

Ten lessons from observing Dr Ajith Kumar

“Are you *sure* you want to collect monkey poop?” was the only question Ajith asked me in my interview, conducted over a phone call. My answer was an enthusiastic “Yes”, and that is how I spent a year working with Dr Ajith Kumar in Valparai, Tamil Nadu.

I was twenty years old and after completing my undergraduate studies in zoology, I decided to take a year off to intern on a field project. I wanted to have a realistic sense of what conservation research entailed, and see if it was a direction I wanted to pursue seriously. At the time, Ajith was a principal scientist at the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History in Coimbatore, and one of the goals of his Valparai project was to study the hormonal cycles of female lion-tailed macaques *Macaca silenus*. I had to follow a large troop of these macaques all day around the Puduthottam area, learn to identify individuals (especially adult females), and carefully collect fecal samples over their oestrus cycles.

The fieldwork was absorbing because it tested -- and extended -- my physical and emotional stamina. But intellectually, I was bored stiff after two months. He responded to my confession with his characteristic throaty chuckle and I continued to work with him for a year, learning about a range of topics from chi-square tests to the best way to eat *kappa*. We stayed in touch for over two decades, but sporadically so because, on a few occasions, we profoundly disagreed over some professional matters. Nevertheless, I first met Ajith when I was at an impressionable age, and his approach to research and teaching greatly enriched my perspective. Here are ten assorted lessons I learned from watching Ajith although I do not claim to meet his standards:

Read widely and regularly

Ajith read a wide range of books with interest and appreciation, from Somerset Maugham’s *Far Eastern Tales* to Thomas Struhsaker’s *Ecology of an African Rain Forest*. Every time he came to



Ajith Kumar with students in northeast India, looking up at Pig-tailed macaques. © Conservation Initiatives.

the Valparai field station, he would bring along printouts of research papers he was reading, or a new book on ecology, and urge me to read them too – there would be sheaves of papers floating all over the place because he never remembered to staple the printouts together. His faded photocopied version of Seigel and Castellan’s textbook introduced me to non-parametric statistics (and he would explain clearly *why* I had to use one test and not the other in a particular case).

Sit with your questions

I understood only a fraction of what I read and Ajith would patiently listen to all my questions but respond to only some. As a teacher now, I recognise that it is important to *not* answer every question a student has. I understand the pedagogical value of his giving me space to search for some answers on my own: it taught me to enjoy the process for its own sake, and cope with the possibility of being on the wrong track altogether.

Laugh at yourself

Ajith often shared anecdotes about his own mistakes. One of his favourite stories was about how he thoroughly misunderstood an invitation when he was a doctoral student in the University of Cambridge and, somehow, ended up running a marathon while wearing a hot woollen sweater. It was inspiring to see someone that accomplished accept they had less-than-stellar moments and find humour in them.

Make room for mistakes

Ajith would often reassure me that it was alright to make mistakes or to fail at some data collection target we had set out to achieve, but he was very particular that I reported everything honestly. “Zero is also a data point” he would remind me. That nudged me to be a little braver than I might otherwise have been; I still repeat that line to myself and my students when we take a misstep or when a line of inquiry fails.



Ajith Kumar, looking up, Valparai. © Divya Mudappa & Shankar Raman.

Argue with logic, not seniority

I sometimes contested Ajith’s views on research, or had trouble accepting a perspective I had read about in one of his books. He used to respond each time with logic or his reasons for subscribing to that point of view – I never heard him draw on his age or seniority to close a discussion. It was an impressive demonstration of communicative rationality.

Engage with people

I saw Ajith chat with checkpoint guards, tea shop owners, colleagues, retired field assistants and doctoral students with the same level of courtesy. He was also quick to encourage anyone who showed an interest in higher education. I learnt much later that he had studied in a Malayalam-medium government school but eventually taught himself English in college. However, his spellings and grammar were so sound that several colleagues, including another of my mentors Ravi Sankaran, used to send him their manuscripts to review their use of both statistics and infinitives. This approachability also explains why Ajith had so many collaborative projects regardless of which institution he was affiliated with.

Get your design right

Once he became reconciled to the fact that I was not really interested in ‘looking up’ i.e. primatology and was instead keen on ‘looking down’ i.e. herpetology, he spent many evenings on the verandah of the Valparai field station telling me about research designs that people had used to study various elusive species and the challenges they had faced. His main point was that a researcher should think of a design that suited the natural history of the species as well as the more formal requirements of sampling and analyses. It was a valuable course on how to think in an integrated manner.

Understand your field site

Ajith had a deep, interdisciplinary understanding of the field site, well beyond the boundaries of his own research. He would recommend C.R.T. Congreve’s historical account *The Anamallais* to every researcher who came to work in Valparai and was a fantastic field botanist. He also knew about the socioeconomic status of different communities in the area, could rattle off literacy and employment rates, and loved to tell a series of darkly funny stories about the prevalence of mental health problems in the plateau.

Keep your notes

Ajith always carried palm-sized hardbound notebooks with him for jotting down various observations. He was evangelical about maintaining field journals, and *keeping* them to look back and learn from. That I still have my field botany notes from Valparai, 25 years later, is a testament to his influence.

Make a subject relatable

I once expressed appreciation for his enthusiasm to teach. He chuckled and said “Mini [his wife] recently banned me from teaching Ammu [his daughter] history”. When asked why, he confessed that on drives with his daughter, he had been pointing out detergent advertisements painted on boulders along the highways (Rin? Or was it Regal?) and telling her that those were Ashokan edicts because she found history a dull subject.

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