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Memories of **Dr. Ajith Kumar**

Shaping the future of wildlife ecology
and conservation in India

1952-2025

Edited by
Y. Chaitanya Krishna
Sanjay Molur

Zooreach Annual
Report 2025-26

In this issue

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Editorial

The special issue dedicated to Dr. Ajith Kumar was a long time in the making, and the editors thank 18 authors for contributing seven articles to this issue. Dr. Ajith was one among a select few who was associated with almost all Indian higher education institutions of repute in wildlife biology and conservation. And as this special issue will show, he was much loved and left lasting legacies in all the institutions he graced with his presence.

The articles in this issue are varied in their style, structure and content, focused as they are on his stint at the Wildlife Institute of India (Kar-Gupta et al. 2026), one of two projects he was associated with in Sikkim (Acharya et al. 2026), his pioneering contributions to Indian primatology (Sushma et al. 2026), steering the Masters Program in Wildlife Biology and Conservation at the National Centre for Biological Sciences (Ramakrishna et al. 2026), mentoring the Indian marine mammal science community (Panicker et al. 2026), setting the stage for the Indian Wildlife Ecology Conference (Kumar 2026), and his diverse publications in a variety of mediums as documented in his bibliography (Pawar 2026).

Each article brings to the fore the unique qualities he embodied to make him a rare individual, quite like the Lion-tailed Macaques he studied. Over the course of a year, as we reached out to former students, colleagues and peers, new stories would emerge of his warmth, genuineness and caring. Some of the quotes and recollections by his students are quite telling, as they correspond to pivotal moments where Dr. Ajith guided them to take career shaping decisions.

We hope this is one among many attempts to document Dr. Ajith Kumar's rich legacy and the indelible mark he has left on wild places and people who were fortunate to meet him. On behalf of all the authors, we invite you to enjoy learning about what made Dr. Ajith Kumar a widely respected peer, much loved teacher, mentor and scientist.

This issue can be looked at as the start to another edition of Zoo's Print to be dedicated to Dr. Ajith Kumar's legacy to be published on 21 June 2026 with a special 'early online' version for the IWECC Conference. There are articles in the making and we encourage those of you interested to contribute to the next issue to look up the Call published in this issue and register.

Y. Chaitanya Krishna & Sanjay Molur
(Co-Editors of the Dr. Ajith Kumar Memorial Issue)

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Cover photos: Dr. Ajith Kumar. Front photo © Uttara Mendiratta; Back photo © M.D. Madhusudan.

Walking Softly, Observing Quietly, and Thinking Deeply: Dr. Ajith Kumar and the Making of a Generation of Wildlife Scientists at the Wildlife Institute of India

This tribute traces the essence of Dr. Ajith Kumar, scientist, teacher, mentor, and philosopher, through the memories and reflections of those who knew him best. It is as much a story of a man as it is of a way of doing science that emphasizes humility, precision, curiosity, and deep respect for life in all its forms. Ajith Kumar began his scientific journey by studying the Lion-tailed Macaque (*Macaca silenus*) in the rainforests of the Western Ghats, a species that would become a symbol of his ecological philosophy, characterized by its sensitivity to fragmentation, requiring patient observation, and often being overlooked. His early training in behavioural ecology, particularly his doctoral work at the University of Cambridge, laid the foundation for a lifetime of asking difficult, often unpopular questions about the interface

between animals, forests, and humans. Wildlife Institute of India (WII) in the 1990s and early 2000s was a space of intense learning and institutional experimentation. Ajith Kumar helped shape that intellectual culture by focusing on foundational skills, field techniques, statistical literacy, ecological reasoning, and mentoring students not only in data collection but also in asking meaningful questions. Whether walking behind a group watching langurs or quietly working on a laptop in the corner of a dusty field station, his presence was steady, generous, and unassuming. His field visits were often less about checking progress and more about checking in, listening to student dilemmas, teaching them to design a research study, suggesting methodological tweaks, and reminding them gently to keep their



Figure 1: Dr. Ajith Kumar (sitting, extreme right, 2nd row from bottom) at the Wildlife Institute of India, 1989

curiosity alive and not give up hope. All this with his signature dose of humour in everything.

Two of us (Nima and Shomita) were part of the first Master's batch from WII during 1988-89, and we were introduced to Ajith when he came to teach us Behavioural Ecology. He turned out to be much more of a friend than a teacher. His classes were full of hilarious anecdotes that often sent us into hysterical bouts of very loud laughter.

The other faculty members would wonder what we were doing, and when once Dr. Alan Rodgers strolled by to check, he was entrapped in this madness himself. Yet, we learnt some of the most relevant fundamentals in ecology from Ajith. He taught us to be critical and irreverent in a good way. He mentored without us realising that he was doing it.

We just imbibed it from him. It's difficult to tease out the lecture hall sessions with Ajith from our interactions outside, especially in our hostel hall, after class hours. Whenever he was there, which was very often, we unintentionally drifted into academic discussions since it was such a lot of fun.

Other faculty like BC Choudhary and our seniors, the researchers, would also join in and narrate their field stories, and that is actually how we grasped a lot about field work, interpreting results, and articulating these to others. In the classroom, we used to have small seminars where we were made to present a topic. At first, some of us were mortified because we were being judged in a way, but Ajith eased it for us with his humour (often quite wicked but none of us were offended by him) and comical critique, pointing out flaws in logic or the use of grammar and language. As part of the module that Ajith was teaching us, we had a field session on the wonderful campus of the Forest Research Institute (FRI), where WII began its journey. We were seven in the batch, and Ajith took us to observe Tarai Gray Langurs (*Semnopithecus hector*). He taught us various techniques used to study primate behaviour, including group and focal scans that we had to conduct on the langurs. The

field session was long-drawn and sometimes a bit monotonous, but overall great fun with Ajith around. What was even more amusing was when we were shown how to analyse the data and interpret results, and Ajith sprung a surprise— while we were observing monkeys, he was meticulously conducting group and focal scans on us. He had a neat analysis of us as a group and individually, which he proudly presented to us and, of course, most hilariously!

He continued this with the next batch (Kaberi's batch), where he would often carry notebooks filled with scribbles, drawings, counts, and observations on field trips. It was not unusual for students to discover that, while they were trying to get their first focal animal scan done, Ajith had already collected an entire dataset on the students themselves, as a playful meta-lesson on observation. Little wonder that he figured out and understood his students well – they were his primary study troops. Beyond Behavioural Ecology, his role in developing the computing lab and promoting statistical training among ecologists in India was quietly revolutionary.

Long before “quantitative ecology” became a buzzword, Ajith was helping students troubleshoot SPSS (Statistical Product and Service Solutions) and guiding them through their first ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) or GLM (Generalized Linear Model). His insistence on clarity, rigour, and ecological relevance raised the bar for field-based research. He was a pillar of WII's faculty – a teacher who never needed to raise his voice to command respect.

What made his teaching so powerful was his deep integrity and unshakeable belief that good science could, and must, be done ethically, collaboratively, and with care. He was not just a faculty member, but a philosopher-naturalist, educator, and mentor who defined what it meant to *think ecologically*. His caring nature for students and researchers went beyond the classroom.

Ajith's involvement with the second M.Sc. batch at WII ramped up just as Dr. Alan Rodgers moved on, and soon, he became the go-to person for Behavioural Ecology, Statistics, and field-based animal behaviour. He introduced us to the mysterious arts of focal and scan sampling, quietly trailing behind on field trips like a benevolent ghost—with a camera slung over his shoulder, of course. I (Kaberi) still remember him shadowing our line of students as Dr. Johnsingh marched ahead through the Goral ridges of Rajaji National Park. His silent presence gave us more courage than we realised.

Then came Sariska. When Nitin Rai sprinted after a tiger for a photo (because why not?), Ajith's calm but firm voice cut through the chaos: "*Observe, don't chase.*" Lesson learned. He also introduced us to statistics. For most of us, SPSS was as foreign as a spaceship, and the Apple Macintosh Plus or SE was our first glimpse of a futuristic glowing box.

We stared in awe. Karmavir Bhatt remembers being completely baffled by statistics at first, but Ajith never lost patience. You could ask him the same question five times in one class—and he'd explain it, each time as if it were the first. And with a grin, he once quipped to Karmavir, "*Primatologists look up, herpetologists look down*"—spot-on career guidance!

Ajith and I (Kaberi) bonded over two gastronomic passions: fish and jackfruit. What else would you expect from a Malayali and a Bengali? After work, we would jump on his scooter—BC sometimes joined in—and zoom off to hunt the biggest, freshest Ganga fish. Triumphant, we would return, cook up a fish-storm in the hostel, and grumble about how ripe jackfruit was a delicacy underappreciated in North India.

Both Geetanjali and I (Kaberi) did our dissertations under Ajith's guidance, studying the not-so-glamorous langurs in Rajaji. Ajith smiled and said, "*You just need a solid dataset and to finish on time.*" No fluff, just the essentials. Of course, I fell behind.

Fieldwork, lab work, and the unavailability of a computer didn't help. Ajith stepped in, offered his home ("*five thirty-three, under the mango tree*"), and lent me his computer, the only personal one among faculty. I wrote my entire thesis at his dining table while he floated by with just the right balance of stats critique, logical nudges, and tea. No big talk about mentorship, just quiet, generous support.

A gentle push from him, and I was back on track. Classic Ajith.



Figure 2: Dr. Ajith Kumar (far right) at Rajaji National Park, 1991. Photo credit: Ajai Saxena.

Ajith had a gift for storytelling. Even when things went off-track, we'd turn to him. He would listen, nod, and then with that signature laugh, shift the energy from panic to perspective. Suddenly, everything felt manageable. That was his magic. When he mentored the third M.Sc. batch, his first message was unforgettable. A group arrived breathless at 8:59 a.m. (helping classmates up FRI's epic slope), and he deadpanned: *"You're being paid Rs. 33 rupees 33 paise to be on time, not to give excuses."* The bar was set. But moments later, the humour crept in, and his warmth took over. Anand Pendharkar recalls how Ajith looked at his spreadsheet and said, *"Zero data is data too."* He spotted patterns Anand hadn't seen, doodled a graph, and that became Anand's first paper. That was Ajith: a statistician with X-ray vision and a soft spot for lost-looking students.

He remembered every student's name, long after they left. When Anand left academia for the Doon School to lead their Environmental Science program, many doubted and raised eyebrows about his leaving academia. Ajith looked at him and said, *"If your student becomes Prime Minister or heads an industry, they will make massive impacts on wildlife and our planet. Their love for wildlife may come from your teaching and not from your thesis. So carry on."*

Even his colleagues respected him deeply. His science wasn't about ego—it was about truth, integrity, and quiet excellence. Dr. Rawat said, *"He listened even if he disagreed, explained gently, never held grudges."* That was rare.

His love for jalebis was legendary. Every visit to Dehradun came with a call to Dr. Asha Rajvanshi: *"Please bring fresh jalebis!"* And his cooking—well, that was an adventure. B.C. Choudhury fondly remembers the infamous Coorgi fish curry: *"two kilos of fish, two kilos of coriander, and a suspicious amount of cigarette ash"*. Only Ajith and Johnsingh dared to eat it. Ajith's pranks were just as sharp. Once, he and BC decided to test WII's botanical brain, Dr. G.S. Rawat. Ajith scaled a wall in the far

corner of FRI, plucked a tiny yellow flower growing from a crack, and proudly challenged Dr. Rawat to identify it. Dr. Rawat examined it and calmly said, *"Old wall species. Grows on cracks in historic buildings."* Game, set, match.

Researchers at WII leaned on Ajith constantly. He would help analyse messy datasets and guide struggling minds. Wesley Sunderraj, studying Nilgiri Langurs (*Semnopithecus johnii*), remembers Ajith suggesting a non-parametric approach that impressed even Dr. Johnsingh. Wesley still remembers walking to Manohar's tea shop with Ajith every day and calling him *"Aaiya"*, a term of deep respect in Tamil and Malayalam. His most vivid memory? *"Ajith never said no to anyone seeking research advice."*

Now, when we walk in the field, we still feel Ajith's presence. In the silence before a question. In the calm before a sighting. In how we watch, listen, and care. Dr. Ajith Kumar's legacy isn't just in papers or methods or field stations. It's in all of us, the students, colleagues, field assistants, and communities he shaped. He taught with his feet on the ground, his camera slung over his shoulder, loads of humour thrown in, and his heart fully in the forest.

Acknowledgements

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Dr Ajith Kumar's association and passion for Sikkim Himalaya: pioneer in initiating conservation biology research and developing human resources in the region

Dr. Ajith, Sikkim and biodiversity: an introduction

A series of hydropower projects were commissioned along the Teesta River spanning northern parts of West Bengal and Sikkim during the 2000's. A multidimensional study to assess the carrying capacity of the Teesta River basin in Sikkim was conceptualized by experts representing different institutes across the country in 2002. The project was funded by National Hydro-electric Power Corporation (NHPC), through the erstwhile Ministry of Environment and Forests (now Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change), Government of India and coordinated by Prof. Maharaj K. Pandit from the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of Mountain and Hill Environment (CISMHE), Delhi University. Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON), based at Coimbatore was one among the partner institutes and was entrusted to undertake the faunal component in the project. Hence, SACON took up a sub-project titled "Ecology of Mammals, Birds, Herpetofauna and Butterflies along Teesta River Basin in Sikkim" in which Dr. Ajith Kumar was the Principal Investigator along with Dr. Lalitha Vijayan and Dr. S. Bhupathy as Co-Investigators. Soon, with his passion for wildlife and the Himalayan landscape, Dr. Ajith initiated the project in Sikkim with his keenness for biodiversity and developing human resources for wildlife research.

Dr. Ajith envisioned building local human resources in Sikkim Himalayan Region

An advertisement was published by SACON in Employment News in April 2002 with a call for

various project-based research positions. SACON is a national institute and is mandated to recruit staff from across the country through national advertisements. However, Dr. Ajith knew that recruiting local people and making them skillful will be of immense value in the long run as those people will continue working for the region's welfare even after the completion of the project.

Additionally, the Sikkim Himalaya, which also includes adjoining Darjeeling hills was not much given attention with regard to higher education in general, and wildlife biology and ecology research in particular. Hence, he wanted to conduct the interview for the selection of project staff (four research fellows and one project scientist) at Gangtok, the capital town of Sikkim. This arrangement was made by SACON (may be for the 1st time) with a sole aim of giving opportunity to young minds of the region, who otherwise would miss attending the interview if held in Coimbatore.

Consequently, the interview was held in the month of July 2002 at Sikkim Government College, Tadong (now Nar Bahadur Bhandari Government College), and as envisioned by Dr. Ajith, out of five positions four got selected from the region (three from Darjeeling and one from Sikkim). Sikkim, a tiny Himalayan state, lacked higher educational institutes then (except few degree colleges and one or two private universities). Hence, this multidimensional multi-institutional project by leading institutes (including SACON) of the country provided opportunities for aspiring candidates who wished to undertake higher studies, especially research leading to a PhD degree. We were among few others (associated with other institutes) to be

a part of the project, and blessed to be mentored by Dr. Ajith and other investigators.

Our journey with wildlife biologist

Initial interaction

Our first interaction with Dr. Ajith Kumar was in July 2002 at Gangtok during the project interview. As mentioned above, Dr. Ajith's main aim was to develop human resource on wildlife biology research from Sikkim and nearby areas, and therefore, we got an opportunity to work with him. Being a lead PI, he had a major role in recruitment, and implementation of the project. We could not understand him much until we visited SACON in the 3rd week of August 2002 for formal paperwork and initial training. Dr. Ajith was excited and happy to have us in the project. We did not have any prior research experience and were clueless what to do next. We travelled around 3000 km away from home with a goal of doing PhD but did not have any idea how it can happen. But after meeting Dr. Ajith and other project PIs, we got some solace and started feeling confident. Within no time, we became friendly with Dr. Ajith and started learning basics of wildlife biology research. We have so many fond memories of working with him, and he has immensely contributed in building our careers (see details in the inset boxes 1, 2 & 3).

Field-based training and exposure tour to Valparai and Varagaliyar: Tropical Rainforests in Western Ghats

All of us were completely new to scientific research, including wildlife biology. In order to provide basic training and exposure to the subject, Dr. Ajith organized a field trip to the tropical rainforest in Western Ghats. We started from his house at TVS Nagar, near SACON in the afternoon, and after travelling for a few hours, reached Valparai when it is almost dark. In this remote location, we were welcomed by Sankar Raman

and Divya Muddapa, both mentored by Dr. Ajith. After a simple dinner, we had a chit chat on wildlife research, including the ongoing Sikkim project.

Early morning the next day, we started from Valparai to Varagaliyar. We were also accompanied by Sankar Raman and Divya Muddapa. On our way while walking, Dr. Ajith kept on teaching about mammals, birds and plants. He would pluck a plant's leaf, smell it and tells us the name, indicating his rich expertise about the biodiversity of the area. After a few hours of walking, there was a heavy rain, and we were completely drenched but then the only option was to walk with all the materials (including eatables) loaded at the back. Since we had no prior field experience, we did not even have rain coats, hence all our items (including spare clothes) got completely wet. We reached the old forest rest house at Varagaliyar where Dr. Ajith stayed while doing his research on Lion-tailed Macaque (*Macaca silenus*) for his PhD.

Tired of walking the whole day, with clothes all wet, and cots with dilapidated mattress to sleep, we thought "*Wildlife research is very tough*", and wondered if we will be able to continue? But the next day we realized that we were in a rainforest with almost 100% canopy cover, multilayered vertical stratification, a highly biologically diverse region which was very memorable. We learnt bird watching and identification techniques, and could sight some unique and rare species. We also could observe some butterflies, mammals including elephants, reptiles including Hump-nosed Pit Viper (*Hypnale hypnale*), etc. This is how Dr. Ajith initiated and imparted research skills to us.

Biodiversity research along Teesta River Basin in Sikkim

The main aim of the project in Sikkim was to understand the distribution and diversity of major faunal groups along the Teesta River Basin. Dr. Ajith minutely planned all aspects of the project, including setting up field station at Dalep, South Sikkim, obtaining the research permit, taking us to



Figure 1: Dr Ajith with researchers from Sikkim at the high altitude Gurudongmar Lake (5200 m) in August 2003. Standing (Left to Right, Sophio Riphung, Bhoj Acharya, Basundra Chettri, Dr. Ajith Kumar and Joya Thapa). Sitting (Left to Right, Field Assistant Dil Bahadur Chettri, Driver Buddha Tamang).

different parts of Sikkim (especially along Teesta basin) and training us on various aspects of wildlife ecology research. After that, he made many visits to Sikkim to follow up whether we were on the right track. We traveled to several places in east, south and north Sikkim exploring and selecting study sites, including high altitude cold desert and wetlands (Fig. 1). Despite his specialization on mammals, Dr. Ajith had immense knowledge on plants, birds and herpetofauna. One of his most peculiar traits is he never gets tired of walking and explaining things. Our field sessions lasted for 10-12 hours during the day time, followed by night sessions on flying squirrels and frogs. While he sometimes appeared tough, he used to refresh us with his humorous jokes and intermittent laughs.

Sikkim Project research findings and outcomes

Studying biodiversity in terms of what exists where and how common or rare they are would serve the purpose of the project, as it was envisioned to understand whether any unforeseen consequences will impact biodiversity along

Teesta River due to commissioning of the dams. This would have been quite straight forward and easy research involving surveys in different locations along River Teesta. But Dr. Ajith desired deeper understanding on biodiversity trends, and guided us to explore biogeographical patterns along elevation gradients. Sikkim, located in the western extremities of the eastern Himalaya, is one of the smallest states of India (geographical area 7096 km²). Within this small geographical span, the elevation changes from around 300 m at the lower valleys to >8000 m at the summit of Mt. Kanchendzonga, the third highest peak in the world (Acharya and Sharma, 2013). Due to changes in elevation as well as other biophysical characteristics, the climate changes from hot tropical type at lower, mild temperate type at middle and arctic cold at higher elevations.

The temperature declines with increasing elevation with a lapse rate of -0.62°C at every 100 m rise in elevation (Acharya et al, 2011a). Similarly, there is a clear gradation of vegetation which transitions approximately at every 900 m interval (Acharya et al, 2011a). Due to such a high vertical zonation of

biological, physical and climatic characteristics within an aerial distance of ~100 km, Sikkim creates an ideal situation to test several biogeographical hypotheses. Therefore, as part of the project, we designed our study to understand the elevational patterns of different faunal groups along the Teesta River basin in Sikkim. Additionally, we also delved into exploring causal mechanisms of the elevational patterns.

We covered various vegetation types and elevation sites (Fig. 2) spanning steep landscapes, deep gorges and valleys (Fig. 3) in Sikkim. While our permanent field station was established at Dalep Busty, South Sikkim (near Singtam town), we travelled across the valley moving up and down on seasonal basis encompassing diverse vegetation types and high elevation ecosystems (Fig. 3) to collect data from set transects and established plots (Fig. 2). Extensive field-based study for more than three years showed different patterns for different faunal groups. Butterflies declined

with increasing elevation showing high diversity below 1000 m and very few species above 3000 m. Reptile diversity also followed declining trend with elevation having no species above 3000 m. Similarly, birds and amphibians followed unimodal pattern with highest diversity at middle elevation, around 2000 m. Mammals showed unique bimodal pattern with two peaks- one between 500-1000 m elevation (tropical semi-deciduous forests) and the other one at 3000-3500 m (temperate coniferous forests). One of the interesting findings of the study was high turnover rates (beta diversity) exhibited by all taxa showing unique faunal communities at each elevation zone.

Additionally, most of the species had narrow elevation range, and were restricted to specific elevation site/zone (Acharya et al, 2011b, Acharya and Vijayan, 2015, 2017; Chettri et al, 2010; Khatiwara et al, 2023; Vijayan et al, 2006). One of the most significant achievements of the project was discovery of one snake species new to science

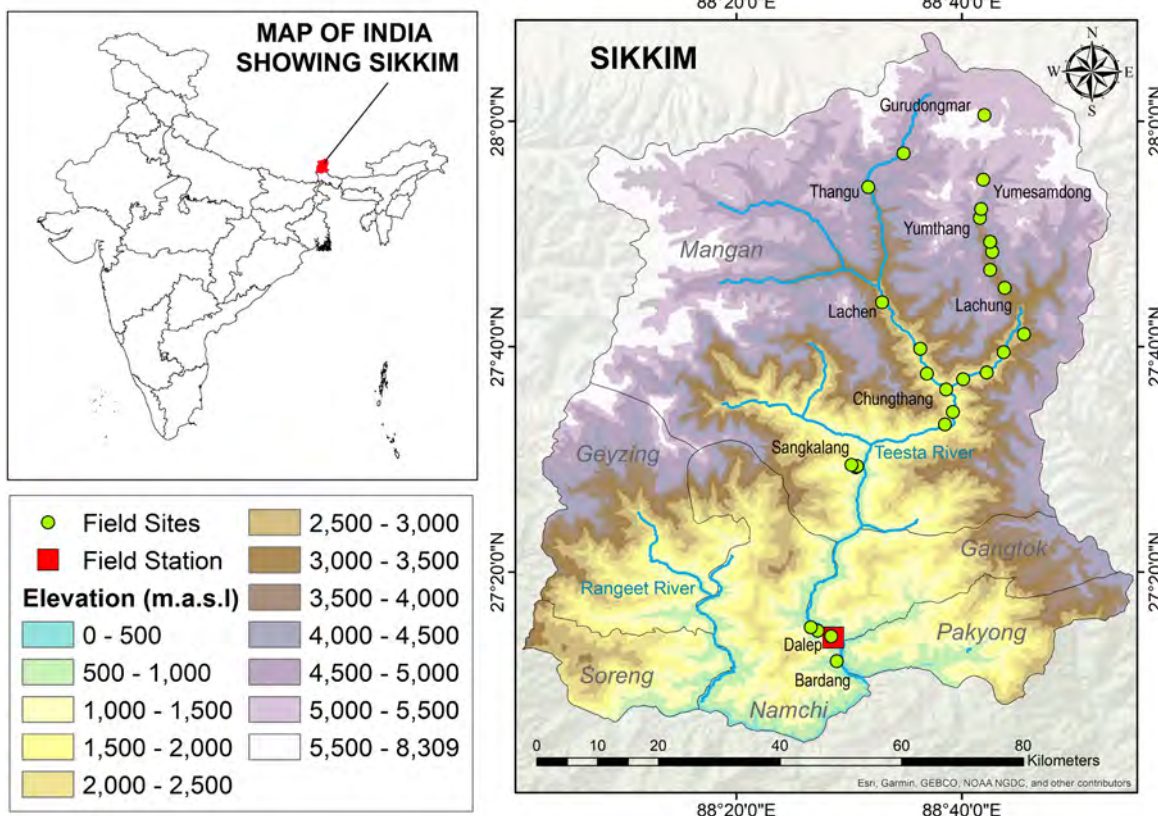


Figure 2: Map of Sikkim showing field station and sampling sites spread along elevation gradient in the Teesta Valley.



