field techniques: I had several opportunities to spend memorable times with him.

A silent bow.

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