

Dr. Ajith Kumar: an otter amongst primates

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When Dr. Ajith Kumar passed away on March 1, 2025 on a field trip, it shook the world of Indian wildlife biology. Soon after, a WhatsApp group would form with hundreds of students, colleagues and well-wishers. A couple of days after, a message on the WhatsApp group for his memorial enquired about his cat. But Malli would be fine because she inhabited many homes. Much like his beloved cat, Ajith had many institutional homes, and each one thought he belonged to them. Ajith had a special place in everyone's life.

Many encomiums have and will be written, as they should be. Ajith was an extraordinary person, in the true sense of that word. He was a passionate primatologist and exceptional wildlife biologist, but so are many others. He had an unquenchable thirst for travel to India's wildest places, but he shared that with his brethren. He was a fine scientist, but he was not alone in that. He was a kind mentor and colleague, but some others are too.

Ajith was more than all that. His endless charm, the constant wit, an almost inexplicable calm in the face of all the slings and arrows of life such as it is, endeared him to just about everyone he encountered. To his academic colleagues, government officials, forest officers, students; to his own mentors, his peers, the next generation, the one after that, the list goes on and on. In a community where success is measured by individual brilliance, Ajith was the finest of collaborators. In an ecosystem where conservationists hold vitriolic, polarised opinions, Ajith walked the tightrope with ease, as if it were a

stroll in his favourite forest. In a field where conflict is common, Ajith was unflappable. In a world where pettiness is all too common, Ajith was generous to a fault with his boundless enthusiasm. With his stories, his ideas, with his affection.

Ajith began his research career in 1974 following a master's degree in Zoology from the University of Kerala. As a research fellow with the Zoological Survey of India in the late 1970s, his academic journey started with the enigmatic lion-tailed macaque (*Macaca silenus*) in the forests of the Western Ghats. In 1987, he went on to complete a doctoral degree, the first on the species, from Cambridge, under the guidance of Prof. David Chivers. Following his return, Ajith went on to teach and guide research at India's premier wildlife



Ajith at Cancona beach, Goa, 2007. © Second batch of MSc students.



Ajith and Malli at his home. © Priyanjana Pramanik.

institutions such as the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) and the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON). During this period, he led several research projects not only related to primatology but also dealing with rainforest ecology and fragmentation, species diversity and small mammal ecology and conservation. He guided several students during this period and many of them have continued his legacy, becoming experts in their own right.

In 2004, with the Wildlife Conservation Society, the Centre for Wildlife Studies and other like-minded institutions, Ajith established the Master's Program in Wildlife Biology and Conservation at the National Centre for Biological Sciences (Bangalore). With over 10 batches of students from different parts of India and beyond, this programme is currently one of the most sought after and productive enterprises in the Indian conservation sphere. During these years, Ajith also served as an advisor and mentor to many wildlife and conservation organisations in India. In 2024, fulfilling a long-held dream, Ajith conceptualized

and convened the Indian Wildlife Ecology Conference (IWECC) which witnessed wide participation from researchers all over the country. Both the Master's course at the NCBS as well as the IWECC conference will continue to benefit from his legacy and vision.

To have your (strong) points of view, and yet accommodate a diversity of others, in fact to embrace them, is a very special skill. Ajith was thus uniquely positioned to be the founding director of his Master's programme which he led and advised for 20 years. He also brought that particular flavour to the many faculty positions and advisory roles he held in institutions across the country in his professional career.

Above all this, he was the teller of tales, a purveyor of odd ideas, a connoisseur of cheap rum, a fine fryer of fish (!) and an irresistible wave of merriment. He often said that he wanted to be reborn as an otter. Their love of water, their fondness for fish, some things about their social structure perhaps, resonated with him. Words will fail to capture all that was Ajith, his ineffable aura.

Ajith Kumar may have passed away, but he will live long in all our memories. What better tribute can we pay than to try to be just that little bit more like him.