Figure 3: Some unique landscapes covered during the study in Sikkim Himalaya. (Clockwise from bottom right, Waterfall near Bob, Chungthang, Mighty Teesta near Chungthang, Cold Desert near Gurudongmar Lake)

Box 1: Reminiscences by Bhoj Acharya

I had just completed my MSc in early 2002 and was looking for job opportunities, hence I did not realize what it meant to work with a person like Dr. Ajith. The most interesting initial experience for me was how he removed teacher-student barrier, most importantly the fear and uneasiness of being with teachers. Dr. Ajith treated us like his friends and created a fear free environment for learning which really helped us to build confidence and move forward with research. He is the one who introduced me to the basics of research, taking us to field in different parts of Sikkim and Western Ghats, explaining ecological details in the field during day time, and teaching statistics in the evening. Since then, he constantly guided, motivated, encouraged and monitored progress as a real guru and fatherly figure till his last breath. He was a passionate photographer and never missed clicking birds, mammals, plants as well as people's activities in the field (Fig. 4). He also loved driving, and used to drive the Marshall jeep purchased for the project activities (Fig. 4).

Six months after joining the project, I got a job with the Government of Sikkim, and wanted to leave the project. Hearing this news, Dr. Ajith was sad as it was his dream to make me a wildlife biology researcher/scientist (he often used to laugh and say, 1st from Sikkim). He held several counselling sessions, tried his best to explain about my future with research, and strongly motivated me to leave the job and continue with the research. After 1-2 months of indecisiveness, I got convinced and finally decided not to join the job, and that is why I am here today. Now I realize what an invaluable gift Dr. Ajith presented to me and my family. He has crafted my career in higher studies.

Dr. Ajith was one of the most lively and joyous persons I have ever met. His humorous, friendly nature and empathetic approach have touched and changed many lives including mine. I am personally so blessed and fortunate to have him as my Guru as he has contributed so much to shape my career as an ecology researcher. There are very few people in this world with whom I am so dearly connected, and Dr. Ajith is of course one among them. I deeply miss Ajith Sir, and his place in my life is irreplaceable.

Box 2: Reminiscences by Basundhara Chettri

My entry into the field of wildlife ecology is merely a coincidence, however my journey ahead was much shaped by Dr Ajith Kumar. During selection interview conducted by SACON in 2002, I had submitted a write up indicating my research interest on Himalayan Salamander, with no prior idea how and what I am going to do. After selection, we had orientation in SACON, followed by field trip in Annamalai hills. I came to know Ajith Sir during our trip to Valparai and Varaglair. He tried to expose us to the extreme conditions which is to be expected in the subsequent field work. Using different approaches, he used to teach us how challenging yet rewarding wildlife studies are.

Spending two months in SACON, we returned back to Sikkim to initiate our field work. Though we established field station at Dalep, South Sikkim, we used to move altitudinally up and down covering all the seasons. Ajith Sir was instrumental in the initial phase of our research journey, helping us in identifying field sites and sampling, establishing contacts with local communities and concerned authorities including researchers and scientists from various institutes. Since our project had different faunal components, he made sure we learned about other taxa and also the vegetation. He was the only PI who had visited all the field sites spread across the altitudinal gradients in Sikkim.

Meanwhile, as soon as the project was initiated, our research permit was cancelled. Even after several round of discussions and persuasions with the concerned authority, he could not convince them why this research project was important. After coming to field station he narrated the whole story and told us not to worry. In the same evening, he started calling several scientists and institutions related to our field enquiring about research positions to engage us. He felt deeply responsible that we should not get lost on the way. But later, the permit issue was solved and we could complete our research work. His cheerful and humorous persona, made the most difficult and serious issue easily approachable.

As a teacher, he made sure that everybody participates and learns. For a person like me, this was very important to come forward. When I look back, my research journey is largely shaped by Ajith Sir. For me, his association and guidance was not limited to PhD but continued much later. Sir, you are gone too early and your guidance and support will be missed in many of our research discourse.



Figure 4: Some glimpses of biodiversity and field based memories associated with Sikkim project. (A) Camera Trapped picture of Masked Palm Civet (*Paguma larvata*); (B) Group of Nepal Gray Langur (*Semnopithecus schistaceus*) in North Sikkim; (C) Setting Sherman traps at a trapping site; (D) Project personnel in a field site; (E) Blue Whistling Thrush (*Myophonus caeruleus*), one of the most common bird species found in the study area; (F) A jeep purchased by the project, and often driven by Dr. Ajith while in Sikkim. Three photographs (D, E and F) were taken by Dr. Ajith Kumar.

Box 3: Reminiscences by Joya Thapa

During the interview of selection of Junior Research Fellows, the barrage of questions started very randomly from the panel with “*Can you name 100 mammals? And your time starts now*” After naming few large mammals, I happen to mention Civets and Martens, that’s when I heard him speak “*which species?*” with eyes all lit. I did not even know who’s who in the panel then but later came to know that he is none other than Dr. Ajith Kumar, the PI of the project. In his words, “*Sikkim is unique because when you travel from north to south, the distance is only about 100 kms but the wide altitudinal range and a high gradient make it an exciting field to study compared to any other place in the world*”. The twinkle in his eyes whenever he spoke about Sikkim was not to be missed. We were all amateurs to the technical aspect of wildlife studies, but his patience was commendable. Though I had worked with ATREE (Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment), Eastern Himalaya Programme in Environment Education, he ensured I attend other courses and meet people from the field as well. Our first trip in the wild with him included his favourite place in the Anamalai hills. We stayed in the Varagaliar forest guest house. The tropical forest was new to us, but with Ajith, the experience was different. Naturally, the realization that there is so much to learn from him became stronger, not knowing that the inspiration would continue not only throughout the project, but throughout our lives.

Once back in Sikkim, loaded with Sherman traps, camera traps, loads of papers and books photocopied from SACON library, high altitude gears etc., we camped up in the field station in South Sikkim and started sampling around in the reserve forests. The initial camera trappings didn’t yield much barring few shots of Masked Palm Civet (Fig. 4) and Jackal (*Canis aureus*). Tree shrews in my traps really excited Ajith as well as the night transects looking for flying squirrels. We were to lay the Sherman traps in grids but it was a near impossible task due to the steep terrain. Hence, he came up sampling in trap lines, so we laid 30 to 60 traps at a distance of 5 m along the line-transect. We made our first trip to Gurudongmar Lake with him and the visible difference in vegetation was evident during a day’s drive from Singtam (426 m) to Thangu (3962 m) where we halted. The next morning after using fire to heat up the diesel tank of the vehicle, we reached Gurudongmar (5425 m).

With the project work not progressing due to the delayed permissions, he helped me write up a proposal of studying *Semnopithecus schistaceus* in the higher altitudes for which we were to apply for funding. We had sighted a group of them around Lachen area during one of our trips to the north (Fig. 4). However, once the permissions came through, we got busy with tasks that remained to be done for the project. In another instance, around Chungthang, one of my transect would have a very high density of small carnivore scats. The first time, he stunned us by just cleaning the scat and eating one of the seed and told us the family to which the seed belonged. It was a very dry scat with many different fruit seeds visible. I could never emulate that, but it was simply an example of his dedication to the field of wildlife and conservation. During the course of our field study, he had moved from SACON Coimbatore to taking charge of the MSc Wildlife and Biology course in Bengaluru, and formally was not part of the project, but in field, we never felt the change. His guidance as well as our well-being was looked into by him.

Once the exciting field work was completed, the thesis writing period resumed when I had the opportunity to stay in Bangalore. He ensured I was camped up in the guest house meant for the visiting faculty of MSc Wildlife Programme. I wasn’t alone in any sense, the first few batches of MSc students had hostels (actually houses) around in the vicinity. Besides, I had the opportunity to meet all the distinguished faculty and enormously benefited from the discussions that used to take place in the evening with the students. He always ensured that I was around for these discussions.

At some point, the project report was submitted then the stipend stopped as well. For support, he employed me with the MSc course to coordinate their classes in NCBS, faculty etc. However, he ensured that I was working for only half a day, the rest of my time was allotted to wrap up my thesis.

Today, when I look back, he was one of the very few persons who has had such a remarkable effect on my life. It is indeed a big loss for me and many others; both professionally and personally. Ajith Sir always remained a humble mentor with high ethical standards with deep empathy and kindness, along with his trade mark of resilience and perspective and most importantly authentic.

(Pan et al, 2013), and rediscovery and taxonomic revalidation of one unique lizard species (Bhupathy et al, 2009).

The findings of the project highlighted rich and unique biodiversity of Teesta basin, and invited immediate conservation attention. The report clearly revealed the fragile nature of the valley, and recommended prohibiting large-scale developmental activities above 1500 m elevation i.e. above Chungthang town in North Sikkim (Vijayan et al, 2006). The findings of the project work led to three PhD theses (Acharya, 2008; Chettri, 2007; Thapa, 2008), and several publications (Acharya and Vijayan 2009, 2010; Acharya et al, 2009; Acharya et al, 2010; Acharya et al, 2011a,b, Acharya and Vijayan, 2015, 2017; Chettri et al, 2009; Chettri et al, 2010; Chettri and Acharya, 2020; Khatiwara et al, 2023). While many individuals have relentlessly worked to contribute to these biodiversity knowledge products, Dr. Ajith conceptualized the whole study and was the main propelling force behind this feat.

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Sowing Seeds for Conservation: Dr. Ajith Kumar and the Making of a Wildlife Master's Program

"He was evergreen, like the Western Ghats that he loved."
-Dr Jagdish Krishnaswamy.

Following the passing of Dr Ajith Kumar, a large group of people who had been touched by his life gathered at the National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bangalore (NCBS) on 15th March 2025 to remember and celebrate his life and legacy. They were all seated in the same hall where they had gathered, less than a year ago in 2024, to celebrate 20 successful years of the Postgraduate Course in Wildlife Biology and Conservation that he had played a vital and pivotal role in establishing and developing. Together, these two days, just shy of a year apart, offered a reflective space for the truly diverse and expansive impact that the Master's Program and, at its helm for several years, Dr Ajith Kumar, had made for conservation science in India.

What began in 2004 as an experiment in capacity building would grow into one of India's highly sought-after postgraduate programs in conservation science. At its core was, and continues to be, the conviction that wildlife conservation required not only passion, but professional training—training that was interdisciplinary, evidence-based, and embedded in ecological realities. Dr Ajith Kumar, affectionately and respectfully referred to ubiquitously as 'Ajith Sir' by nearly two hundred students and mentees, was an essential element in the team that shaped this ethos at NCBS, Bangalore.

The making of the NCBS MSc in Wildlife Biology and Conservation

Balancing India's developmental goals with conservation of wild species and habitats presents a paradox. The country harbours four of the world's

biodiversity hotspots, supports some of the largest viable populations of iconic large mammals, and has, at the time, set aside only approximately 5% of its land as protected areas. At the same time, it is experiencing rapid economic development, high human population pressures, and escalating ecological challenges. The need for scientifically trained conservation professionals—individuals capable of stewarding natural heritage in complex social and political landscapes—is critical. Yet, in the early 2000s, structured, high-quality postgraduate training in wildlife biology and conservation in India was limited. Conservation practice was often driven by commitment and field experience, but formal academic training that combined ecological theory, rigorous quantitative methods, and exposure to policy and practice were few. The idea of a master's program dedicated to wildlife biology and conservation emerged from this gap. It was as much conceived as an academic degree, as it was a mission: to build professional capacity for wildlife and wildland conservation in India through a rigorous, high-quality postgraduate training program, and to facilitate evidence-based conservation of India's wildlife and wildlands.

Dr Vijay Raghavan, one of the founding members of the program, recalled, *"The MSc course at NCBS began in a very interesting way. The connections trace back to Anindya Sinha, [...] who was an independent post doc at the time here, studying primates [...] Through him, the connection extended to Ullas Karanth [...] who came over and said that he had received a major award and that he wanted to use that to start and support a masters program in wildlife. And that was again discussed among the faculty, and the opinions on why we shouldn't have the program were plenty [...] Many people have said that when more than three quarters of faculty say not to do something, then it must be quite exciting and so*

it must be done [...] Anyway, the program began with great skepticism, and Ullas said that with someone like Ajith there, it will work. And truly, it has worked entirely because of him.”

The program took shape through an unconventional partnership. In its earliest phase, it was a collaboration between the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the Centre for Wildlife Studies (CWS) and the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS), with the National Institute for Advanced Studies (NIAS), and contributions from the Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF). Founding individuals including K. Ullas Karanth, Ajith Kumar, Anindya Sinha, K. Vijay Raghavan, Jagdish Krishnaswamy, M.K. Matthew, K.S. Krishnan and others, worked to bring together academia, NGOs, and research institutions in an unusual model. NCBS and the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) contributed academic strength; organizations such as WCS, CWS, and NCF grounded the program in conservation practice. NCF, now a program partner, took on the responsibility of planning the design, curriculum and delivery of the program.

T. R. Sankararaman, co-founder of NCF and long-term supporter and friend of the program, reflected, *“Ajith brought not just his vision, calm temperament, and mentorship to the course, but effortlessly cultivated a huge amount of goodwill and support across institutions and individuals to run it so well.”*

This academia–NGO partnership was, at the time, relatively uncommon. It reflected a shared recognition: conservation science in India needed both intellectual rigor and real-world relevance. It also required flexibility—an openness within academia to engage with practitioners, and a willingness among NGOs to invest in long-term capacity building. Dr Ajith Kumar (AK) embodied these qualities as a mentor and in his vision for this program.

Uma Ramakrishnan, a Professor at NCBS, shared, *“I joined NCBS over 20 years ago, and literally one of the first people I met was Ajith. I was a total newbie: new to the Indian wildlife community and new to academia. But*

he always accepted me. He listened to my ideas, read my draft applications, connected me with people, and always, always rejoiced when good things came our way. He, Suhel [Quader] and I worked together to get the MSc program integrated into (yet differentiated from) NCBS.”

Accessibility was also a guiding principle in the development of this program. It offered full fellowships, enabling students from diverse backgrounds to enrol without financial barriers. In a field often limited by economic constraints, this commitment to inclusion expanded the social and geographic diversity of conservation professionals in India.

Anushka Rege, an alumna from the sixth batch of the program, shared, *“In a community that acknowledges inequities, yet still has much work to do in terms of breaking down hierarchies, where young researchers and scholars often find themselves feeling vulnerable, Ajith Sir had this rare ability to make everyone feel valued and heard. He stood for his students, he stood beside his students, and he ensured that they were seen, respected and empowered no matter where they came from or who they were.”*

Following detailed discussions among the founding members, it was decided to house the Master’s Program at NCBS and the first batch of students began their academic journey with Dr Ajith appointed as the Director of the MSc in Wildlife Biology and Conservation in 2004. The decision for him to lead the course towards its mission, while actively collaborating with various non-governmental and government institutions was an easy one for the members to take, given his academic background, drive to mentor young scholars interested in this field, and his social aptitude – all crucial skills to have as the director of a budding program that would go on to rely on the goodwill and support of a long list of faculty and institutions.

Anindya Sinha, another one of the pivotal founding members of the MSc program, remembers, *“When Ullas and I were discussing who could be the first Director of our pioneering Postgraduate Program on a*

cool Bangalore morning, possibly in December 1999, we unanimously and almost simultaneously decided on Ajith. We simply could not think of anyone else, who was, in equal measure, uncompromisingly passionate about wildlife conservation, a most open-minded, grassroots-level teacher, and above all, a truly empathetic, kind, and gentle individual. Essentially Ajith.”

L.S. Shashidhara, the current Director at the National Centre for Biological Sciences, added succinctly, “For a little man, he had such a towering personality. He’s one of the tallest scientists I’ve ever come across in India.”

Mahesh Rangarajan, Professor of History and Environmental Studies at Ashoka University, and faculty for the first seven batches of students, looked back on his time with the course, “Dr Ajith Kumar had no parallel in any sense of the word. I met him first in 1998, and much more often when the MSc was being planned. He had a naughty sense of humor but privately could map every student, present and past, their strengths, vulnerabilities, all. His own formidable scientific knowledge came with an extraordinary knack of keeping in touch with all, all kinds and classes of people. There was real professionalism and genuine generosity.”

From the outset, the program was intentionally small, with an intake of 15 students from India once every two years. Further, an executive decision was made to open the doors to students from a variety of academic backgrounds, doing away with the prerequisite for students only from scientific or biological backgrounds to apply. This meant that each cohort would be unique in their combined disciplinary training, experiences, perspectives and career paths, allowing for deeper peer-to-peer learning over the course of two years with the program.

Rhea Lopez, an alumna of the eighth batch of the program, recounts her journey with AK, “From the time that he cross-questioned me as a literature student trying to break into this MSc course at my interview, I was convinced that Ajith Sir disliked me and that we’d never get along, a notion that was solidified over our constant head-butting with his impeccable scientific rigour and my, I later realised, stubbornness and insecurity over my

approach to things. So much so, that in the following year when at the very last minute he became my thesis guide, for a very social science heavy thesis, I was quite terrified. Over the next few months of fieldwork, we bonded over fishing stories, seasonal alcohol and excitement over spotting otters [...] I realised that his seeming opposition to what I did was his way of getting me to engage more deeply and defend my ideas. When my confidence began to waver and imposter syndrome began to set in, he switched roles with a remarkable ease and defended not just my ideas but my abilities at a time when I most needed it.”

Rather than building a large permanent faculty, the program, by design, operated with a lean core team—typically a course director and coordinator—supported by a diverse group of guest faculty drawn from universities, research institutes, NGOs, and government bodies. This allowed students to learn from experts actively engaged in research, policy, and conservation practice across the country, while also having a couple of consistent and familiar faces guiding them through their Master’s at NCBS.

The curriculum was intentionally interdisciplinary, and continues to be, actively adapting with newer developments in conservation science. Students were trained in fundamental ecology, evolution and natural selection, taxonomy and natural history, population and community ecology, genetics, and historical biogeography. They were equally exposed to environmental law and policy, social sciences, environmental history, ecological philosophy, conservation practice and management, statistics, study design, and data science.

This breadth of curriculum reflected the understanding that conservation problems could not be solved from a single disciplinary vantage point. Ecological processes are entwined with social realities, protected areas exist within political economies, and field data need to withstand quantitative scrutiny—the program aimed to train professionals who could move across these domains to tackle the plurality of conservation issues.

Fig. 1: Ajith Sir on a field trip in Periyar Tiger Reserve with the first batch of MSc students (2004-2006).



Field-based experiential learning was central, and this is also where having a Director like AK made a large difference to the students' understanding of natural history and the real-world applications of what they learnt in the classroom at NCBS. Extended field trips and immersive modules were not add-ons but foundational elements of a field-based pedagogical approach. Students learned to observe, to measure, to question, and—crucially—to cultivate a deep respect and concern for wild spaces and wildlife. And, as they did so, they gathered a trove of anecdotes that formed experiential lessons in ecology and humorous lived experiences, made more colourful and memorable with Ajith Sir's enthusiastic presence across batches.

Radhika Nair, an alum of the ninth batch of students, shared an assortment of characteristically amusing field stories collated from her batchmates at AK's memorial in 2025, *"Ajith Sir could become a part of any primate troop he came across. When we were at the NCBS field station in Pachmarhi, we were regularly harassed by a troop of rhesus macaques trying to steal our food. The first time they stalked us, I remember Ajith Sir immediately got up to shoo them away and exclaimed, to the monkey, 'Hey! There are three primatologists here!'*

referring to himself, Divya [Vasudev] and Jayashree [Ratnam]. Another time [...] a monkey approached and started showing his canines to the group, looking to intimidate them and steal some biscuits. The students were startled and unsure. Ajith Sir, however, was completely unperturbed and charged back at the monkey [...] When asked how he stayed so calm, he just said, 'With macaques, it's all about establishing dominance!'

Samira Agnihotri, part of the first guinea pig batch of the course, recounted how, *"Thanks to Ajith Sir, field trips (each more memorable than the other!) were not just about learning sampling and transects*

and how to collect and analyse data. They were equally about meeting other people from the larger wildlife and conservation community, from different stakeholder groups - forest department officials, founders of NGOs and field assistants. We understood the value of that much later in life. To give a tiny glimpse: we were having lunch at Tahr Trails in Valparai, visiting in 2024, close to two decades after Ajith Sir had taken us there. The owner came to greet us, and the moment I was introduced as Ajith Sir's student, his face lit up, and we got special treatment."

AK's enthusiasm and sense of wonder made him a lovable individual to these various stakeholders and his students alike, ultimately contributing to enriching the experiences that several batches of the program had through their coursework. Tarun Menon, an alumnus of the seventh batch shared an anecdote that his cohort remembers fondly, *"Our batch was on a field trip to Bharatpur, but due to a shortage of cash, we hadn't hired a guide for the day. Ajith Sir could see how some of us were trying really hard to see some rare birds like the sarus crane and the dusky eagle owl. But when we weren't able to find them, without any of us asking, without hesitating, he hired a guide on his own and asked him to show us all that we were trying to see. It really*

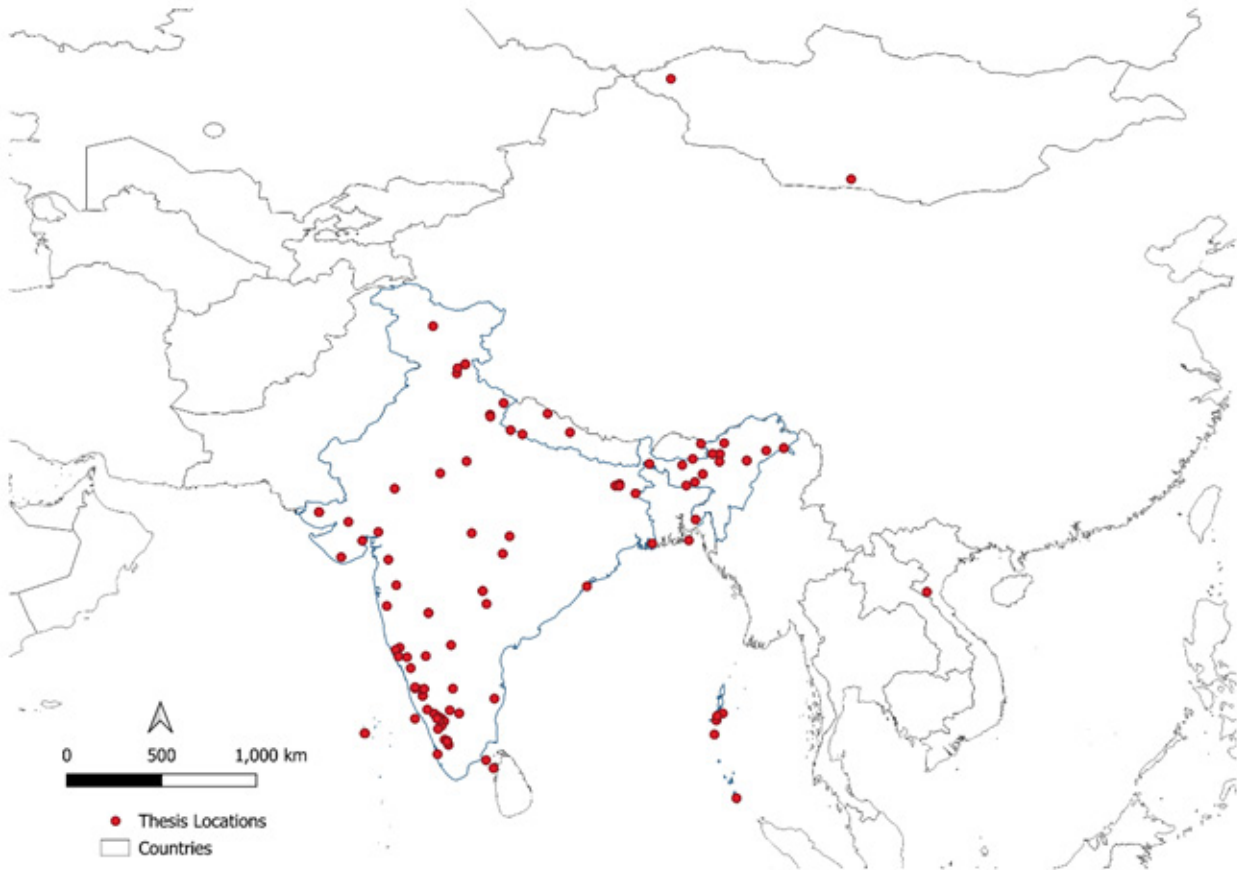


Fig. 2: Locations of students' theses across India, and beyond (till 2024)

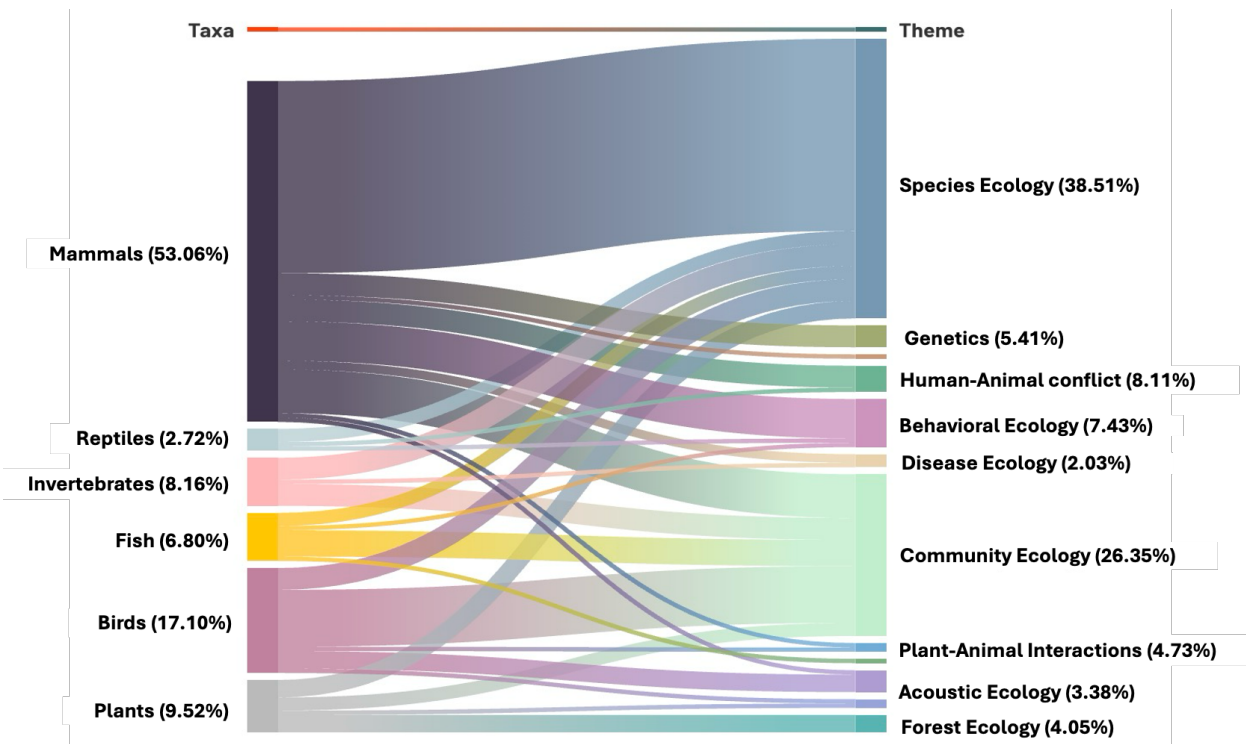


Fig.3: Diverse taxa and themes reflecting the scope of student theses emergent from the program

showed us how much he valued curiosity about natural history, irrespective of taxa.”

The two-year program was designed to culminate in an individual research dissertation, often conducted in diverse habitats across India, where students designed and executed independent studies under mentorship.

The First Cohorts: A Leap of Faith

The first batch (2004–2006) entered uncharted territory. There was no alumni network to consult, no established reputation to rely on. What they encountered was intensity: demanding coursework, probing discussions, and a culture of critical inquiry. Students recall AK as a teacher who combined high expectations with quiet encouragement. He asked difficult questions—not to intimidate, but to sharpen thinking. He insisted on clarity in study design and honesty in interpretation. A poorly constructed argument would not pass unexamined; nor would an untested assumption. At the same time, he fostered curiosity, often urging students to look more closely at a pattern in the field, to read more widely, or to situate their findings within larger ecological narratives.

Meghna Krishnadas of the third cohort poignantly shared, *“He was among the pioneers in this research field in India, helping make the science more rigorous while being deeply curious and aware of the natural history that underpins the ecology we do.”*

Those early years were marked by experimentation and adaptation. As the program transitioned from its initial WCS/CWS–NCBS partnership to being housed fully within NCBS, it retained its core philosophy of being focused on field ecology, even while embedding itself more deeply in an institution dedicated to fundamental biology. Ajith wore many hats through these years – while retaining his role as Director right up to his retirement in 2020 with the 8th batch of students – he was an academic guide, life coach, confidant, philosopher, support system and all-round

calming presence to the many students who moved through NCBS’ corridors over two decades.

Swapna Nelaballi from the second batch, echoing words and sentiments of several students and faculty at AK’s memorial, shared, *“He did his best, and then some. He was fiercely protective of his brood, advocating for us in our darkest moments. He had a way of making space for people genuinely without pretense, whether it was over a meal at his home, or a trip to see *Strobilanthus* flowering, or in the midst of an academic crisis. He had a way of making you feel seen and heard. He led with generosity, whether in the form of a quiet recommendation, an unexpected check-in, or just holding the door open - literally and metaphorically - for those who needed it.”*

Growth in numbers and reach

Since its inception in 2004, the program has graduated 149 students, with a further 20 in the current cohort. Students’ master’s theses have spanned a diversity of habitats, taxa, and themes. As seen in Figure 2, students have conducted their field research across varied ecological landscapes of India—from forests and grasslands to wetlands and mountainous landscapes.

Chandni Gurusrikar, the course coordinator for eight years between 2012–2020, reminded us of the administrative challenges of running this enterprise and of the more mischievous sides of Ajith Sir as she navigated her tasks as someone learning the ropes of this field, *“He drove me up the wall on many occasions, we disagreed on many things, many views and threw a fit at each other often and argued about multiple wildlife issues. I coined a word to describe Ajith Sir - to describe the stress he gave me - ‘Ajith-ated’, which most of the time I would be! But with time, I would realise that he was only trying to make me better and bring out the best in me. He was a man with a big heart, and was always just a call away when he was needed.”*

Figure 3 shows the breadth of inquiry that has emerged from the program. Spanning multiple taxonomic groups—birds, fish, invertebrates,

mammals, plants and reptiles, both within and outside protected areas—the research has spanned a diversity of questions and themes in the ecological and conservation sciences: from acoustic and behavioural ecology to disease ecology, from plant-animal interactions to forest processes and communities, conservation genetics and human–environment interactions.

Taken together, these projects traverse scales—from genes to ecosystems, from individual behaviour to landscape-level processes, and move across traditional disciplinary boundaries. In this way, the program has encouraged students' independence in their choice of research and willingness to engage with conservation questions from multiple vantage points.

The program's emphasis on rigorous training – from conceptualisation of research questions to fieldwork and analyses – has also translated into tangible scholarly output. About 70% of students (not including the most recently graduated cohort) have published their thesis findings in international peer-reviewed journals. As of February 2026, this has resulted in 97 publications—a significant contribution to conservation science from a master's program.

“As a Master's student, after being berated with his usual statement, “All that is ok, but what about your paper?”, I got flustered and asked, “Why should you use scientific publication as a measure of anyone's scientific contributions?”. He responded with characteristic equanimity, “Ok, I agree scientific publications may not be the best indicator. But can you think of something better? If you find something better, I will use that”. I was caught completely off-guard, as I was expecting a lecture about my impertinence. His ability to disarm with charming innocence made him one of the best collaborators in the conservation sector”, shared Divya Karnad, from the 2006–2008 batch (First published in a tribute to Dr Ajith Kumar by Mongabay India, 10th March 2025).

Yet the impact of capacity building unfolds over time. As AK often acknowledged, the true measure of such a program is not immediate, but cumulative. It lies in

the trajectories of its alumni and collaborators, the institutions they join and build, and the academic and conservation-oriented questions they continue to care about, ask and pursue.

Jagdish Krishnaswamy, added, *“For students whose futures belonged more with activism and the practice of conservation rather than academics, he was equally effective as a mentor, because he had partnerships across the country and very good relationships with Forest Departments and Government officials, and in that way, he was quite different from many of us.”*

AK served as Director of the Master's Program during its formative years, shaping its philosophy and operational culture. His leadership combined academic rigor with administrative pragmatism.

He navigated institutional constraints, cultivated partnerships, and ensured sustained funding through diverse sources, including the Wildlife Conservation Society, core funding from the Department of Atomic Energy through NCBS-TIFR, the Department of Science and Technology, the Wildlife Conservation Trust, the Tata Trusts and The Habitats Trust among others

In 2016, the program tentatively experimented with the addition of 2 international students to each cohort, to test its relevance in the wider Asian region. Over time, this scope has expanded. and as of 2024, through the Fonseca Leadership Program of Global Environment Facility, the program supports 5 international students from developing countries in Central, South, and Southeast Asia in each cohort. Thus far, seven students—from Nepal, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Mongolia—have graduated. Four are currently enrolled in PhD programs in Australia, Canada, and the United States.

After years with AK at the helm, leadership was passed on to Dr. Jayashree Ratnam in 2020, who continues to run the course at present. Under her leadership and with timely support and advise from AK, the program continues its work, with the present cohort (2024–2026) including five international

students: two from Laos, and one each from Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and the Philippines. This expansion reflects the program's growth and its efforts to reach beyond India to the wider Asian geography.

This is a natural extension of the founding mission to build conservation capacity across the biodiverse, developing tropics.

Alumni trajectories

More than 60% of alumni have gone on to pursue PhDs in ecology, wildlife, and conservation at leading universities in India and abroad. Alumni from the first three cohorts (2004–2010) now occupy leadership roles in research and conservation programs within NGOs in India and overseas. Others hold faculty positions in some of the country's premier institutions.

Over the years, a number of alumni have returned to the program to serve as affiliate faculty, teaching subsequent batches in the classroom and the field, and guiding or co-guiding student research. This continued engagement of alumni with the program creates a vibrant network that enables the younger cohorts and builds effective collaborations.

Beyond formal roles, alumni are engaged in conservation action on the ground: designing protected area management strategies, leading long-term ecological monitoring, advising on policy, and working at the interface of science and society. In this sense, the program's legacy is dispersed- in universities, government departments, and civil society organizations across the region. Capacity building is slow work, but with time, the seeds sown

under AK's stewardship have sprouted across the conservation landscape in India.

Two decades on, the numbers have added up: 149 graduates, 97 publications, international cohorts, alumni in leadership and academia. But beyond these metrics lies something more meaningful and less easily quantified: cross-generational conservationists who are working collaboratively to engage with wildlife and nature conservation.

Anish Andheria, an alumna from the first batch reflected, *"The MSc program in itself is an inanimate thing, something that we are attached to but cannot interact with. And Ajith is the proxy that gives it its form."*

The Master's Program in Wildlife Biology and Conservation stands as an enduring testament to AK's vision: that conserving nature demands not only love for the wild, but the disciplined cultivation of knowledge, skill, and responsibility.

AK also intuitively recognized the importance of an alumni association as a neutral platform for the alumni to engage collectively as a community. AK first floated the idea in 2008, and was instrumental in supporting the process which culminated in the formal creation of the first iteration of the Master's Program alumni association in 2012. The organization was fairly active from 2012 - 2016 in terms of advocacy, communicating to both central and state policy makers on matters pertaining to wildlife and habitat conservation. A renewed effort to revive the alumni network is currently underway.

Hi All

Yesterday (30th June) I stepped down from the MSc Wildlife program, something that I have been planning for some time.

This is not a good bye of any sort! Just informing you that I am stepped down from the MSc Program. That's all! Otherwise, nothing changes. I would continue to write reco letters; my home is open, with corners for people to crawl into for a night or two! If you want to stay for a several days in Bangalore (not months!) and can't find a place, please let me know in advance. I can take off, leaving the cat with you at home!

It's you guys who made my life in the last decade and half a most enjoyable one! I hope it would remain so!

Best regards

Ajith Kumar

Fig. 4: Ajith Sir's email to all the MSc program alumni after he retired as course director in 2020

A Mentor, A Guardian, A Family Member

To speak of Ajith Sir only as a teacher or program director would be to miss the essence of what he meant to those around him. Across years and cohorts, he became far more than an academic guide—he was a steady presence in moments of doubt, a source of quiet reassurance, and, often, the person students turned to first when life felt uncertain or overwhelming.

“When I had a health scare, one of the first people I reached out to was Ajith Sir. ‘Just eat fish,’ he said. He proceeded to narrate a story about his relative whose response to a heart condition was to become fitter than he ever had been. He also added that the person continued to have a drink every night! ‘Come home, I will make you fish. Everyday!’”, he said. In 10 short minutes, he’d disarmed my fears, brewed hope and extended help unconditionally. My friend, Avishkar Munje calls Ajith Sir, ‘Dumbledore’. He swears he has heard Ajith say, “help is available at NCBS if someone needs it”. I believe him!” shared Akshay Surendra, an alumna from the seventh cohort (First published in a tribute to Dr Ajith Kumar by Mongabay India, 10th March 2025).

Such moments—simple, disarming, deeply humane—defined his relationships with students. He had an intuitive ability to recognise vulnerability, and to respond without judgment or fanfare. Support came not as grand gestures, but as thoughtful, timely interventions that restored confidence and steadied resolve.

Uttara Mendiratta, from his first brood at NCBS, spoke of early challenges after joining the course, *“When I joined the M.Sc. program, I was terrified. After having a job for nearly seven years, the thought of returning to subjects like Math and Statistics (never my strong suit) felt overwhelming. Ajith immediately recognized my struggles and handed me books with titles like ‘Maths for 11th Graders,’ gently reassuring me while we laughed—we were still teary-eyed from a meltdown. He had this rare gift of offering support without making you feel embarrassed or*

judged.” (First published in a tribute to Dr Ajith Kumar by Mongabay India, 10th March 2025).

His mentorship extended far beyond academic guidance. It lay in the relationships he chose to build—individual, attentive, and enduring. He took the time to know his students not just as researchers, but as people, understanding their fears, their aspirations, and the often unspoken uncertainties that accompanied both.

Rhea Lopez, shared in quiet reflection at the memorial, *“What has always stood out for me was his ability to form personal relationships, meaningful ones, with individual people he met and worked with. Maybe that’s what made him such a great primatologist. He took the time to get to know you, understand you without bias and see value in you when you didn’t see it in yourself.”*

K. Ullas Karanth, a friend of several decades and close collaborator through the program, shared in his memory after AK’s passing, *“Dr. Ajith Kumar [was] my friend from 1983 when he was studying lion-tailed macaques in the Anamalais. He has been my colleague and collaborator between 2004 to the present day, after I recruited him into CWS to lead the Master’s Program in Wildlife Biology and Conservation at NCBS. Ajith was a passionate wildlifer, a deep scholar, and incredibly affectionate and entertaining friend. Ajith inspired generations of young researchers and students, becoming their wise guru, funny uncle and even at times an agony aunt or a matchmaker.”*

AK had a knack for knowing just when he was needed, reflected through timely check-ins across over 150 students. He never neglected a student who was struggling, nor did he only champion those who shone. He modified his approach with each student based on their needs and always believed that people deserved second chances.

Rohit Chakravarty from the fifth batch spoke of how AK always knew when to provide support and when to push, *“We’ve all had a lot of falls and faced failure. That’s usually when a course director may abandon you for bringing shame to the course, but instead, that was when*

Ajith Sir adopted us more [...] in the end, after adopting us when we were taking falls, he helped rebuild all of us. That's something that only he could have done. For all the rebuilding that he's done, I'm very thankful to him, and a lot of us have gone on to do many things even after falling to our lowest."

There was, too, an immediacy to his generosity—a willingness to step in, without hesitation, when his students needed him most.

Swapna Nelaballi endearingly recounted how he made grand gestures seem insignificant, and how he would truly go above and beyond to support his students' careers, "In 2015 when I was offered a PhD position, my first call was to Sir. He was overjoyed, his excitement matching my own, if not exceeding it. But soon reality set in [...] I would have to leave the country, and how on earth would I take my baby cat with me? I scoured the internet looking for ways to transport a cat to America. [...] the logistics, the cost, it was impossible [...] I began to wonder, was the PhD worth it if it meant losing my baby. One afternoon as I sat with Ajith Sir over one of our many lunches at the NCBS cafeteria, I told him about my predicament, half hopeful half desperate, I asked if he or

anyone from our wildlife community would be willing to take him. Without batting an eyelid, he said yes."

Taken together, these recollections speak to a form of mentorship that was deeply relational. Ajith Sir did not simply teach or advise; he invested—in people, in their journeys, and in their well-being. In doing so, he created a community bound not just by shared training, but by care, trust, and an enduring sense of belonging. And it is this community, still-growing, that now stands by each other through moral support, professional collaborations and joint initiatives, and contributes to shaping the next generation of wildlife biologists and conservationists.

Carrying Forward a Rich Legacy

Legacies are often spoken of in terms of measurable achievements, but Ajith Sir's legacy resists such neat accounting. It lives instead in the culture he cultivated, the values he embodied, and the many lives he touched. In a voice that captured the significance of Ajith Kumar in his life, Jagdish Krishnaswamy closed with his final memories of him, "Till the very end, he was a wildlife scientist. [Fig. 5] This was 1st March [2025], and those are Sherman traps being set by the students.



Fig. 5: The last picture of Ajith Sir, on a field trip in Pachmarhi with the 11th batch of NCBS MSc students, courtesy, Dr Jagdish Krishnaswamy.

We had several gerbils coming out, they were all being measured, tails being marked and so on, and there was one shrew! One of the Gerbils had its ear punched, and Vivek [Ramachandran] mentioned that it was probably from 2-3 years ago. Ajith said, 'Wow, that must be a really long-lived one, since usually they get predated upon...' and he went on to say that it was quite an interesting find! [...] He was active as a wildlife scientist until the very last day."

Even at the very end, his engagement with the natural world remained undiminished—an enduring reminder that for him, science and natural history were not merely his profession alone, but a way of being.

Herman Ramesh, an alumna of the 10th batch, shared how humbling it was to interact with AK given that he had already retired by the time this cohort joined the program, *"We were very lucky as a batch because we got to witness Ajith Sir amongst his NCBS cubs at the 20-year reunion of the MSc program. At NCBS, we call all our faculty by their first names, but Ajith Sir was always Ajith 'Sir' and that reunion really showed us why. Seated in that room of about 150 people, all of whom had come before us, was a testament to his legacy."*

That legacy is perhaps most visible in the community he helped build—a network of students, collaborators, and colleagues whose lives intersect through the program, and whose work continues to shape conservation science and action across the country.

Vijayaditya Singh Radhod, a current student with the ongoing 11th batch of the program that was with AK on a field trip when he passed on, closed the memorial in 2025 with, *"We were the last batch to be fortunate enough to spend time with Ajith Sir, but in just a short period of time, it became abundantly clear that he was brilliant, benevolent and boldly witty. Even in his last moments in Pachmarhi with us, he was clicking pictures with flora while trekking up on a hill in search of vulture nests [...] it was a reminder that if this doyen of the field hasn't stopped learning, why should any of us?"*

His example—of genuine curiosity, of joy in discovery, of humility before knowledge—continues to guide those who follow.

Krithi K. Karanth, a faculty associated with the program and a long-term mentee and friend of Ajith Sir's summarised collective sentiment by sharing, *"We all have a huge bar to uphold. [...] I hope in some small way, each of us can take his spirit of endless love, ridiculous humour and friendship forward. Each of us were very lucky to have known you, Ajith, and now we all have to up our human game."*

To carry forward his legacy, then, is not only to pursue excellence in conservation science, but to uphold a way of engaging with the world that is generous, curious, and empathetic. It is to recognise that the most enduring contributions are not only those that advance knowledge, but those that support and enable others on their journeys.

Note

Some of the quotes in this article were given to Divya Karnad for an obituary written for Mongabay-India (<https://india.mongabay.com/2025/03/an-ode-to-joy-remembering-ajith-kumar-obituary/>).

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Expressions of Interest

Call for papers: 2nd issue of Zoo's Print honouring Ajith Kumar

We will be publishing a second issue of Zoo's Print honouring the life and legacy of Dr. Ajith Kumar. We invite students, colleagues and friends of Dr. Ajith, to contribute articles that highlight his contribution to wildlife, ecology and conservation science for India and the World. We also seek forward-facing articles that illustrate how learnings from Dr. Ajith Kumar will shape your approach to mentorship, capacity-building, collaborative research and conservation.

If you are interested in writing for this special issue, please fill this form: <https://forms.gle/gKbP6QeYLAvi89PA7>, and we will get in touch with you soon after. If you know someone who might have just the right story, idea or opinion to share for this special issue, kindly share this google form with them.

Kindly fill in the google form by May 07 2026.

We aim to publish the second issue in June 2026.

Best wishes,
Samira Agnihotri and Akshay Surendra
Editors of the second special issue of Zoo's Print honouring
Dr. Ajith Kumar

Chronicling Ajith Kumar's journey as a primatologist – His contribution to primate studies in India

Tryst with Lion-tailed Macaques

Dr. Ajith Kumar started his career in the field of primatology in the late 1970s under the guidance of Dr. G.U. Kurup in the Zoological Survey of India. The research involved surveys on the distribution and relative encounter rates of primates in large parts of southern India. Later, Ajith was one of the first few Indian field biologists to have started independent field research in primatology. Other Indian primatologists who preceded him are discussed in Singh et al. (2020a). He obtained his PhD from Cambridge University under the supervision of Professor David Chivers for his study on the endangered Lion-tailed Macaque (*Macaca silenus*) in the Anamalai Hills in southern Western Ghats. This was the third study on the species. The first two studies (Sugiyama, 1968; Green and Minkowski, 1977) were largely natural history studies. Ajith's was the first long term study



Figure 1: Dr. Ajith Kumar in Varagaliar, his PhD field site.