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Kartik Shanker

Many of Ajith Kumar's students and friends remember the exact moment that he became part of their life. But when I look back on the 1990s when we became acquainted, he just seemed to have been part of my journey throughout. The fragmentation project of the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, which was largely conceived by him, was eerily similar to my PhD, except that their project spanned many landscapes (and researchers), whereas mine was confined to the Upper Nilgiris (and my field staff). Both were based on the theory of island biogeography: where their project looked at both natural and anthropogenic fragments, mine focussed entirely on shola-grassland montane ecosystems. Both involved amphibians, reptiles and small mammals. With all these ingredients, no wonder we discussed the project with great excitement every time we met. Fittingly, he was my thesis examiner – there was red ink before and beverages afterwards.

Many years later, Ajith Kumar and I ran the Indo-US Knowledge Initiative project together in collaboration with Dr. Barry Noon of the Colorado State University in Fort Collins, USA. The project was based on knowledge exchange and capacity building and largely involved workshops, training and faculty visits to encourage collaborations. While many projects and partnerships were seeded through this programme, it had little for us personally in terms of research or collaboration. But Ajith Kumar and Barry Noon both believed that this was worth far more than many of the other things we did as scientists. They were both amazing role models for a community that otherwise privileges individual success over collective benefit.

Over the years, Ajith supported innumerable initiatives that I was involved in. He persuaded the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS) to support the magazine, Current Conservation, during its early years, specifically for it to be sent to Forest Departments and educational institutions around the country. He was one of the early editors of Conservation and Society and a huge source of support during its transformation into a globally recognised journal. He was a staunch supporter of NCBS's support for the field station, Andaman and Nicobar Environment Team (ANET). I could go on. Ajith's capacity for supporting ideas, projects and people was limitless – not only was he enthusiastic about things that he found exciting himself, but he could be energised by your passion. And that is rare and priceless.

Meera Anna Oommen

Many years apart from each other, Ajith and I studied at the same college in Kerala, a unique institution not particularly known for its academic prowess, but for its energetic student body which had a dubious reputation for taking up cudgels against the state government. During our first meeting at the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), we bonded fondly over common memories of these misdemeanours - demonstrations at the Trivandrum Secretariat, stone-throwing, and the occasional arson attempt on public property, promptly followed by being lathi charged, tear gassed and pursued by the police, and eventually taking refuge in the Indian Coffee House, which served as a safe haven. We barely remembered the causes we fought for, but just that there was a distinct attraction to the politics of EMS Namboodiripad, who was a defining figure during both our tenures as students.

Some years later, Ajith was a PI of the fragmentation project at the WII where I joined as a researcher on the Himalayan biodiversity project. As both were funded by some surplus funds from the PL 480 scheme, the US Fish and Wildlife Service was a partner on both projects. Ajith was a sounding board for us researchers, and with his Co-PIs Barry Noon and Ravi Chellam, we had a great many discussions, and the meetings and mid-term assessments were merry events because of these three individuals. We learnt a lot in the process, not just about research, but life in general.

Ajith, Kartik (Shanker) and I moved to Bangalore around the same time. Ajith was setting up the Master's programme at NCBS and the initial phase was very exciting as he designed the course with his old accomplices such as Barry Noon and Jack Frazier. Since we lived in the same apartment complex, he was also roped into child care duties that he performed with great ease. Some years later, he got his pound of flesh as I had to reciprocate by teaching environmental history to the NCBS students. Ajith was also one of the first advisory board members of Dakshin Foundation, the NGO that we started, and he continued to support us all through the years.

Our last unfulfilled project was to make sausages out of wild boar in Kerala. Although our views on many issues differed considerably, we discussed the possibility of developing a circular economy model involving the sustainable use of wild pigs involved in conflict. Ajith was greatly excited by the possibility that this would be a locally acceptable solution in the Central Travancore landscape, a place where both he and I originally hailed from. Alas it was not to be, but time will tell.