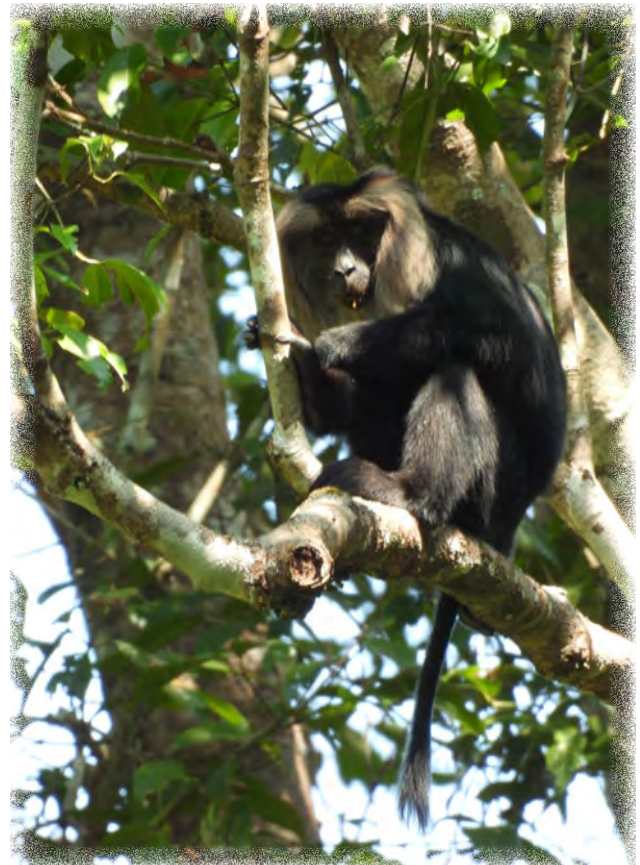


Figure 2: Lion-tailed macaque (*Macaca silenus*).

of the species spanning over six years. His work on Lion-tailed Macaques (LTMs) was the first study to quantify the species' behaviour and population dynamics, (Kumar, 1987; Kurup and Kumar, 1993). Many aspects of the species' behaviour and ecology, particularly demographic parameters were studied in depth for the first time.

Eight troops were monitored regularly for demographic parameters, of which one troop was selected for an intensive ecological study. Some key findings of the study were delayed sexual maturity in females and long inter-birth intervals, low population turnovers but high infant survival

rates (Kumar, 1987, 1995). His study documented the first eight weeks of infant development (Kumar and Kurup, 1981). His study also systematically estimated daily path length and home ranges of the study troops by establishing measured grids in the forest. Other significant findings of his study include highly diverse frugivorous diet and dependence on seasonal fruiting resources. His PhD study was followed by a population survey of the LTM across different sites in the Western Ghats. What was significant about Ajith's study was that while it laid a solid foundation for future research on the macaque's ecology and population dynamics, it also presented its accurate status in the wild.

Although, previous researchers had highlighted the status of the LTMs in the wild, the population estimate reported was an underestimate (Green and Minkowski, 1977; Kurup, 1978; Ali, 1985). Ajith estimated it to be between 3000 to 5000 individuals in the wild (Kumar, 1987), and interestingly, the current global population is estimated to be -4000-4200 individuals across 47 sub-populations (Singh et al. 2020b; Kavana et al. 2024).

Guiding with Scientific Rigour

Wildlife Institute of India

After his PhD, Ajith joined the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) in Dehradun as a faculty member. While in WII, he continued his work on primates. He mentored students and collaborated with forest officers to study endangered primates. Dr. Atul Gupta, an Indian Forest Service officer, collaborated with Ajith to study Pharye's Leaf Monkeys (*Trachypithecus phayrei*) in Tripura. They examined its feeding ecology and conservation prospects in secondary forest patches left fallow after *jhum* (slash and burn) cultivation

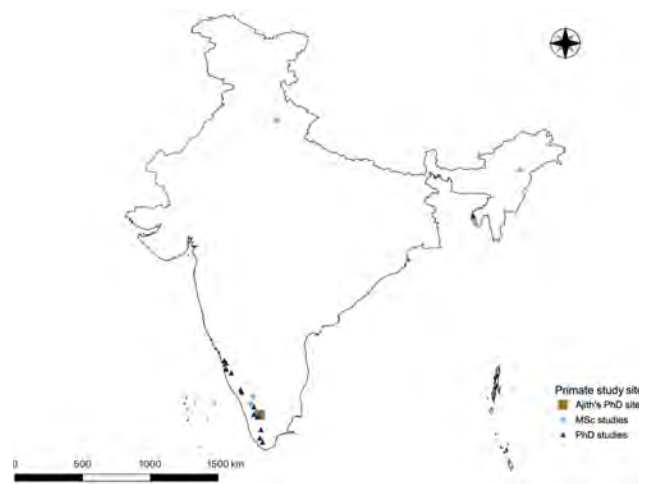


Figure 4: Primate study sites of Dr. Ajith Kumar (brown square) and of students supervised by Dr. Ajith Kumar (blue diamond – MSc students and black triangles – PhD students).

(Gupta and Kumar, 1994). Young leaves comprised a large portion of its diet. They suggested that the species could persist in secondary forest patches despite the practice of *jhum*, provided these forest patches were left undisturbed for at least nine years to allow regeneration of woody species. They also noted that the presence of small patches of primary forests close by played an important role in regeneration. Kaberi Kar-Gupta's Masters dissertation study under Ajith's supervision examined diet selection in Hanuman Langurs (*Semnopithecus entellus*) in Rajaji National Park



Figure 3: Dr. Ajith Kumar at Varagaliar forest rest house.



Figure 5: Dr. Ajith Kumar at Asian Primate Symposium, Medan Indonesia, November 2024.

and assessed nutritional correlates of its foraging behaviour in two seasons (Kar-Gupta and Kumar, 1994). They found that the food selection during winter was positively correlated with crude protein and negatively correlated with acid detergent fibre in both winter and spring. This was one of the first studies in India that looked at the role of nutrition in diet selection.

Concurrently, he supervised another Masters dissertation study on Hanuman Langurs that examined the influence of food availability on ranging and space use patterns of the species (Tiwari, 1991).

This was also one of the early studies that attempted to understand space use patterns of a forest primate using rigorous methods before the use of GPS in such studies. Interestingly, the study involved establishing measured grids in the forest and recording the troop's location on a gridded map during daily follows similar to Ajith's study on LTMs.

Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History

Ajith joined Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON) in 1992. He continued his work on ecology and conservation of primates and other mammals in the Western Ghats. He mentored students and guided their graduate and doctoral research.

He collaborated with two of his colleagues in WII to study the effects of forest fragmentation on herpetofauna, small mammals, and arboreal mammals in the Anamalai hills.

His first doctoral student Govindaswamy Umapathy studied the impact of rainforest fragmentation on arboreal mammals viz LTMs, Nilgiri Langurs (*Semnopithecus johnii*), and Indian giant squirrels (*Ratufa indica*). One of the aspects studied was the effect of forest fragmentation on



Figure 6: Waterfall field station in the Anamalai Hills. Circa 1996. Dr. Ajith Kumar with John F. Oates, and Mewa Singh, and students Prabhakar, Umapathy, Krishnamani, Lisa, and two others.



Figure 7: Dr. Ajith Kumar (middle in the back row) at the felicitation party in Cambridge for Dr. David Chivers, his PhD guide (2nd from right in the front row).

Masters Program in Wildlife Biology and Conservation

Ajith joined Centre for Wildlife Studies (CWS), Bengaluru in 2004 to establish the Master's degree program in Wildlife Biology and Conservation at the National Centre for Biological Sciences in Bengaluru. He spearheaded the program from 2004 to 2020. Several students from

the MSc program worked under

the demography of LTMs (Umapathy and Kumar, 2000a). They found that the decrease in fragment size correlated with decreased birth rate and the proportion of immature individuals, and an increased number of adult males. The canopy height and tree density were the best predictors of the occurrence of LTMs and Nilgiri Langurs in the forest fragments (Umapathy and Kumar, 2000b). A brief study on the LTMs in a forest fragment reported temporary group fission (Sakthivelou and Kumar, 1998). Another doctoral student of Ajith studied the phyto-ecology of LTMs in the central Western Ghats in Karnataka. They found that the ~ 40 % of woody species were food trees of the species. However, 27 % of the food plant species were also harvested as non-timber forest produce (Krishnamani and Kumar, 2000; Krishnamani and Kumar, 2018).

In the late 1990s, Ajith in collaboration with Dr. Werner Kaumanns of the German Primate Center brought in a substantial research grant from the Volkswagen Foundation to study the effect of forest fragmentation on various aspects of the biology of LTMs. This project further facilitated a long-term collaboration (on-going) between Dr. Kaumanns and Dr. Mewa Singh of University of Mysore that has resulted in several publications on the species, both *in situ* and *ex situ*. Mewa's collegueship and close friendship bond with Ajith spans over almost half a century.

his guidance for their dissertation on various taxa. Some of his students studied primates. Divya Vasudev studied the influence of resource attributes such as abundance and distribution, and predation pressure on group size and composition in a large population of Hanuman Langurs (*Semnopithecus entellus*) in southern India (Vasudev et al. 2008).

This was the first study to examine these effects on group size and composition of Hanuman langurs in southern India. Resource heterogeneity had a positive influence on group size, while resource abundance had a negative influence. Uttara Mendiratta studied the winter ecology of Arunachal Macaque (*Macaca munzala*), a primate species that inhabits the sub-tropical forests in the remote regions of Arunachal Pradesh. This species was discovered only a few years before the study (Sinha et al. 2005).

The study compared its feeding ecology and ranging in winter and spring seasons (Mendiratta et al. 2009). Her study reported significant seasonal differences in activity patterns. During winters when food availability was low, the macaques' overwintering strategy was dependence on low quality foods such as pith, an increase in feeding time and a decrease in ranging time to reduce thermoregulation costs.

An interesting study led by Swapna Nelaballi (Swapna et al. 2010), described seasonal differences in exudativory in Bengal Slow Loris (*Nycticebus bengalensis*). Her study noted that exudates were not fallback foods but formed a large portion of their diet despite being patchily distributed. Ajith's seminal work on the LTM's inspired another graduate student, Meghna Krishnadas to design a study to examine the foraging strategies of the LTM's during the lean season. She estimated macronutrient content in fruits to assess their quality. Her study showed that during the lean period, LTM's fed on high quality fruits that were less abundant and patchily distributed rather than the abundant low quality fruit resources (Krishnadas et al. 2011). Uddipana Kalita's study on Capped Langurs (*Trachypitecus pileatus*) suggested that resource abundance did not have any influence on food selection, but rather presence of acid detergent lignin negatively influenced selection of food resources (Kalita et al. 2018).

IUCN Red List Assessments

Ajith played a pivotal role in some of early efforts towards systematic conservation assessments of primates, particularly LTM's. He, along with



Figure 9: Dr. Ajith Kumar at LTM population and habitat viability analysis workshop

Sanjay Molur and Sally Walker of Zoo Outreach Organisation, carried out the first population and habitat viability analysis for the species (Kumar et al. 1995). He was also involved with the first report on conservation and management plan for South Asian primates (Molur et al. 2003). Apart from these, he was involved in the IUCN Redlist assessment of macaques and langurs (Singh et al. 2020b,c,d,e,f; Singh et al. 2024; Kumara et al. 2020; Kumar et al. 2020a,b).

Ajith also collaborated with researchers in other institutes. He contributed to two major studies on LTM's that had significant conservation implications. Hussain et al. (2013) examined the prevalence of gastrointestinal parasites in troops inhabiting forest fragments. Their study indicated that high prevalence and species richness of gastrointestinal parasites in LTM groups were directly related to habitat fragmentation, high anthropogenic activities and high host density. The parasite load partially explains the reason for the decline in immature survival and birth rate in small and isolated rainforest fragments. Ram et al (2015) analyzed genetic structure of LTM troops inhabiting forest fragments, contiguous forests, and the populations across the Palghat gap. They found that the troops in forest fragments had a depleted mitochondrial diversity as compared to those in large forest



Figure 8: Dr. Ajith Kumar sitting on a liana, in Varagaliar.

complexes. Further, it was reported that the populations north and south of the Palghat gap were substantially genetically different and these findings had a significant implication for management of captive breeding of this endangered species. Ajith also contributed to a systematic review of population status of Indian primates (Hameed et al. 2023).

This review of 41 studies reported that among the Indian primates, 20 were evaluated for their population status and a majority of these studies reported declining population trends even within protected areas.

‘Ajith sir’, as he was fondly called by his students, was not just a fellow primatologist but to many of us, he was a ‘sounding board’, someone with whom we could discuss our observations in the field and get his keen insights into primate ecology and behaviour. Umopathy recalls that planning a field visit with Ajith involved far more than just an itinerary. His meticulous preparation extended to every conceivable detail, which included several papers to read, essential gadgets (especially the calculator), notebooks, the precise type of torch lights and their batteries, leech-proof socks, candles, dry fish, snacks, and even books for downtime... the list was invariably exhaustive! Ajith’s commitment to his students extended beyond logistics.

Umopathy recalls that after each day’s fieldwork, they would sit together to discuss the findings and analyse data—often using that indispensable calculator! Much to his consternation, Ajith once asked him to perform correlation and regression analysis using it.

His passion for teaching was profound, not just focused on data analyses and research design; he was equally dedicated to teaching how to identify plant species in the rainforest, particularly the food trees crucial for primates. He would try and identify every fruiting plant, taste their fruits and make us taste them too!

Apart from the usual banter and quintessential qualities of Ajith, he would quiz us about the research questions, critique the study and its sampling design. At the end of a field session with Ajith, we would always come back wiser! This hands-on mentorship continued consistently, right until his very last field visit. He truly was one of the greatest teachers, mentors, and friends!

Acknowledgements

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Exploring Uncharted Waters and Oceanic Mammals in the northern Indian Ocean - A Journey with Ajith

Dr. Ajith Kumar was best known for his work in primatology, behavioural ecology, and wildlife education. His interest in marine mammals was less well known. Though he rarely spoke about it, he hoped to build a long-term research program focused on these species in India. When Divya Panicker first expressed an interest in marine mammals, Ajith gently cautioned her—explaining that the work was resource-intensive and far less glamorous than the animals themselves. But what set him apart was that, even as he warned her, he quietly worked to open doors and create opportunities. He understood better than most that progress in this field would depend on collaboration, given the vast waters in which marine mammals live and their wide-ranging nature.

In 2013, Ajith was introduced to Drs. Kate Stafford (University of Washington, UW, now with Oregon State University) and Mark Baumgartner (Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution; WHOI), two U.S. researchers who were organizing a marine mammal survey team for a cruise aboard the R/V *Roger Revelle* in the offshore waters of the Bay of Bengal. In email correspondence from April 2013, Ajith wrote to Kate and Mark:

“Some of us have been talking about the need for a marine mammal study initiative in India; therefore all of us are very excited about your survey and interest in working together in the future. As of now, there are no ‘experienced’ Indian marine mammalogist in India.

There is a very small pool of (maybe 5 or 6) young and enthusiastic marine ecologists with limited experience of studying coastal marine mammals. Divya Panicker, who wrote to you, is one of them and works with me. Your survey would be a fantastic opportunity for 1 or more of them to get a feel [for] what this is, to be with you and your colleagues, and then to develop a long-term program. I think it is also important that a more ‘experienced’ wildlife ecologist (in the absence of a marine mammalogist) spend time on this survey to get a feeling of what the survey is like and to discuss the broader issues of long-term collaborative research such as institutional linkages, funding etc. Personally, I would be most excited to be on board, although I have no prior experience in this field; but this is a call that my colleagues and I can make while meeting your requirements”.

Ajith and Divya enthusiastically joined Kate and Mark’s survey team aboard the *Revelle*, which



Figure 1: Dr. Ajith Kumar on a marine mammal research cruise



Figure 2: Cover of the MMCOI report produced from the 2023 meeting. This meeting was a direct consequence of Ajith's early efforts.

marked a turning point for all of us. It began a journey—both at sea and in thought—that led to the first recordings of blue whales in Indian waters (Panicker and Stafford 2021) and helped lay the foundation for what would later become the Marine Mammal Consortium of India (MMCOI report 2023).

At the time, research on coastal cetaceans in India was growing steadily, with early-career and a very few established researchers asking ecological and conservation-based questions that focused on near shore populations (For example: Sutaria 2009, D’Lima et al. 2014, D’Souza et al. 2013, Muralidharan 2013, Jog et al. 2018, Panicker et al. 2018a). But the field remained difficult—marine work demands boats, equipment, funding, and the ability to operate in tough conditions. These are resources that are often out of reach for early career researchers or students. Offshore marine mammal research in India was even more limited, despite its importance and given the biodiversity of marine mammals in Indian waters. Most research came from a few opportunistic surveys by oceanographic and fisheries institutions, with little contribution from a wildlife ecology perspective (e.g. Afsal et al. 2008).

During the three-week research cruise aboard the *R/V Roger Revelle* across the Bay of Bengal in November–December 2013 (Gordon et al. 2013, Tandon et al. 2016), Dr. Kumar joined a small, international marine mammal research team. The cruise brought together participants from three countries – USA, Sri Lanka and India. Expert

Figure 3: Dr. Ajith Kumar (bottom row, 6th from right) along with scientists from three countries across physical, biological and chemical oceanographic disciplines studying the unique biophysical environment of the Bay of Bengal in 2013





Figure 4: Dr. Ajith Kumar and Suzanne Yin on the foredeck of the Revelle

marine mammal trainers Suzanne Yin and Ernesto Vásquez guided the group.

The *Revelle* cruise traversed international waters, starting from Colombo, Sri Lanka and cutting through the heart of the Bay of Bengal. Although a senior scientist at the peak of his career, Ajith was new to the field of marine mammal research. He joined the cruise to build institutional linkages and explore the potential for long-term collaboration. True to his nature, he approached it like a student—doing the assigned homework, taking notes (Figure 5), and engaging with quiet curiosity. Ajith joked that while we were still squinting through binoculars, Yin had already identified the species, counted the group, and described their behavior. As Yin later recalled, “Ajith was someone who kept an eye on what was going on—very understated until something cool happened, and then he got very excited.”

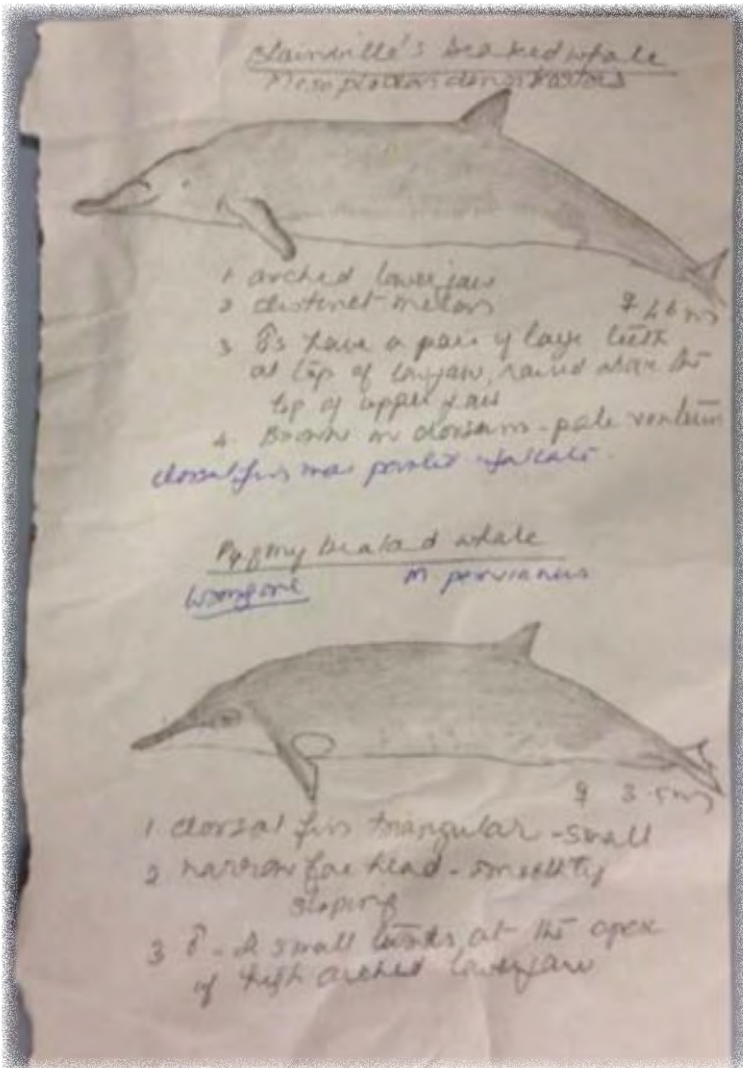


Figure 5: Dr. Ajith Kumar's drawings of beaked whales, which were used to train observers on key markers to identify to species.

What made the Bay of Bengal and the northern Indian Ocean so compelling to scientists from around the world was its unique geography and oceanography. Bounded by land to the north, cut off from polar influences, and driven by a powerful monsoon system, the region is shaped by seasonally reversing currents and massive riverine input from the Indian subcontinent after the monsoon. These forces create layers of biological and physical complexity, making it a dynamic but poorly understood part of the ocean. The 2013 cruise marked the start of a five-year international effort to study air-sea interactions at the ocean's surface, focusing on processes that influence freshwater distribution and its connection to the Indian Monsoon. In the northern Bay of Bengal, sharp boundaries between ocean water

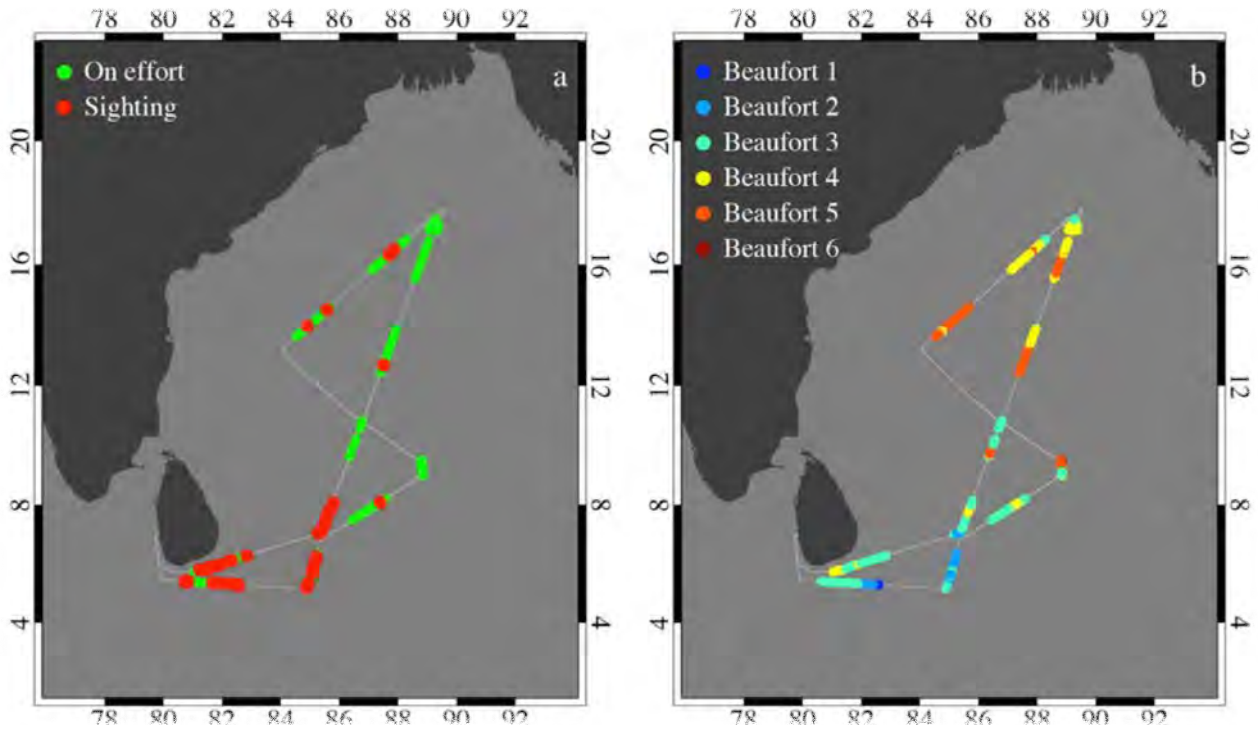


Figure 6: Figure F-8 reproduced by Shroyer & Mahadevan 2013. Left panel: Locations of survey effort (green) and marine mammal sightings (red). Right panel: Beaufort sea state (a measure of how rough sea conditions are) along the cruise track.



Figure 7: Participants of the bioacoustics workshop held by the University of Washington, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS) and Wildlife Conservation Society Wildlife Programme in 2014.

masses form due to heavy river runoff and rainfall, creating a shallow mixed layer shaped largely by salinity.

Mixing along and across these boundaries can alter water properties. In the southern Bay of Bengal, strong internal waves emerging from the Andaman–Nicobar gaps carry nearly ten times more energy than those in the open ocean and may play a key role in mixing water layers. These physical processes in the Bay of Bengal can influence global climate by affecting wind patterns, heat and salt transport in the Indian Ocean, and shifts in monsoon and rainfall patterns (Wijesekara et al. 2016). Within this context, in 2013,

our team recorded 52 sightings of 12 different cetacean species, including blue whales, sperm whales, spinner dolphins, and killer whales. Most sightings occurred in the southern Bay, with fewer observed in the central and northern regions. However, better visibility and calmer seas in the south may have contributed to this pattern, so it remains uncertain whether these differences reflect true variations in cetacean distribution (Wijesekara et al. 2016, Figure 6). Yet even this exploratory survey hinted at something intriguing—a possibly distinct and smaller cetacean community inhabiting the northern Bay (Shroyer & Mahadevan 2013). Combining more sighting data with ocean measurements will help



Figure 8: Marine Mammal Symposium participants at NCBS in 2018



Figure 9: Students, and trainers, and Dr. Kumar before the cruise on R/V Sagar Sampada in 2018. Enjoying long pretzels smoked like cigars is a fun tradition whenever a new marine mammal species is encountered at sea; the training participants are practicing this tradition here.



Figure 10: Reproduced from Srinivasan et al. 2018, Photo credit: Mridula Srinivasan – Observers using “big-eye” and handheld binoculars to survey for cetaceans in offshore Kerala waters.

us understand how monsoons affect where and when cetaceans are found in this region.

Beyond the data, the experience left a lasting impact on the team. Amid long hours of surveying in high seas, spotting cetaceans, and mapping the biophysical environment, a shared sense of purpose took shape—one that many of us still carry: to build marine mammal research capacity among Indian students and provide opportunities to access offshore waters to study oceanic species.

Just days after the cruise, Dr. Ajith convened a meeting of researchers from ten institutions to discuss the next steps. That momentum led to an acoustic training workshop at NCBS in 2014 (Figure 7), and the 2017 Marine Mammal Symposium, which brought together over 35 institutions in India and sparked lasting collaborations (Figure 8; Panicker et al. 2018b).

All the while, Ajith quietly built bridges—supporting partnerships with U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Centre for Marine Living Resources and Ecology (CMLRE) in the Indian Ministry of Earth Sciences, WHOI, and UW. These efforts helped students pursue PhDs and training

opportunities in the U.S. (Panicker et al. 2022). He also played a key role in organizing a training cruise off Kochi aboard the R/V Sagar Sampada—one of the first dedicated marine mammal cruises on an Indian oceanographic vessel (Figure 9). Led by Dr. Mridula Srinivasan (NOAA), Suzanne Yin, and Ernesto Vasquez, the cruise helped to train ten students in offshore survey methods, including the use of big-eye binoculars, and gave them a rare opportunity to work on a large research ship (Figure 10; Srinivasan et al. 2018).

Exploring Uncharted Waters and Oceanic Mammals in the northern Indian Ocean

A Journey with Ajith

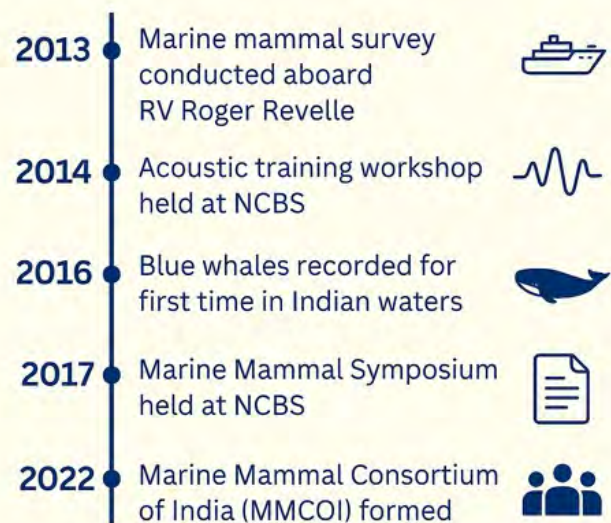


Figure 11: Dr Ajith Kumar (first from the left) with marine mammal team on R/V Roger Revelle

What was perhaps most endearing about Ajith—and something many of us continue to learn from—was that he never sought recognition for himself. It was always about the work. He never walked alone, and he made sure we didn't have to either.

Ajith's generosity, humility, and belief in collective learning shaped everything he did. He walked alongside students, researchers, and collaborators—many of whom found their way into marine science because of his support. He was gentle and kind and truly made space for young researchers to begin to spread their wings. He also shared his love of the wildlife of India with the international researchers with whom he worked.

Today, as long-term monitoring programs grow and new scientists begin their journeys in India, we see Ajith's legacy everywhere: in the institutions now studying marine mammals, in the students he mentored, and in the questions he helped us start asking. The loss of such an unassuming yet steadfast presence in our midst is immeasurable. Perhaps the only solace lies in carrying his legacy forward—in our work, in our values, and in the communities we build—so that he continues to live on in that we do.

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Building Bridges for Wildlife: Dr. Ajith Kumar and the Story of IWECC

IWECC: Inception and the need

The inaugural Indian Wildlife Ecology Conference 2024 (IWECC24) took place from 14-16 June 2024 at the National Centre for Biological Science, Bengaluru. This conference was several decades in the making. IWECC was conceptualized by Dr. Ajith Kumar and he managed to bring together over 500 ecologists from more than 40 institutions across India under one roof to converse, connect, and collaborate.

While there have been other platforms to showcase applied ecology and conservation research in India, in Dr. Ajith's words "*There was a long-felt need to have a platform solely for wildlife ecology researchers to share their work, network, and meet up*" (Bhaumik et al 2025).

Dr. Ajith once shared that he had brought up this idea more than 30 years ago, when he was working at the Wildlife Institute of India. At that time, the

field of wildlife ecology was still relatively nascent in India, with fewer institutions conducting ecological research. The idea was shelved, only to be revived several decades later, once it was felt that the wildlife ecology community was ready for such a platform.

IWECC24: Beginnings, partnerships and collaborations

Being the long-term planner that he was, Dr. Ajith started mobilising the community and resources for this conference, two years before it actually came to fruition. He recalled making multiple trips to meet his contacts at major ecology and conservation organisations across India (who would eventually come together to provide key funding and institutional support for the conference) and broaching the idea of this conference with them.



Figure 1: A Special Interest Group Meeting in session during IWECC24.

Dr. Ajith's ability to get buy-in from the oft-polarised community of ecologists and conservationists was a true testament of his warmth and the respect he held in the community. By end of November 2022, the steering committee comprising 14 individuals representing 14 organisations was in place to provide institutional backing, funding, and strategic direction for the conference.

Following the first meeting of the steering committee, Dr. Ajith worked steadily in the background to execute the decisions taken in the meeting — from hiring a conference coordinator to holding talks with potential venues and sponsors, forming committees, and mobilising close to INR 55 lakhs in funds, generously provided by the Steering Committee institutions.

By June 2023, the venue (the National Centre Biological Sciences in Bengaluru) and the conference coordinator had been finalised. The next phase of the conference had begun — announcing to the community that the event was happening, putting together the website, forming the other key committees such as the scientific and organising committees, and developing the conference program.

Dr Ajith envisioned IWEC24 to be a place where Indian ecologists across career stages could come together to share and showcase the diversity of their research in ecosystems, taxa, geographies, and disciplines. He wanted IWEC24 to capture the significant advances in research on India's diverse wildlife ecology over the last few decades, with a special focus on ensuring representation from institutions and researchers from all parts of India.

IWEC24: Behind the scenes planning and preparations

Dr. Ajith curated IWEC24's Scientific Committee which was instrumental in charting the scope and knowledge-sharing sessions of the conference. He chose nineteen senior ecologists specialising

in diverse ecological disciplines, landscapes, and taxa. They came together to set guidelines, review Symposia, Abstract, Poster, and Special Interest Group Meeting proposals. This dynamic committee reviewed over 400 abstracts and finalised about 250 presentations [1] in a span of three months, spurred on by Dr. Ajith's regular, polite but pointed, reminders!

The conference ended up showcasing research from all parts of India, with all the major taxa and ecosystems covered through 133 research talks in 18 different Symposia [2], 44 research talks in six thematic Open Sessions [3], 94 poster presentations [4], eight Special Interest Group Meetings [5], and three panel discussions on latest ecological concerns [6]. In addition to the scientific sessions, the conference also had workshops on nature journaling and art, and storytelling for conservationists [7].

Simultaneously, in the background, the logistical and administrative aspects of the conference were also coming together. Dr. Ajith and his organising team worked together, often very long hours, to organise the conference, ensuring no stone was left unturned in making this event a worthwhile experience for participants. The team worked through every weekend, morning to past midnight, and sometimes even through the night to make the conference happen. Many participants commented on how smoothly the conference was organised — again a testament to Dr. Ajith's thoughtfulness and keen awareness of every task pertaining to the conference. Under his guidance, the six-member organising committee was given the creative freedom to transform the still-abstract conference to a logistical reality.

The smooth flow of the conference would not have been possible without the infrastructural support offered by NCBS. All requests — catering, accounts, arranging accommodation and transport for participants, arranging for the catering tent, AV set up, and so on — was immediately and efficiently arranged by the NCBS administration.



Figure 2: Day 2 group photo with the conference participants and organisers

It significantly cut down operating costs and logistical planning that the organising team had to do. Dr. Ajith often joked that the NCBS Meetings and Administration team was so efficient in arranging everything required for the conference, the IWEC24 organising committee had to meet only once before the conference, for a brief one hour meeting!

Whether it was the expertly curated, highly interesting conference sessions or just Dr. Ajith's far-reaching reputation and charm — the conference registration list was oversubscribed from the beginning. Many eager participants sadly had to be turned away, simply because of lack of venue space. There was a period when the registration portal had opened for the last 40 places and within 20 minutes these spots were also booked. This brought in a flurry of frantic emails from unlucky participants asking why the registration form had shut down mid-booking! When the conference finally came around, there were 502 registered participants and another 50 more who gatecrashed!

IWEC24: The event

After a year of preparation, the conference was set to begin. Guests started streaming in, the IWEC24 team was busy ensuring everyone was housed, fed, and watered. The word of the conference had spread so far and wide, there was even a public session to introduce the relevance of ecology to the wider public [8]. Three days of scientific sessions, networking, and events went by in a blur.

The conference provided a much-needed platform for a diverse group of ecology researchers to come together and share their work, bridging knowledge gaps and enabling peers to network and collaborate. Before we knew it, the conference was over with a promise from the supporting partners to once again steer a second iteration of the conference. In addition to that, the community suggested the formation of an Indian Ecological Society, like the British Ecological Society or Ecological Society of America.

The event was momentous enough to be picked up by [The Hindu](#) and the proceedings of the

conference published in [Nature, Ecology, & Evolution](#) scientific journal.

Beyond the curation of sessions and ideating the conference, what stood out was Dr. Ajith's commitment to equality, diversity, and enabling access for ecologists across the country to attend the conference and share their work. Whether it was ensuring diversity among committee members or mobilising funding for conference participants coming from underrepresented regions or communities of India, Dr. Ajith made sure every voice counted in this process. More than his organisational ability or his networking capacity, the thoughtfulness in ensuring diversity and ease of access was at the forefront in the conference structure and participant composition.

He even personally sponsored the travel of some participants who were coming from the Northeast, Western Himalayas, and Central India when the conference funding did not fully cover their travel costs. His reasoning was that more than ever, we needed to have voices from the Northeast, Central India, Western Himalayas to be represented in ecology.

IWEC26 & beyond

Dr. Ajith also laid the groundwork for the next edition of IWEC in 2026 before his untimely demise. In early February 2025, he travelled to Ashoka University in New Delhi to kickstart the process of the next IWEC — getting a commitment from Ashoka University to host the next conference and liaising with IWEC24's partners for fundraising. With the kind of energy and passion he brought to IWEC24, his legacy will no doubt echo in every session of the next conference.

Reminisces by Varsha Sathish Kumar (IWEC24 Coordinator)

Dr. Ajith hired me as the IWEC24 coordinator in May 2023. I had never heard of him and my Google searches yielded few results, with the only source of information about this enigmatic man being an article written by his former students on the event of his 60th birthday [9]. Reading that article struck a strange chord with me because the article was obviously written with a lot of affection. I was curious to meet him.

I had been introduced to him by Dr. Jayashree Ratnam in early January 2023 when I had interviewed for the course coordinator position



Figure 3: The poster session gave many early career researchers an opportunity to showcase their work.

at the Wildlife Masters Office in NCBS. Although I did not get that job, Dr. Ratnam had suggested I work with Dr. Ajith instead. A single phone call towards the end of January '23 with him was all the information I got about this role and the conference. It took a few more months before I officially joined the IWEC24 team.

I remember every detail of my first meeting with Dr. Ajith clear as day and I remember going home excited about working with him. His warmth, charisma, and wit came as a pleasant surprise in that first meeting.

Over the next few months, I got to know Dr. Ajith Kumar more closely. Being an avid traveller, he would give me the vaguest possible instructions on what to work on and left me for weeks on end to figure things out. After years of being micromanaged by neurotic bosses, Dr. Ajith's hands-off approach was refreshing. I was touched that he trusted me enough to handle the organisational and administrative aspects of the conference and this pushed me to work harder to not disappoint him. Looking back, it was entirely Dr. Ajith's trust in my abilities, gentle yet firm guidance, and his ability to make people feel valued that made me want to give my effort to the conference and not disappoint him. A true leader without making himself seem like one, he had this unique skill in knowing how to bring out someone's abilities.

Having just moved to India from Singapore, I was homesick and lonely. Dr. Ajith instantly picked up on this and made an effort to check up on me frequently. When I fell sick with dengue, several bad bouts of flu, and recurrent allergy flare-ups, he would always make sure I consulted a doctor and would bring me nourishing meals touting dubious wisdom on the health benefits of fried fish. From day 1, I was never treated as an outsider. He put me at ease, as he did with everyone else. On my first day of work, seeing my anxious face, he asked me about my family. Having ascertained that I had Kerala roots, he smiled twinklingly at me.

A few hours later I would know the reason behind the mysterious smile. As we walked to the lunch hall, he pointed to a tree and asked me to name it. I took a hesitant guess and called it a cashew tree. Instantly, his eyes bulged out, veins in his temple pulsing he exclaimed — *“How can you say that being from Kerala! That is a jackfruit tree!”*. Very sheepishly I apologised saying that I liked trees but had no clue how to identify them. The next day, he came in carrying seven different books on botany and plonked it on my desk, instructing me to finish reading them by the next two weeks. A teacher to one and all indeed!

He was someone who never believed in hierarchy. My suggestions were treated with equal consideration and respect as the suggestions of senior committee members. He would tell me what needed to be done and trusted me to deliver. Apart from working from the office, we would often also work from his home, where I would be finishing IWEC tasks, while he whipped up a homely meal of rice, dal...and fried fish.

As the conference drew closer and work got hectic, he worked alongside me through the long hours without a single complaint. I remember an incident, about 3 weeks before the conference, when the workload was at its highest, I had been working for 36 hours straight without even bothering to go home. When he came into the office, he was surprised to see me still there. Seeing his face, I burst into tears because of how overwhelmed and exhausted I was with the never-ending list of tasks. He immediately sent me home to sleep and took over my work until I was sufficiently rested. He banned me from checking emails or my phone for the next 10 hours!

We also had our moments of disagreement, when both of us would insist on doing things a certain way but with characteristic Ajith sir aplomb, he would collaboratively brainstorm on a mutually agreeable solution. The moments of frustration were rare, far outweighed by our shared laughter, teamwork, and his infectious energy.

After the conference, when I moved back to Singapore, he continued being a close friend and mentor. I would frequently call him and tell him how much I missed working for him. He would laugh in his self-effacing way and say that now it was time for me to look for new adventures and with a mock-glare, scold me for not applying for a postgraduate degree.

Little did I know that he would be gone in less than a year after IWEC24. A day does not go by when I don't miss him. But I am forever grateful for that one brief year I spent working with him for IWEC24. He helped me believe in what I was capable of, built up my fledgling confidence, and showed me what true leadership looks like. Our last conversation stays with me. I was confused, wondering how to shape my career, and he, with

his pragmatic but gentle wisdom, urged me to try different things — but to always show up with joy and energy. His exact words “*Find something you're passionate about and stick to it. May bring you money, joy, sadness, frustration, accomplishment. At least you will be satisfied doing what you want*”.

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Observe, Read, Connect and Publish: Literary Contribution of Dr. Ajith Kumar

Dr. Ajith Kumar, fondly known as Ajith Sir among his students, was an accomplished scientist, mentor, and collaborator. His deep commitment to wildlife biology and conservation in India is evident through his association with numerous organisations, the large number of students he mentored, and the broader scientific and conservation community he engaged with. This is a modest attempt to shed light on his contributions to scientific literature, policy, and public engagement. Dr. T. R. Shankar Raman, Dr. Y. Chaitanya Krishna, and Pooja Pawar have created a digital collection of the literature he contributed to, available as an open-access library on the Zotero platform. (https://www.zotero.org/groups/5895078/dr_ajith_kumar_bibliography/library). Reading through his publications is much more than a tour of various ecosystems—learning about diverse taxa and reckoning with the alarming threats to the country’s biodiversity and wilderness.

Not Only Primates

Ajith Sir began his scientific endeavour with Dr. Kurup, at the Western Ghats Regional Centre of Zoological Survey of India, where he was part of field surveys and behavioural study of the Lion-tailed Macaque (*Macaca silenus*) in the Western Ghats. His first scientific paper, published in 1981, detailed the association between an infant Lion-tailed Macaque, its mother, and the rest of the troop. From budding naturalist to veteran primatologist, his scientific inquiries of primates included research on Lion-tailed Macaque infant behaviour (Kumar & Kurup, 1981) to interactions within the troop, inter-troop dynamics, and the sexual behaviour of Lion-tailed Macaques (Kumar, 1985; Kumar & Kurup, 1985), for his PhD thesis (Kumar 1987), while also highlighting the threats to their habitats, their ecological role in rainforests

and management (Kumar, 1994a, Kumar et al., 1997). His passion for studying the Lion-tailed Macaques remained unbroken for over five decades.

In the early 1990s, his research expanded to other arboreal mammals such as the Travancore Flying Squirrel (*Petinomys fuscocapillus*), Large Brown Flying Squirrel (*Petaurista philippensis*) (Ashraf et al., 1993), Malabar Giant Squirrel (*Ratufa indica*), Nilgiri Langur (*Semnopithecus johnii*) (Umapathy & Kumar, 2003), civets - Brown Palm Civet (*Paradoxurus jerdoni*) and Malabar Civet (*Viverra civettina*) in the Western Ghats (Kumar & Johnsingh, 1990), and Phayre’s Leaf Monkey (*Trachypithecus phayrei*) (Gupta & Kumar, 1994), Namdapha Flying Squirrel (*Biswamoyopterus biswasi*) (Kumar 1998), and Bengal Slow Loris (*Nycticebus bengalensis*) (Swapna et al, 2009) in northeast India, along with other primates across the country. The geographic span of his research directly or with his students spanned from the southernmost part of the Western Ghats in Kalakad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve to the Himalayas in the north and the Sikkim and the Andaman and Nicobar Archipelago in the east. It is remarkable to note that most of the species-centric publications were followed by detailed reports and publications on threat assessments and potential conservation and management implications. In addition to species specific ecological studies, he pioneered in investigating ecological concepts such as impact of forest fragmentation in the Western Ghats. This focused on communities of small mammals, amphibians, and reptiles.

In the following decades, along with his students, his scientific inquiry further broadened to study various life forms, including non-primate mammals (Sivaganesan & Kumar, 1993, 1994, 1995; Sridhara

et al., 2013; Krishna et al., 2016; Srivastava & Kumar, 2018, Rege et al., 2020, Khatiwara et al., 2023), birds (Ramachandran et al., 2017; Munje & Kumar, 2022), insects (Dolia et al., 2007), lizards (Ishwar et al., 2003), plants (Krishnadas et al., 2021; Gopal et al., 2023), and marine mammals (Panicker et al., 2020). He co-authored a total of 112 publications (including reports and popular articles). The major research themes that ran across landscapes—from mountains to plains to the coasts and to the deep sea—were population ecology, behavioural ecology, landscape and community ecology, evolution, and conservation science. Understanding impacts of habitat fragmentation on wildlife was one of the major research themes that his students pursued for scientific research. He mentored students to assess habitat use of various taxa in commercially important agroforestry plantations such as coffee, tea, rubber, teak and sal. Freshwater ecosystems such as streams, wetlands and rivers were his treasured habitats too, with publications on Asian Small-Clawed Otter (*Aonyx cinereus*) (Prakash et al., 2012), water birds (Ramachandran et al., 2017), and stream dwelling frog community (Vasudevan et al., 2006).

His publications included peer reviewed journals, newsletters, bulletins, magazines and regional reports. He diligently submitted reports to the Ministry of Environment and Forest, India and respective State Forest offices. He also contributed several book chapters to Forest Department publications and magazines. During the Silent Valley Movement, he articulated compelling ecological arguments for the conservation of endemic species of the southern Western Ghats (Yoganand & Kumar, 1999). In an article for Down To Earth magazine (2006), he expressed his fear about vanishing Malabar Civet (*Viverra civettina*) from the Western Ghats and hoped that it would not follow the same fate as thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*) in Australia that went extinct due to hunting pressure. Unfortunately, Malabar Civet remains a mystery till date and its validity as a unique species is

debated due to lack of reliable evidence by his own students who he mentored (Rajamani & Mudappa, 2010).

In-house Reviewer 2

Ajith Sir not only encouraged us to translate our ideas into scientific questions, but he was also a rigorous critic. He was so well read in the literature of the field that he would immediately point out missing references and conceptual gaps in our proposals, applications, reports, and manuscripts. He never hesitated to reject an idea if it was not sound enough. He paid attention to the smallest details, including grammar. It was often frustrating to receive his feedback on a document that would return bleeding with comments and corrections. He would insist on inculcating critical thinking, voicing opinions and finding solutions. He was widely read and maintained an enviable collection of books on nature and ecological history. In the middle of intense discussions, he would pull out a relevant book from his shelf and say, “*I will lend you this book only if you promise to return it.*” I am sure many of us are guilty of misplacing or forgetting to return his books.

People’s Scientist

He was a remarkable collaborator and mentor who initiated and sustained numerous collaborations and cordial relationships over the years. He worked and published with 117 co-authors on Indian studies, and his contributions to two global-scale studies placed him among more than 600 co-authors. He was remarkably successful in sustaining collaborations with organizations, both small and large, across the country. This facilitated valuable networking opportunities, collaborative research projects, and shared learning experiences for numerous early-career researchers. Apart from his formal roles at few research institutions such as Wildlife Institute of India, Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, National Centre for Biological Sciences and Centre for Wildlife Studies, he engaged with several organisations by serving as research advisory board member,

attending annual work seminars and meetings, examiner for numerous MSc and PhD theses, and agreeing to be a referee for students, early career researchers and peers.

Starting with his PhD fieldwork in the Anamalai Hills, he laid the foundation for long-term engagement between field researchers and diverse stakeholders, including Forest Department staff at all levels, mahouts from the elephant camp, and local residents. He cared for people as deeply as he did for his beloved macaques and their forests. During his visits to students at their field sites, he made it a point to interact with field assistants and local villagers, who remembered him fondly even decades later. He went out of his way to help field staff in times of need, and his relationships with them paved the way for his students to work in those landscapes with full local support.

Study tours were thoughtfully planned to enable students to interact with Forest Department personnel—from officers to watchers—as well as local conservation practitioners and researchers. He ensured that his students connected with experts in their areas of interest. His network of peers, students, and friends, along with his long-term relationships with them, made the field of ecology and conservation seem like a very small world. He celebrated his students' achievements as his own, with great pride.

A Visionary for Field Research and Ecology

Ajith Sir loved spending time in the wild—walking through the wilderness, observing nature, and discussing it at length with students until his last breath. He was a strong advocate for field ecology and was instrumental in promoting field research in many remote parts of the country. He actively identified potential sites for field research, collaborating with and encouraging other organizations to conduct studies in these areas. Today, thanks to many organisations and

their leadership, several well-equipped field stations across the country facilitate fieldwork and long-term monitoring. He was also part of a global-scale assessment of tropical field stations in biodiversity conservation (Eppley et al., 2024), which highlighted the key role that field stations play in conservation.

He never missed an opportunity to interact with forest personnel, ranging from IFS officers on probation to anti-poaching watchers. At a time when a substantial proportion of IFS trainees came from IITs and engineering colleges, he engaged with institutions such as IIT Palakkad in 2016-2017 and was actively involved in teaching along with these students the introductory course on ecology, biodiversity and conservation to increase students' familiarity with the subject. His passion for teaching extended beyond professionals. He was equally fond of working with school students. In collaboration with Ashoka University, Ajith Sir was instrumental in structuring a hands-on Ecology and Wildlife Conservation course for students in Grades 11–12 as part of the Lodha Genius Programme from 2023. This programme also enabled many of his students to engage with teaching.

Though he did not consider the number of scientific publications as the sole measure of one's merit, he was deeply aware of their importance in academia and conservation. He was particular that his students published their work in national and international journals, submitted reports to respective forest department offices and equally insistent on writing popular articles to make research accessible to a wider, non-scientific audience. Today, what we miss is perhaps that unexpected morning call and the familiar, unwavering question: "*Where is your manuscript?*"

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ZOO OUTREACH ORGANISATION

Innovative and Collaborative

ANNUAL REPORT
2025-26

Melia azedarach fruits in Chamba @ Amrin Ansari

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Zoo Outreach Organisation

Himalayan Restoration Project: Ecologically restoring species, livelihoods, and landscape



Background

The Himalayan Restoration Project seeks to ecologically restore the long-neglected and largely unfamiliar, deteriorated broad-leaf oak and pine forest habitat nestled in the mid-elevations of the Himalaya, in Himachal Pradesh. The Chamba Valley is currently reduced to having one small wildlife sanctuary (Khajjiar-Kalatop) and several isolated small fragments of the lesser-known forests interspersed with ever-increasing terraced agriculture that occupies more than 90% of the landscape. The HRP collaborates with the communities and educates them on the importance of forests and the need to protect it. We have established a community-led nursery in 2022 and are currently growing 21 species of native Himalayan species.

In 2022, with an extensive outreach program during the pilot studies, the Rathiyar Village Panchayat, Chamba head has issued an undertaking on behalf of seven wards of the panchayat (including 28 villages with a population of 2,282 in 503 families owning nearly 860 hectares of farmland) to be our partners in the restoration program. We partner with local farming communities, empowering them with ecology-based adaptations & sustainable livelihood options, and collaboratively rewilding this degraded landscape using native plant species grown in a community

managed nursery. By actively involving the local communities as integral members of our team and fostering partnerships with key stakeholders such as the forest department and other NGOs, we holistically bring decision-making, ensuring scientific and ecological restoration of this precious ecosystem.

Active conservation is the need of the hour, and the Himalayan Restoration Project aims to do just that through stakeholder-run restoration and conflict mitigation programmes. The area of focus is around the Khajjiar-Kalatop Wildlife Sanctuary, western Himalaya and lies within the recently demarcated eco-sensitive zone of



HRP team arranging saplings in the nursery. © Lakshay Tyagi



HRP team deweeding the saplings. © Sachin Verma

the sanctuary. The project is trying to work towards conserving the fragile landscapes of western Himalaya, through an interconnected multi-pronged approach using science and traditional knowledge for holistic wellbeing of communities, livelihood, and species.

Activities conducted during the reporting period 1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026

- Germination of native saplings of western Himalaya in the nursery.
- Restoration of degraded patches of land across the project landscape.
- Education outreach, upskilling, and training workshops for students, teachers, women, youth, and community members.
- Roadkill surveys across the landscape area over 8+ months.
- Perception and knowledge surveys with community members and other stakeholders.
- Representation of the project at national and international conferences.



Shanti deweeding the saplings before they are transported to the restoration plots. © Sanjay Molur

Key achievements and outcomes

- The community nursery germinated 20,000+ saplings of 21 native species.
- 3 ha of degraded land restored with 3,000+ native saplings. Additional 2 ha of land conserved.
- 500+ students and youth educated, 200+ women trained and upskilled, and 500+ community members sensitized in conservation, restoration, coexistence, and climate change.
- Provided 25 livelihoods for local community members (5 permanent and 20 seasonal).
- 35+ days of roadkill surveys across a 35-km stretch since June 2025 to document the threats to wildlife species over seasons from vehicle movement.
- 50+ knowledge and perception surveys with the local stakeholders on their understanding of climate change, crop raiding, restoration, and eco-based livelihood opportunities.
- Representation through posters, talks, and films in ERA India, 2025 GLF



The team transporting saplings from nursery to the restoration plot. © Sanjay Molur



The team stocks up nursery supplies to germinate saplings before winter sets in. © Amrin Ansari

functions.

Key partnerships and collaborations

The HRP is part of the Global Landscape Forum chapters and is called GLFx Himachal. HRP is a member of the Global Alliance for Rights of the Nature and Youth in Landscape initiative. In the past year the project has strengthened its existing relations with the Rathiyar Gram panchayat,

Asia Community & Action Week, and Tropentag 2025.

- Collaborated with Green Hub India to produce a film on the Himalayan Restoration Project.

Challenges faced

The climate crisis remains one of Chamba's biggest challenges. This year, heavy rains and landslides left the team stranded at the field station without electricity, food supplies, or network connectivity. The situation became extremely challenging and even posed a serious risk to one of the community members working with the team. At the same time, shifting climate patterns are becoming visible through altered flowering and fruiting cycles, which are beginning to influence the success of the flora in the region.

Team members and locations

The project presently has 13 members working. Ten team members are based in Chamba of which six belong to the local and indigenous communities, while three members are based in Coimbatore coordinating the technical and administrative

Arpana Trust, and Himachal Pradesh Forest Department to collaborate and work in the area towards a climate positive future.

Acknowledgments

The team is thankful towards the partners, the community, students, women, and youth in the landscape for their support and encouragement. Thanks are to: Randoh Higher Secondary School for collaboration; the forest department and panchayat officials for the administrative support and help during on-field action; the Arpana Trust for providing the facilities for the field station; Mr. Shakthi for the nursery space; and Salesforce for funding the project.



The HRP teams signs MoU with Rathiyar Panchayat pradhan. © Lakshya Rathore



Students from Randoh Higher Secondary School join HRP team in the restoration efforts. © Amrin Ansari



HRP team conducting education outreach session with government school students in the landscape. © Lakshya Rathore



HRP team conducting wildlife film screening for government schools as part of outreach activities. (Lakshya Rathore)



HRP team invites villagers from across the landscape, interested in restoration to sign MoUs for future conservation & restoration efforts. © Amrin Ansari



HRP team conduct a hand-on training program on native species restoration as part of the NSS program with Randoh Higher Secondary School. © Lakshya Rathore

Future plans/next steps

The Himalayan Restoration Project is a long term programme to restore the 800+ ha of degraded landscape with the communities. As part of the vision the 2026–27 target is to restore 10 ha of degraded land and reach out to many more schools and communities for a climate positive future.



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Citation: Bhattacharjee, T., S. Verma, A. Ansari, L. Tyagi, L. Rathore, P. Chaman, V. Ahuja & S. Molur (2026). Himalayan Restoration Project: Ecologically restoring species, livelihoods, and landscape. Zooreach Annual Report 2025–26. In: *Zoo's Print* 41(3): 01–04.

Wetland Restoration at Nallusamy Checkdam



Background

Wetlands are increasingly threatened at an alarming rate by pollution, habitat degradation/loss, invasive species, and over exploitation. This is more so the case with urban and semi urban wetlands that are also threatened by increasing developmental projects that invariably release effluents into wetlands. Some of these threats can to be addressed through ecological restoration. As part of this vision, Zooreach has undertaken ecological restoration of Nallusamy Checkdam with support of Bosch Global Software Technologies.

Activities conducted during the reporting period 1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026

- 🐾 Foster multistakeholder collaboration to ensure holistic restoration and resilience.
- 🐾 Continue running the Coimbatore plains native plant nursery for on-ground restoration
- 🐾 Establish a native aquatic plant nursery to set up the plant polishing zone
- 🐾 Rapid biodiversity assessments at the study site for these taxonomic groups – birds, fishes, reptiles, amphibians, mammals, invertebrates, and plants.
- 🐾 Road kill surveys conducted at regular intervals.

Key achievements and outcomes

First-of-its-kind nursery of native terrestrial and aquatic plant of wetlands of the plains

Challenges faced

Delays in permissions from the authorities.

Location

Nallusamy Checkdam, Keeranatham, Coimbatore

Participants

Local community members are being networked with and the education programs will be held in the next financial year

Key partnerships and Collaborations

Kosika Neer Karangal; Keeranatham Panchayat office; Annur Taluka Tahsildar office; District Collectorate Office; Local communities; Local government schools

Measurable outcomes

- 🐾 Setting up of the first-of-its-kind 5,000 native terrestrial plants nursery and 3,000 native aquatic plants nursery for the plains and wetlands of open natural ecosystems of Tamil Nadu.
- 🐾 Educator training manual and flash cards of open natural ecosystems of Coimbatore with over 50 species (plants and animals) with information about the species including warnings about nonnative plant species.



Aquatic plant nursery with over 5 species. © Koshik V. Rao



© Koshik V. Rao



Planting native seeds in grow trays. © Koshik V. Rao

Recorded over 130 individual roadkills over 25 surveys.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to all the subject experts who have tirelessly supported and helped with the biodiversity surveys, and collaborators, local community members and Bosch team for supporting this project.

Future plans/next steps

- Outreach with local community members
- Removal of invasive species at the study site around the wetland
- Plantation of 2,500 native terrestrial and aquatic plants to strengthen the bunds,

build riparian vegetation, set up the plant polishing zone and promote native biodiversity.

- Continue the rapid biodiversity assessments and the systematic roadkill surveys
- Conduct surveys for the two endemic plant species *Caralluma diffusa* and *Cordia diffusa*.



Planting native lily plants!
© Kritika P.



Teamwork at the Coimbatore plains native nursery. by the Zooreach office. © Poojitha Dupati

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Citation: Iyer, P., Sidharthan, P. Kritika, S. Sushanth, K.V. Rao, B. Ravichandran, R. Rajeshkanna, L. Ravikumar, P. Molur & S. Molur (2026). Wetland Restoration at Nallusamy Checkdam. Zooreach Annual Report 2025–26. In: *Zoo's Print* 41(3): 05–06.

Conserving Denise & Friends



Background

Freshwater ecosystems require urgent attention owing to multiple threats such as habitat destruction, overexploitation, pollution and invasive species. With this growing concern, Zoo Outreach Organisation set out to conserve subterranean fish, and unsustainable harvest of threatened endemic species from the Western Ghats (Red-line Torpedo Barb *Sahyadria denisonii* and associated species). The two components of the project are carried out under the LivelyWaters! programme with the subterranean component led by Dr. Rajeev Raghavan and the Denise & Friends component led by Dr Sanjay Molur.



Sahyadria denisonii or Denise. © Koshik V. Rao

Activities conducted during the reporting period 1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026

- Literature review, perception surveys and species presence/absence surveys were conducted at different sites across Kerala and southern Karnataka.
- Habitat assessments during surveys (habitat types - riffles, cascades, eddies, pools, forests, villages, fields, riverine forests with *Terminalia arjuna*, *Ochlandra travancorica*, *Barringtonia acutangula*, *Homonium riparia*, tussock grasses, deeper in the moist forest giants like *Elaeocarpus tuberculatus*, *Vateria indica*, *Syzygium bourdillonii*, *Semecarpus travancoricus*, *Syzygium travancoricum*, *Myristica malabarica*, etc.)
- Assessing trade status and economics through community surveys
- Assessing threats such as sandmining, pollution (run off from pesticides, plastic),

invasive species, unsustainable fishing and destructive fishing practices, aquarium trade through field surveys

- Developed dual language education materials like a manual and education packets using the data collected to reach the public to activate participation in protecting the species.

Key achievements and outcomes

- These surveys provided clarity on stakeholder understanding and connection towards freshwater ecosystems and threatened species.
- Education materials in English and Malayalam (local language) that is based research, collated data, pedagogy including games and activities to teach using experiential learning techniques.



Exploring the riverbanks of Chaliyar with Local fishermen. © Koshik V. Rao

Challenges faced

Accessibility of the streams to study presence of *S. denisonii* owing to erratic monsoon, sand mining, destructive fishing practices, and other developmental projects.

Participant numbers and locations

Total participants-152 villagers from 59 locations in 56 villages in and around the banks of Iruvanjippuzha (Chalyar River), Periyar River, Bavali River, Veni River, Kanjirappuzha (Iritty River), Valapattanam River, Payaswini/ Chandragiri River.

Key partnerships and collaborations

Partnered with experts from Kerala University of Fisheries and Ocean Studies (KUFOS), and a few local conservation enthusiasts.

Measurable outcomes

- 💧 Four publications providing key report on survey findings
- 💧 Confirming locations with presence/ absence of Red Line Torpedo Barb *Sahyadria denisonii* and other associated fish species
- 💧 Completion of initial perception and knowledge surveys to understand attitude towards Denise and the river systems, threats and possible interest towards conservation of the species/ecosystem.
- 💧 Selecting specific locations from existing network of stakeholders relevant for the workshops and outreach programs
- 💧 Preliminary mapping of threats in specific locations

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Mr. V. Jithin and Mr. Kashinathan for supporting us with the perception study design and selection of locations in the study sites for perception studies. Thanks to Beta Mahatvaraj for providing photographs and guidance to the education team.



Fishes struggling for survival in polluted water of Payaswini River. © Deepak



Ghost nets disposed at the sides of the Periyar River. © Koshik V. Rao



A local family catching fish at Chandragiri River. © Koshik V. Rao



Children fishing at the sides of Periyar River. © Koshik V. Rao



Fishermen catching fish using nets in Periyar River.
© Koshik V. Rao



Fishermen at Reservoir of Pazhassi Dam of Iritty River.
© Koshik V. Rao



Fishes the fishermen caught at Reservoir of Pazhassi Dam of Iritty River. © Koshik V. Rao



Rubber Latex factory effluent at sides of Payaswini River.
© Koshik V. Rao

Future plans/next steps

- 💧 Workshops for community elders, educators, and school teachers using the developed education materials such as the teacher training manual and education packets.
- 💧 Facilitation workshops focused on setting up behaviour change mechanisms towards sustainable harvest.
- 💧 Build local stewards to champion the cause of sustainable harvest to ensure species conservation and livelihood security.



Observing the Riverbanks of Periyar for Denise. © Sidharthan



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Citation: Iyer, P., K.V. Rao, Sidharthan & S. Molur (2026).
Conserving Denise & Friends. Zooreach Annual Report
2025–26. In: *Zoo's Print* 41(3): 07–09.

Conserving Subterranean fishes of Kerala

Background

Subterranean fishes are mysterious freshwater fishes that were discovered recently. They have extremely unique adaptations- some are blind, have translucent skin, barbels/feelers and/or chemoreceptors for finding and hunting their way in underground water channels.

These fantastic fishes are threatened by chlorination of wells, borewell digging, chemical pollution that go into ground water reserves and persecution cause of misunderstandings.

Activities conducted during the reporting period 1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026

- Survey for subterranean fishes in Kerala
- Community perception surveys to map attitudes and knowledge base of local communities towards these fishes
- Development of education materials for communities and educators to build foundation for behaviour change
- Engage with managers and policymakers to build new management strategies for conservation of these fishes



Presenting the local language education packet.
© Zooreach Team

Key achievements and outcomes

- Developed educational materials such as posters and education packets that breaks down since to simplify the information in both English and local vernacular language
- The key study sites were in 11 districts in Kerala – Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, Pathamamthitta, Kottayam, Alappuzha, Thrissur, Ernakulam, Kozhikode, Malappuram, Kannur, Kasargod.
- Genetic studies conducted for the following species *Rakthamichthys sp.* (4

samples), *Horaglanis sp.* (8 samples), *Ophichthys fossorius* (2 samples), *Pangio bhujia* (4 samples). All this genetic study generated 10 CO1 sequences for these subterranean fishes.

- Conducted community surveys with 25 members including those who have subterranean fishes occurring in their home wells.
- Conducted interactions with Panchayat



Searching for subterranean fishes in water tank. © Zooreach Team



Checking for subterranean fish in house well. © Zooreach Team



Remya sharing the education packet with a school student
© Zooreach Team



Local wells that houses suterranean fishes. © Zooreach Team

member from seven different districts (Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam, Alappuzha, Kottayam, Kozhikode, Kannur, Thrissur).

Challenges faced

Lack of adequate funding.

Key partnerships and collaborations

- Kerala University of Fisheries and Ocean Studies
- Local panchayats and managers in study sites in Kerala

Measurable outcomes

- Designed and developed 1,000 education packets in English and local vernacular language for outreach to lay the foundation for behaviour change towards conservation of subterranean fishes.
- Conducted surveys in 12 districts in Kerala and genetic studies in four unique subterranean fish species that is crucial to better understand these lesser known species
- Conducted surveys of 25 community members and interacted with panchayat members from 7 districts in Kerala

Acknowledgments

We thank all the collaborators, partners, and local communities that have participated and supported this study.

Future plans

- Conduct outreach programs with local community members in study sites in Kerala.



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Citation: Iyer, P., R. Sundar, P. Molur, L. Ravikumar & S. Molur (2026). Conserving Subterranean fishes of Kerala. Zooreach Annual Report 2025–26. In: *Zoo's Print* 41(3): 10–11.

1OCEAN Magic of the Ocean 1OCEAN

Background

This sub-vertical focuses on teaching about marine biodiversity and the ocean more broadly, making marine conservation accessible, relatable, and curriculum-linked for schools (students & teachers) and communities, particularly in contexts where the ocean is rarely mentioned in the school curriculum.

Activities conducted during the reporting period 1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026

- 🐟 Mapping curriculum to UN Ocean Decade Ocean Literacy principles
- 🐟 Literature review and surveys of target audience
- 🐟 Developing content linked to the 7 Ocean Literacy Principles of the UN Ocean Decade and different subjects taught in the school curriculum
- 🐟 Website design and development including feedback loops to test for bugs and verification of all the content by experts
- 🐟 Networking and coordinating with website developers, designers, animators, subject experts, and researchers
- 🐟 Launch of the e-learning

platform and introducing the platform at 11 schools

Key achievements and outcomes

- 🐟 Network of schools, teachers, educators, subject experts, and volunteers for ocean biodiversity conservation.
- 🐟 Launch of 'Magic of the Ocean'
- 🐟 80+ educators registered on the website with 12 schools using the material in their classrooms.
- 🐟 Materials used as part of the Classrooms 4 Coexistence program.

Challenges faced

Expert validation considering the tight schedules of subject experts was challenging but was handled by determination and coordination.

Participant numbers and locations

We have had 295 participants including teachers, students and other users. The locations of the project are Rameswaram and Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu and Thiruvananthapuram in Kerala.

Key partnerships and collaborations

Twenty-one schools participated from various locations in and around Rameshwaram, Ramanathapuram, Coimbatore, and Thiruvananthapuram.

Experts

Dr. Biju kumar, Dr. Sanjay Molur, Dr. Amit Kumar, Dr. S.R Ganesh, Dr. Dipani Sutaria, Dr. Divya Panicker, Priyanka Iyer, and Usha Ravindra



1OCEAN team with the mascot Dr. Monta Ray. © Prema

Measurable outcomes

- 🐟 Developed an interactive website on Magic of the Ocean.
- 🐟 The initiative has trained over 45 teachers.
- 🐟 Engaged more than 100 students.
- 🐟 Registered 70 users on the platform.
- 🐟 Produced 27 open-access ocean literacy resources.

Acknowledgments

Thankful to all the experts, teachers, students, collaborators, developers, designers, and well-wishers for all their inputs and support during the content development, designing and launch of the e-learning platform.

Future plans/next steps

- 🐟 Training workshops with educators on popularizing the e-learning platform.
- 🐟 Upgrade the e-learning platform based on feedback and to add new chapters to make it more inclusive.

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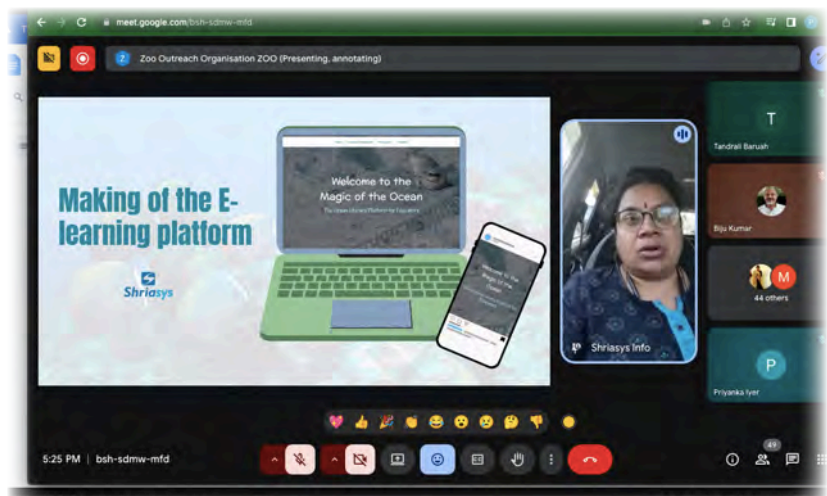
Citation: Iyer, P., U. Ravindra, T. Baruah, P. Kritika, L. Ravikumar & P. Molur (2026). 10CEAN Magic of the Ocean. Zooreach Annual Report 2025–26. In: *Zoo's Print* 41(3): 12–14.



Kerala University Launch- Co-creation for the platform Magic of the Ocean with University of Kerala. © Sidharthan



Launch in GPS School- Co-creation and implementation of the e-learning platform- Magic of the Ocean in GPS School in Coimbatore. © P. Kritika



Online launch- The platform was also launched with the teachers, designers, developers, and the 10CEAN community. © Tandrali Baruah

10CEAN Miscellaneous

This year focused on analyzing the existing data sets that included species identification, advanced literature review, preliminary analyses of opportunistic survey data involving catch, gear usage, demography, knowledge, and perceptions. These analyses continue to build the foundation for all other initiatives of 10CEAN including all the outreach and awareness that are based on solid science and on-ground information from Indian waters.

As next steps, this work advocates the need for dedicated campaigns at the local and national levels to raise awareness amongst the general public and the fisherfolk about the increasing decline in shark population in our waters, to encourage better informed consumers, to aid in reduction of destructive gear use and multi gear use per craft. Such campaigns can bring about changes in perceptions, foster a sense of community ownership, and give a foundation for science-based management strategies in the future. Addressing the lack of awareness of sharks at a local and national scale can be a vital step towards ensuring their long-term survival which will help keep the ecological balance of our ocean.



On the occasion of Manta Ray Day, 27 Sep 2025, the e-learning platform was launched in Vidya Vanam School, Coimbatore.
© B. Ravichandran.

IOCEAN programme: Citizen Science

Conservation of 'Critically Endangered' Hammerhead Sharks of India via Participatory Science



Background

The project aimed at empowering fisheries and marine science students from coastal colleges in southern India to actively participate in monitoring shark landings (focal species being hammerhead sharks) at local fish landing sites via structured citizen science & internship programs.

Activities conducted during the reporting period 1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026

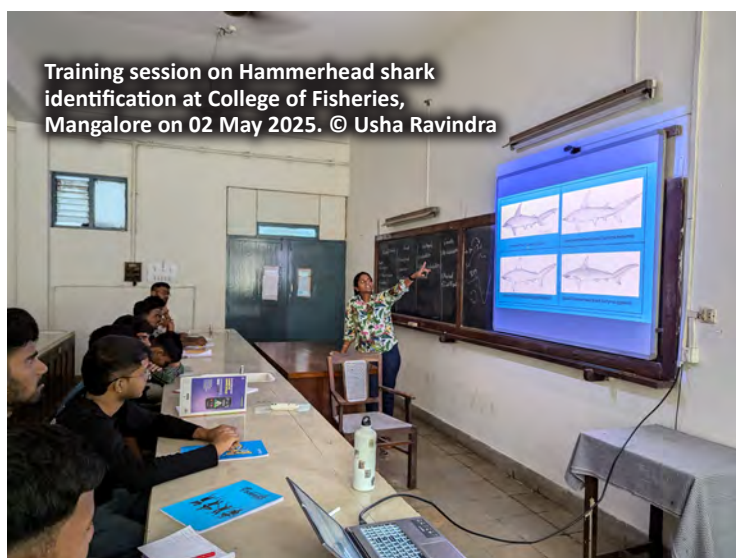
- 🐟 Conducted shark conservation training workshops across eight colleges in three states: Tamil Nadu (5), Kerala (1), and Karnataka (2). The workshops covered 11 fish landing sites in Tamil Nadu (8), Kerala (1), and Karnataka (1), covering diverse shark fisheries (target catch, bycatch, and occasional landings).
- 🐟 Students were introduced to: status of sharks in India and their identification; photographic guidelines to identify sharks for citizen science; identification of

hammerheads and data gaps to address their conservation; and how to use IOCEAN Citizen Science website to document fish landings.

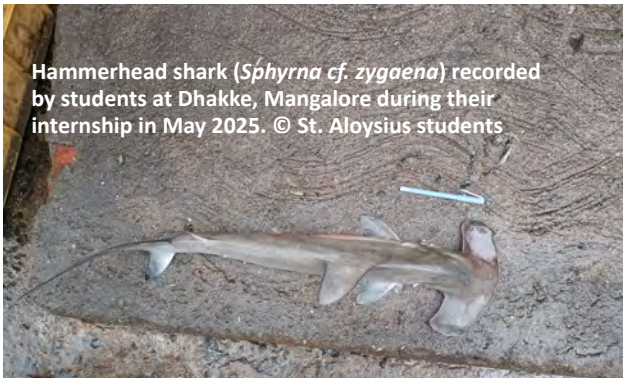
- 🐟 Implemented internship program with four partner colleges involving 51 students documenting shark trade, bycatch, landings, fisheries mapping, and artisanal catch monitoring across 17 fish landing sites.
- 🐟 Created 'IOCEAN Youth Network' for continued engagement in marine conservation discussions and activities.
- 🐟 Developed citizen science educational materials (poster, foldout, website). Materials include photographic guidelines for shark identification, hammerhead identification basics, shark vulnerability concepts, bycatch issues, and QR-linked web resources (expandable to broader marine conservation topics).

Key achievements and outcomes

- 🐟 Hammerhead Watch: Internship survey reports recorded more than 80 juvenile hammerhead sharks landed at Dhakke market, Mangalore, during just six survey days in May.
- 🐟 The internship programme produced eight observational reports on shark/bycatch trade at regional level of which two are published in *Zoo's Print* and others are still under review.
- 🐟 Recorded ~1,700 observations on the IOCEAN Citizen Science Portal (1,300 internship entries;



Training session on Hammerhead shark identification at College of Fisheries, Mangalore on 02 May 2025. © Usha Ravindra



Hammerhead shark (*Sphyrna cf. zygaena*) recorded by students at Dhakke, Mangalore during their internship in May 2025. © St. Aloysius students



200 workshop training field visits; 200 literature-based; ~20 test entries).

- 🦈 Published three outreach articles covering workshop proceedings in regional media, including *The Hindu* and *Zoo's Print*.
- 🦈 Eight unchartered artisanal landings along Mangalore & Kapu coastline were mapped by interns. This information could help impede any developmental projects if proposed in these areas in future.

Challenges faced

Although all participating colleges expressed interest in the internship program, they requested stipends to financially support their students. Due to funding constraints, internships could not be extended to all institutions. Based on priority and available resources, the Zoo Outreach Organisation could support six students to undertake internships near prime shark and/or bycatch landing sites.

Participant numbers and locations

Total students trained: 307; Total internship students: 51; Total workshops conducted: 8; Total colleges covered for training workshops: 8; Total fish landing sites covered in shark/bycatch monitoring: 17.

Measurable outcomes

- 🦈 307 students introduced to shark conservation & monitoring
- 🦈 Network of eight coastal colleges across three states (Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala)
- 🦈 17 fish landing sites identified & monitored during internship
- 🦈 Two observation reports published on shark/bycatch landings
- 🦈 1,500 observations inputted in Citizen Science website
- 🦈 Conducted 30+ mentorship meetings (April–July) guiding 22 interns across 4 colleges in report writing, data collection, Excel, Google Drive, mapping basics, literature review, and morphometric analysis using JMicrovision
- 🦈 Three media articles published in *The Hindu* & *Zoo's Print* on project activities

Acknowledgments

We thank the WCT-BEES grant for funding the project; Dr. Biju Kumar from University of Kerala for guidance; father Churchill from South Asian Fishermen Fraternity for guiding students on fish & fisher welfare thinking;



Queen Mary college students documenting artisanal fish landings in citizen science website during their internship in May 2025. © Queen Mary college students

Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India
Block-6, Tamilnadu Slum Clearance Board-nochi Nagar, 119, Block-6,
Tamilnadu Slum Clearance Board-nochi Nagar, 119, Kamarj Salai, Nochi
Nagar, Mylapore, Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600004, India
Lat 13.038146° Long 80.28015°
12/05/2025 06:46 AM GMT +05:30



Field visit to Mudasalodai fishing harbor to train students on how to conduct community surveys with fishers, document landings, scientific photography, and data organisation on 04 April 2025.
© Usha Ravindra

Abisha C. from Dakshin foundation for being a resource person and Arjun Viswa for helping with translation & photography; the following college staff/representatives for their support with training workshops: Dr. Durariraja, Dr. Karappuswamy, and Dr. B. Ahilan from Fisheries College and Research Institute, Thoothukudi; Dr. Vijayanand from Annamalai University, Parangipettai; Vishnu H., and Arun C.R. from University of Kerala; Dr. Samuel, Dr. Prince, Naufal Nazium, and Dr. Immanuel from Centre for Marine Science and Technology (CMST), Rajakkamangalam, Kanyakumari; Glavin Thomas and Marvel lobo from St. Aloysius college, Mangalore, Karnataka; Dr. Kumar Naik, Mr. Sanjay, Dr. H.N. Anjanayappa from College of Fisheries, Mangalore; Ms. Malathi and Ms. Basheera from St. Mary's Queen College, Chennai; Noorul Samsoon and Ms. Ganishka from Thassim Beevi, Kilakarai, Ramanathapuram. Last but not the least, we are very grateful to and thank all the fisherfolk for their co-operation and participation.

Future plans/next steps

The project results on hammerheads sharks will be used to kickstart the Hammerhead Watch project, where more students will be

trained & supported to continue document hammerhead landings at prime sites identified from this project. More colleges will be networked to establish internship tie-ups while engaging the current ones. Currently, the Cit-Sci portal is undergoing an upgrade to improve the user interface, improve existing elements, and include some additional features. Going forward, this initiative will be expanded across the entire Indian coastline by establishing credit-based collaborations with coastal universities/colleges while further growing the IOCEAN Youth Network, empowering students to take long-term stewardship of marine conservation.



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Citation: Ravindra, U., L. Ravikumar, P. Kritika & P. Iyer (2026). Conservation of 'Critically Endangered' Hammerhead Sharks of India via Participatory Science. Zooreach Annual Report 2025–26. In: *Zoo's Print* 41(3): 15–17.

Ram Hattikudur Advanced Training in Conservation 2025–26 (Batch 5)

A community of career conservationists to lead the world into restoring wildlife

Background

Global biodiversity is at a tipping point with species vanishing and ecosystems degrading, making it an urgent need to build conservation leaders.

The RHATC Program, a brainchild of Dr Sanjay Molur, stepped into its 5th year in 2025, is designed to provide young aspirants and early-career conservationists a unique platform to learn, engage with leaders, and exchange ideas in the field of conservation. The course provides a unique blend of contemporary conservation biology, science, philosophy, finance, policy, outreach along with equipping the participants with on-ground knowledge, tools, and perspectives needed to address real world conservation challenges while being inclusive, holistic, and scientific.

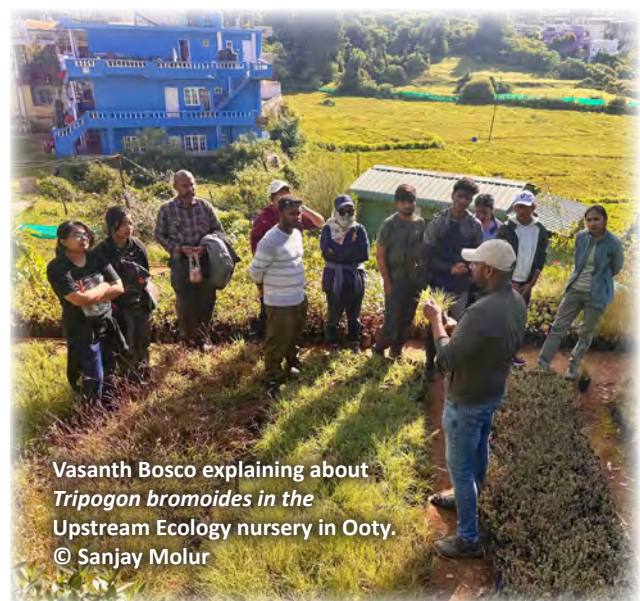
With an alumnus of 49 graduates from 13 states in India, the theme for the fifth Batch was Ecological Restoration where the Fellows underwent training on planning restoration models alongside conservation. RHATC is one of a kind course combining scientific expertise, grassroot engagement, and innovative thinking. The four-month inhouse immersive program is designed to equip conservation enthusiasts with on-field skills from experts across the globe.

Activities conducted during the reporting period 1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026

- The RHATC team interviewed youth from different parts of India to select applicants that fit the fellowship.
- The team conducted sessions for the

Fellows on conservation biology, education & outreach, publication & research ethics, taxonomy, conservation assessment and planning, flora and fauna conservation, restoration, wildlife law & policy, scientific writing, fundraising, and other aspects of conservation.

- The Fellows were taken to field trips across the four months for hands-on training and field exposure to learn from experts.
- The Fellows were trained in scientific and popular writing for conservation and given the opportunity to publish.
- The team invited mentors, leaders, experts, and researchers from across India and abroad to train the Fellows in Conservation.



Vasanth Bosco explaining about *Tripogon bromoides* in the Upstream Ecology nursery in Ooty.
© Sanjay Molur



Examining a spiderweb on the crest trail in Coorg. © Sanjana V.K.

Challenges faced

- Making the younger generation understand the importance of responsibility and sticking to promises made during the selection process.

Participant numbers and locations

- The program supported nine Fellows from seven states during the 5th batch of RHATC.

Key partnerships and collaborations

- The program partnered and collaborated with 109 resource people, mentors, leaders, field contacts, experts, and funders from 37 organizations across the 4-months.

Key achievements and outcomes

- The program successfully ended the fifth batch with nine graduates from seven states.
- More than 60% of the graduates are already working in the field of conservation across different landscapes in India.
- The Fellows published a special edition for Zoo's Print, an international conservation magazine.
- The Fellows completed a 15-day mentorship challenge across three locations – lateritic plateaus at Kasargod, deciduous forests at Annamalai, and rocky outcrops at Tumkur; coming up with detailed project reports on restoring each of these landscapes.

Measurable outcomes

- The team organized 100+ sessions led by 109 resource people for the Fellows.
- The course organized 20 field trips across different landscapes and ecosystems in southern India.
- Five graduates are working in conservation and research positions with different government institutes and NGOs across India.
- Three detailed project reports for eco-



Exploring a hill stream at twilight in Coorg. © Sanjay Molur



Fireflies sparkling around Iyal farm in Pollachi. © Gokul K



Interaction with Srinivasan Kasinathan from NCF Annamalai restoration project in Valparai. © Trisa Bhattacharjee



Group photo with the Rainforest Retreat team in Coorg. © Sanjay Molur

restoration of three landscapes produced.

- 28 articles published in Zoo's Print magazine.

Acknowledgments

The RHATC team is grateful to: all the funders and supporters – Coromandel International (Murugappa Group), Mansukhani Family, Chandrakala and Satwady Govardhan Shetty, and Sanjay Manohar Family & Friends; all the research institutes, NGOs, and individual researchers who collaborated throughout the course for sessions, mentorship, and field trips; and the admin team back at Zooreach for all their efforts and support.



RHATC team after plantation in Ooty. © Sanjay Molur



Discussion with Joss Brooks at Pitchandikulam Library. © G. Pannagasri



RHATC Fellows with Zooreach Team at the office.

Future plans/next steps

After successfully completing five batches, the RHATC team is now working towards launching a one-year internship-cum-training program as an extended pathway of RHATC, designed to deepen learning and provide more immersive conservation experience. Stay tuned for what’s coming next!

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Citation: Bhattacharjee, T., P. Molur, P. Iyer, L. Ravikumar, P. Kritika, B. Ravichandran & S. Molur (2026). Ram Hattikudur Advanced Training in Conservation 2025–26 (Batch 5). Zooreach Annual Report 2025–26. In: *Zoo’s Print* 41(3): 18–21.

Mansukhani family

Coromandel 
FUTURE POSITIVE


murugappa

Chandrakala and Satwady Goverdhan Shetty Fellowship

Sally Walker Conservation Fund

Sanjay Manohar family & friends

PhD programme at Zooreach



The Systematics, Ecology, and Conservation Lab at Zoo Outreach Organisation Trust started its PhD programme in Conservation Action, as a Research Institute affiliated with the Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE) in January 2024. There are two renowned scientists/conservationists guiding students/PhD Scholars – Dr. Sanjay Molur and Dr. Bhargavi Srinivasulu. Currently there are five PhD Scholars: Ms. Trisa Bhattacharjee, Mr. Sushanth S, and Ms. Amrin Ansari registered with Dr. Molur. Mr. Asad Gopi and Ms. Ananditha Pascal are with Dr. Srinivasulu. Also, we collaborate with professors from MIT (Manipal Institute of Technology), and Shristi for the work.

Trisa Bhattacharjee registered in April 2024, is studying the different threats to elephants in Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve, and whether it has varied in the past 50 years through documenting anthropogenic changes and people's perception. The study focuses on understanding the impact of humans on forest and elephant conservation, along with analysing the present state of human-elephant interaction in the landscape. The study will help create education outreach programs and stakeholder-led mitigation for human-elephant coexistence in the region.

S. Sushanth registered in October 2024, is working on patterns and underlying drivers of species composition changes of plants, herpetofauna, birds and mammals that occurs during the process of secondary succession in the southern Western Ghats, India. His

work examines biodiversity dynamics, shifts in community structure, functional diversity across successional gradients. The work also aims to generate insights into ecological recovery process and inform conservation planning and restoration strategies in human-modified plantation mosaic landscapes within this biodiversity hotspot of India.

Asad Gopi registered in October 2024, is studying the distribution and movement ecology of the Indian Flying Fox *Pteropus medius* and investigates how land-use and land-cover changes influence their spatial ecology in Greater Hyderabad, Telangana, India. His work examines patterns of habitat use, roost selection, foraging movements, and connectivity across urban, peri-urban, and semi-natural landscapes. The study also aims to assess the impacts of human-modified environments on bat behaviour and population dynamics, generating insights for urban biodiversity conservation, mitigation of human-wildlife conflict, and evidence-



based management strategies for this ecologically important and human-reliant flying mammal in a rapidly urbanizing region of India.

Amrin Ansari registered in October 2025, is looking to understand the ecological drivers behind the negative interaction between humans and Asiatic Black Bears *Ursus thibetanus* in Chamba, Himachal Pradesh. The study aims on generating baseline data from the landscape to form the basis of evidence-based conservation planning for the species.



Ananditha Pascal registered in October 2025, is working on the macroecology of the Hemidactylus geckos and the role in rock outcrops in peninsular India. The work aims to incorporate ecological niche modelling to understand climate change and LULC impacts on hemidactyl geckos, determine the variation in their functional traits in association with eco-geography and also study the role and diversity patterns across rock outcrops, which are important ecosystems for species like the gekkonids. These seemingly divergent, but highly integrated studies, bridge data-driven macroecological approaches to conservation-evidence, bringing much-needed attention to the threatened, yet neglected Hemidactylus geckos and rock outcrops of peninsular India.



Coursework

The PhD programme is also incorporated with course work studies, wherein the students will choose either these or courses outside the

organisation for their mandatory credits. The courses are:

- ✍ IUCN Red List Assessment Training (5 credits): This is a 5-day hands on training workshop conducted to learn all about the IUCN Red List of Species and a mock species assessment from one of the developers of the present-day criteria and categories for assessments along with learning data-interpretation for conservation planning
- ✍ Conservation Translocation Training (4 credits): This is a 3-day hand-on learning workshop to understand the basis for reintroductions done scientifically and systematically to promote conservation, to learn principals of translocation, how to differentiate those that are not promoting conservation, and steps to consider while planning a conservation translocation exercise to increase the probability of success for species conservation.
- ✍ Publication and Research Ethics Course (2 credits): This is a 3-day workshop session with the Journal of Threatened Taxa team to learn how to maintain the integrity of scientific publication and research.
- ✍ Conservation Education and Outreach Course (4 credits): This is a 3-day hands on learning training workshop, where we will learn regarding the nuances of education, what kind of education works? Which audiences? What fails? How to bring about behavioural change to achieve our conservation goals
- ✍ Research Methodology: Conservation Implementation (4–6 credits): This is a course work to make scholars understand the various research methods used in for various studies and aspects. It helps to learn how different data collection methods are carried out, what all parameters should be considered.

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Citation: Sushanth, S., T. Bhattacharjee, A. Gopi, A. Ansari, A. Pascal, B. Srinivasulu & S. Molur (2026). PhD programme at Zooreach. Zooreach Annual Report 2025–26. In: *Zoo's Print* 41(3): 22–23.

South Asian Invertebrate Specialist Group (SAsISG) & Invertebrate Conservation Information Network of South Asia (ICINSA)

Background

SAsISG and ICINSA focuses on conserving invertebrates in the South Asian region. The project targets on expanding membership and building networks with invertebrate experts across South Asia; completing global Red List assessments for more invertebrate groups; identifying important invertebrate habitats; identifying overlooked & exploited invertebrate groups; develop and implement conservation action plan model for invertebrate groups; promoting research on taxonomy & natural history; promoting conservation awareness among the public and wildlife enthusiasts; develop policy interventions; capacity building workshops to train conservationists in all aspects of invertebrate conservation; and supporting more invertebrate conservation works in the region.

Activities, key achievements, and outcomes during the reporting period 1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026

🦋 Five subnetwork groups under SAsISG have been formed: Marine Molluscs, Tiger Beetles, Tarantulas, Diplopoda. Five leaders have been nominated to lead the subnetwork groups for the South Asian region: R. Ravinesh (Marine Molluscs), J. Chaithra Shree (butterflies), V. Sharan (Tiger Beetles), (Gautam Kadam & A. Abinesh (tarantulas), and Aparna Kalawate (Diplopoda). They have been tasked to expand the network across South Asia and to take up activities to promote the



Observations from 'Tiger Beetle Quest' conducted by Tiger beetle watch group and Rhopalocera and Odonata Association of Rajapalayam (ROAR) © Bikash Kumar posted on Tigerbeetlewatch insta page

conservation of their respective invertebrate groups in the region.

🦋 More than 250 members (major representations being from India and fewer from Sri Lanka, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Abu Dhabi, Bangladesh, Maldives, and UK) joined ICINSA. Based on the commitment and actions of active members in the upcoming years, they will be appointed to SAsISG membership. Around 24 members have been added to the SAsISG given their contributions to invertebrate conservation.





'Spend time with butterflies', one day workshop to butterfly enthusiasts in collaboration with Nilgiri Biosphere Nature Park (NBNP) on 9 August 2025 at NBNP. © Usha Ravindra

🌿 The SAsISG vision, activities, and invertebrate conservation topics were communicated in international conferences, regional talks, workshops, and social media posts. To name a few, SCB's International Conference for Conservation Biology Conference at Brisbane 15–20 June 2025; Butterfly workshop with Niligiri Biosphere Nature Park on 09 August 2025; A talk & field visit on firefly conservation by Sri Ram Murali & Chandrasekhar Ratnam



***Quedara basiflava*, a Western Ghat endemic. One of the 350+ species of butterflies of India that will be assessed in the future IUCN Red List workshop for butterflies. © Tarun Karmakar**

for Ram Hattikudur Advanced Training in Conservation fellows in December 2025; and seven SAsISG social media posts.

- 🌿 The IUCN Red List Training workshop was conducted on 18–22 October 2025, training 12 people from across India in the Red Listing framework & methods.
- 🌿 11 November launched as World Tiger Beetle Day by SAsISG during the Tiger Beetle Red List workshop in July 2024 was successfully celebrated the following year in 2025 by Graphic Era University, Wildlife Institute of India, Rhopalocera and Odonata Association of Rajapalayam (ROAR) organisations via international talk. The event was celebrated by ROAR & Tiger



New members, Sriram Murali & Chandrasekar Ratnam, added to the SAsISG network by SAsISG co-chair, Dr. Sanjay Molur. © Usha Ravindra

Beetle Watch group by conducting a 'Tiger Beetle quest' on iNaturalist from 28 June 2025 – 06 July 2025 which yielded good observations.

- 🌿 11 'Bugs r all' publications focused on invertebrates taxonomy, natural history, conservation published in Zoo's Print.
- 🌿 For Red List assessments for butterflies of India, a checklist of a total of 1,383 butterfly species found in India was listed from

literature, of which, 151 species are endemic and 190 species are near-endemic to the country. Data like distribution, habitat type, habitat threats, species threats, natural history, host plant data (including their distribution and threats) required for assessments from literature have been collated for all endemics from 420 papers and consulting more than 30 experts to keep the database updated. Partial funds needed for the Red List workshop have been raised from the MbZ Species Conservation Fund & IUCN.

Challenges faced

Lack of funds remains to be the core challenge given the humongous amount of work we are yet to do for invertebrate conservation. Being rich in invertebrate diversity, it is crucial we move fast and are able to support the network/s to carry on the tasks.

Key partnerships and collaborations

Partnerships were formed with Tigerbeetlewatch group, The Naturalist School, Rhopalocera and Odonata Association of Rajapalayam (ROAR), Nilgiri Biosphere Nature Park (NBNP), IUCN SSC Dragonfly Specialist Group, and Wild & Dark Earth for various SAsISG & ICINSA activities.

Acknowledgments

We thank IUCN, MBZ Conservation fund for supporting SAsISG network expansion project and Butterfly Red List assessment works.

Next steps

We will be maximizing the SAsISG & ICINSA networks in South Asian regions with the help of current members and leads; launch website for SAsISG; plan taxonomy & conservation training workshops; Conduct Red List assessment workshop for butterflies of India; plan Red List assessments for more invertebrate groups; and develop a first Conservation Action Plan model for invertebrates.



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Citation: Ravindra, U., L. Ravikumar & S. Molur (2026). South Asian Invertebrate Specialist Group (SAsISG) & Invertebrate Conservation Information Network of South Asia (ICINSA). Zooreach Annual Report 2025–26. In: Zoo's Print 41(3): 24–26.

Conservation Planning Specialist Group – RRC South Asia



Background

Zooreach has been hosting the South Asian Conservation Planning Specialist Group (the then Conservation Breeding Specialist Group) since the 1990s. And as a regional centre, Zooreach conducts species conservation plans (single species and/or multispecies) in different part of India and/or other South Asian countries.

This year two conservation planning workshops were conducted. One conservation plan was developed on six species of small wild cats of Assam and one on the Assam Roofed Turtle. In addition, a facilitated workshop to develop a coalition of snake conservationists was organized.

Activities conducted during the reporting period 1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026

- ✦ Preplanning for the workshops through regular meetings with the host organization and guiding them on the data required for the planning process on the different species, relevant stakeholder lists, and introducing them to the planning process.
- ✦ Facilitating the conservation plans through workshops in Guwahati, Assam on the six species of small wild cats and the Assam Roofed Turtle.
- ✦ Guiding the host organization to write up

the reports and supporting them with the whole process.

- ✦ Developing the Monitoring and Evaluation model.
- ✦ Scoping Workshop to bring all stakeholders of snakes in the Western Ghats was conducted.
- ✦ Rescue Lab to discuss evidence-based approach to handling and rescuing snakes

Key achievements and outcomes

- ✦ A Species Management Plan developed for the lesser known and often neglected six species of small wild cats in Assam.
- ✦ A Species Management Plan developed for the lesser known and misunderstood Assam Roofed Turtle in Assam.
- ✦ Establishment of the Snake Conservation Coalition of the Western Ghats.

Challenges faced

Lack of understanding of the conservation planning and facilitation process by some stakeholders with no exposure to the SMART and process design techniques.

Participant numbers and locations

There were approximately 120 participants in all the four workshops put together. The conservation plan workshops were conducted in Guwahati, Assam and the snake workshops were conducted in Lonavala, Maharashtra and in Bangalore, Karnataka.



Participants of the small wild cats of Assam Species Management Plan Workshop.
© Zooreach team



Working group in discussion at the small wild cats workshop. © Priyanka Iyer

Key partnerships and collaborations

For the conservation planning workshops, the host organization was Aaranyak and the project was supported by the Assam Forest Department, French Agency for Development, and Assam Project on Forest and Biodiversity Conservation. Collaborators included forest department officials, researchers, scientists, students, and community members who participated in the conservation planning process. For the snake workshops, Zooreach was the host organization supported by Upadhyaya Foundation and the collaborators included more than 25 organizations from around the Western Ghats range states.

Measurable outcomes

Conservation plans for these seven species was an extremely inclusive process with a



Working group discussing the existing initiatives in different protected areas and non-protected areas in Assam. © Priyanka Iyer

one plan approach that considered all the myriad threats faced by the species and aims to develop solutions. These solutions were also mapped to the various stakeholders depending on their role, capacity, and type/ extent of interaction with the species and its habitats. This also included specific timelines. In summary, the plan is specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound, i.e., SMART goals and objectives assigned to the participating stakeholders.

The 25+ organizations supported Snake Conservation Coalition of the Western Ghats was established, several teams formed to tackle various focused topics, MoUs signed, Secretariat established, official website launched, preliminary funds raised for the Secretariat and workshops, and interviews to hire a coordinator underway.

Acknowledgments

Thanks are due to Aaranyak team and all the participants of the workshop for recognizing the need to develop conservation plans for these lesser known and undervalued species and ensuring that the required time and effort was accorded to the process. Also to Upadhyaya Foundation for financial support and to all the organizations and individuals who participated in the various snake workshops.

Future plans/next steps

Future plans are to develop conservation plans for other species such as snakes and invertebrates that are in dire need for conservation action in India.



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Citation: Iyer, P., T. Bhattacharjee & S. Molur (2026). Conservation Planning Specialist Group – RRC South Asia. Zooreach Annual Report 2025–26. In: *Zoo's Print* 41(3): 27–28.

Snake Conservation Coalition of the Western Ghats



Background

Snakes are one of the most misunderstood and persecuted animals in India. They are often killed at sight due to fear or misconception, negating the ecological role they play. With a rich diversity of snakes, Western Ghats is facing increasing human-snake interactions, unscientific protection measures like relocation, and stress from habitat loss & other anthropogenic pressures. This emphasizes on the need to develop a region specific, stakeholder-led conservation action plan for the region to ensure coexistence. The need of the hour is to bring together all the stakeholders to work with each other despite the differences and put away personal opinions and beliefs to forward scientific, evidence-based, systematic approach to conservation of snakes in the Western Ghats. This stakeholder initiative was the brainchild of Dr Sanjay Molur and the participants of 25+ organizations ratified the need for a coalition.

Activities conducted during the reporting period 1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026

🐍 18–19 April 2025 -- Zooreach conducted a 2-day Scoping Workshop on Snake Conservation in Western Ghats at Lonavala, Maharashtra. The program was funded by the Upadhyaya Foundation and supported by Naturefuture. The workshop was facilitated by Dr Sanjay Molur of the Conservation Planning Specialist Group South Asia & Zooreach, followed by sessions conducted by Gerry Martin, Dr Kartik Sunagar, Dr S.R. Ganesh, Dr Chelmala Srinivasulu, Nachiket Utpat, Lisa Gonsalves, Dr Navaz Sharif, Gnaneshwar Ch, Sumanth Bindumadhav, and Dr Freston Marc Sirur. There were several working groups set up throughout the



A few SCC-WG members in a panel discussion about the Coalition at the India Animal Welfare Forum 2026 in Mumbai.



Dr Sanjay Molur facilitating session at the Snake Scoping Workshop in Lonavala. © Payal Molur



Working group discussion on various threats snakes face in the Western Ghats. © Payal Molur



Working Group discussing on different solutions to conserve snakes.
© Payal Molur

workshop to discuss different related topics.

🐍 8–9 December 2025 -- 2nd workshop called the Snake Rescue Lab was organised in Bangalore, focusing on the development of effective rescue protocols for snake conservation. Again supported by Upadhyaya Foundation, Naturefuture, and Zooreach, the event was facilitated by Dr. Sanjay Molur, who began with an introduction about the objective and the need for the workshop. It was followed by an open conversation among the participants about the present issues and malpractices regarding snake handling.



SCC-WG members launching the Coalition at the India Animal Welfare Forum 2026

There were sessions on legal compliance, decision making, scientific challenges, snake handling, importance of understanding snake physiology for snake bite mitigation and more led by Subhra Sottie, Kedar Bhide, and Gerry Martin. Jose Louise engaged the participants further by explaining about the SARPA app and shared his experience of engaging with snake handlers/ rescuers in Kerala.

Key achievements and outcomes

🐍 At the end of the first workshop the Snake Conservation Coalition of the Western Ghats (SCC-WG) was set up with the vision to 'Ensure conservation of snakes of the



SCC-WG members at the Rescue Lab Workshop in Bangalore. © Sanjay Molur

Western Ghats through multi-stakeholder collaborations and science-based actions through a conservation planning workshop by 2026'.

- 2 The team finalized and launched the SCC-WG logo designed by Aaron Fernandes during the second workshop with all the stakeholders.
- 2 On 31 January 2026, the Snake Conservation Coalition of the Western Ghats website was officially launched with all the stakeholders at the Indian Animal Welfare Conference, Mumbai. The team at present is working towards organizing the Assess-to-Plan and Conservation Action Plan workshops for the snakes in the landscape.

Challenges faced

Fund raising has been the most challenging part. The Secretariat needs support for personnel, infrastructure, and logistics to follow through with various responsibilities and deadlines committed by the coalition members for activities committed.

Key partnerships and collaborations

The Snake Conservation Coalition of the Western Ghats was founded by the following



Working group at the Rescue Lab workshop discussing about the different rescue guidelines for snakes. © Amrin Ansari

organizations: Centre for Wilderness Medicine (Department of Emergency Medicine, Kasturba Medical College), Chameleon Wildlife Organization, Conservation Planning Specialist Group South Asia, Evolutionary Venomics Lab, Humane World For Animals India, India Snakes, Kalinga Foundation, Madras Crocodile Bank Trust, Malabar Awareness and Rescue Center for Wildlife, Mhadei Research Centre, MVR Snake Park & Zoo, Nature future, PfA Wildlife Rescue & Conservation Centre, RESQ Charitable Trust, South Asian Reptile Network, Spreading Awareness On Reptiles & Rehabilitation Programme, Thackeray Wildlife Foundation, The Green Cross, The Last Wilderness Foundation, The Liana Trust, Upadhyaya Foundation, Wildlife Information



Participants of the Rescue Lab Workshop after a successful wrap up. © Sanjay Molur



Participants at the end of Snake Scoping Workshop in Lonavala, Maharashtra.

and Liaison Development, Wildlife SOS, and Zoo Outreach Organisation.

Measurable outcomes

- 🐍 30+ stakeholders (experts, conservationists, researchers, rescuers, policy makers, and others) from 20+ organisations identified the need for three focused workshops and establishing SCC-WG to lay the groundwork for a comprehensive conservation action plan.
- 🐍 The Snake Rescue Lab with 24 participants from 19 organisations shared their knowledge, opinions, and ongoing works directed towards compiling a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for scientific snake rescue.
- 🐍 Seven major working groups formed, and deadlines finalised for their specific tasks.
- 🐍 Partial funds raised for the Assess-to-Plan workshop in June 2025.
- 🐍 SCC-WG Secretariat established at Zooreach.

Acknowledgments

The team is thankful towards all the partnering organizations, funders, collaborators, participants, and researchers who made the coalition and the events possible. Also, a special thanks to the admin team at Zooreach

and Upadhyaya Foundation for making sure that all travel, lodging, and project activities could be conducted smoothly.

Future plans/next steps

The Coalition is all set to conduct the Assess-to-Plan workshop in June and the Conservation Planning workshop in the coming months. The team is positive about the impact the planning will play towards snake conservation and human-snake coexistence in the Western Ghats.



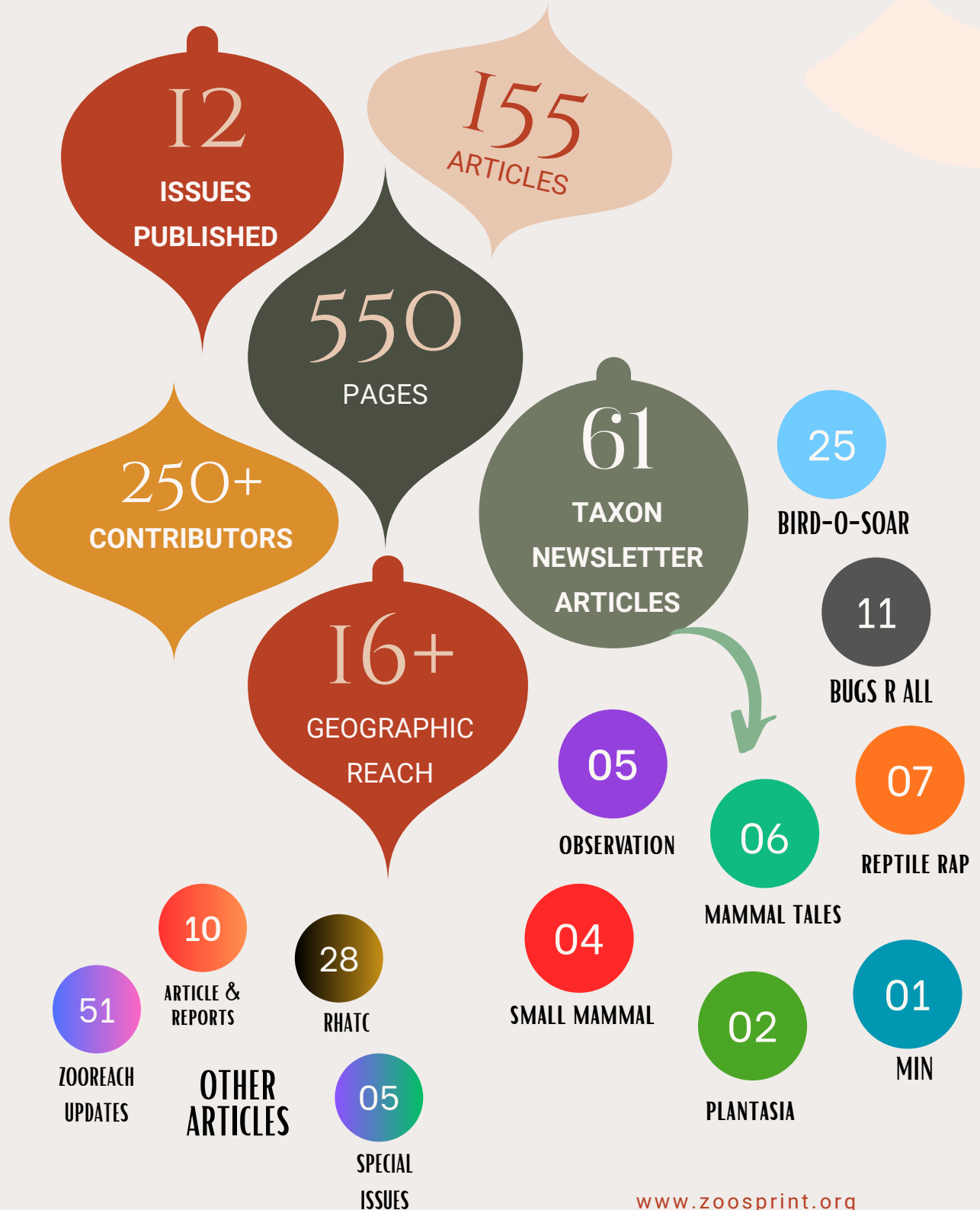
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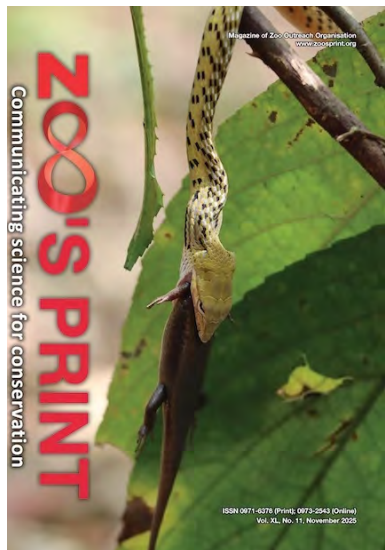
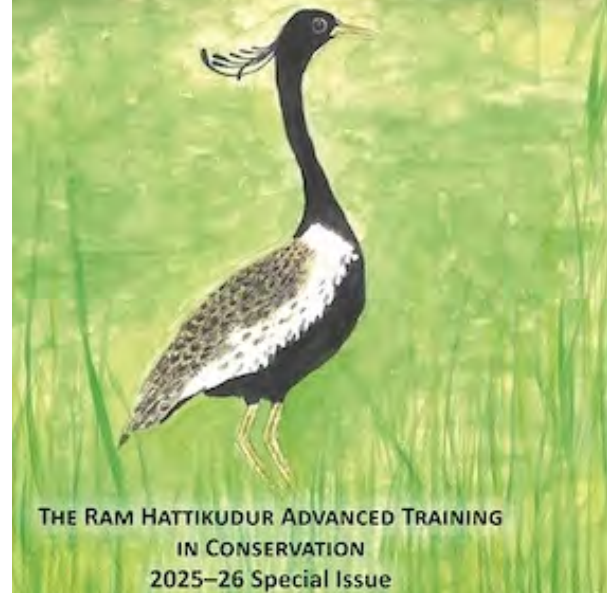
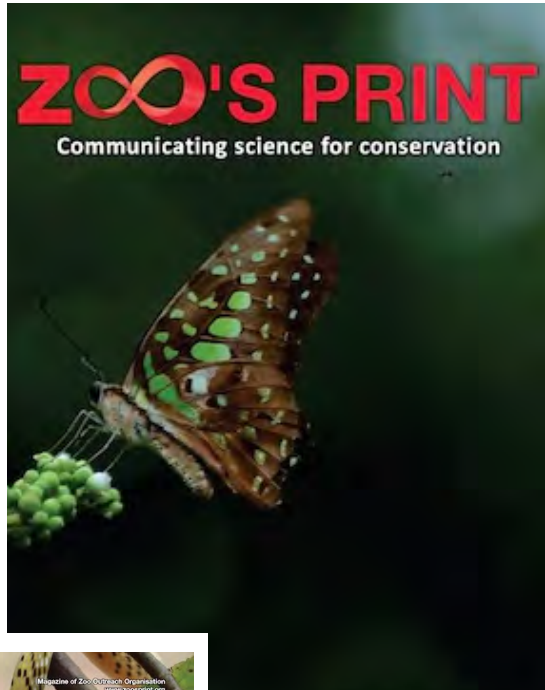
Citation: Bhattacharjee, T., A. Ansari, P. Molur & S. Molur (2026). Snake Conservation Coalition of the Western Ghats. Zooreach Annual Report 2025–26. In: *Zoo's Print* 41(3): 29–32.

ZOO'S PRINT

Communicating Science for Conservation



www.zoosprint.org



Zoo's Print (ISSN 0971-6378 Print; 0973-2543 Online) is the monthly open-access magazine of **Zoo Outreach Organisation** (ZOO), founded in 1985 by Ms. Sally Walker in Mysore. The first issue was published on 21 January 1986, making the magazine now over four decades old. In 2017, Zoo's Print was transformed from a zoo-focused publication into a broader conservation science communication magazine and today it serves as an ideal platform for biologists, amateurs, scientists, citizens, students, and anyone interested in natural history, with the tagline "Communicating Science for Conservation". Zoo's Print remains a key vehicle for this mission, connecting a diverse community of contributors from across India.



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Citation: Ravikumar, L., R. Marimuthu, R. Rajeshkanna (2026) & S. Molur. Zoo's Print. Zooreach Annual Report 2025-26. In: *Zoo's Print* 41(3): 33-34.

JOURNAL OF THREATENED TAXA

www.threatenedtaxa.org

The Journal of Threatened Taxa (JoTT) (ISSN 0974-7907 Print; 0974-7893 Online) is the monthly open-access, peer-reviewed journal of Zoo Outreach Organisation (ZOO), launched in 2009. JoTT publishes original research, short communications, and notes on the conservation, taxonomy, ecology, and natural history of threatened and poorly known species worldwide. With a mandate to make biodiversity science freely accessible, JoTT has grown into one of the most prolific conservation journals in the world.



753
AUTHORS

16
COUNTRIES

213
ARTICLES

~134
DISTINCT SPECIES

6
RESEARCH THEMES

12
ISSUES

1832
PAGES

**JoTT Monthly Overview: Pages, Publications & Authors
(April 2025 - March 2026)**

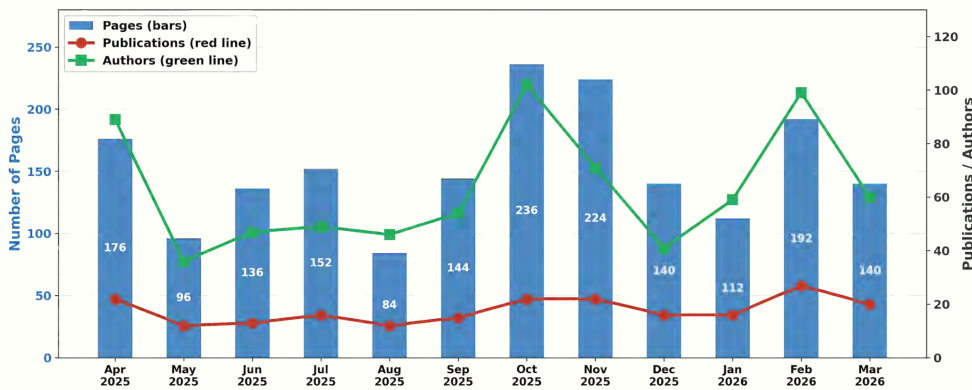


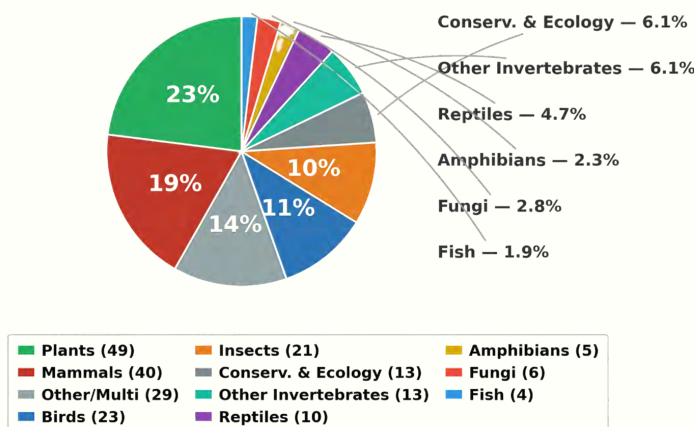
Figure 1. Month-wise data of number of pages, publications, and authors.

Taxonomic Coverage: Articles in JoTT during this period covered a wide spectrum of taxa. **Plants** were the most represented group with 49 articles (23.0%), followed by **Mammals** (40, 18.8%), **Birds** (23, 10.8%), **Insects** (21, 9.9%), **Other Invertebrates** (13, 6.1%), **Reptiles** (10, 4.7%), **Fungi** (6, 2.8%), **Amphibians** (5, 2.3%), and **Fish** (4, 1.9%). An estimated **~134 distinct species** were mentioned by scientific name across the 213 publications.

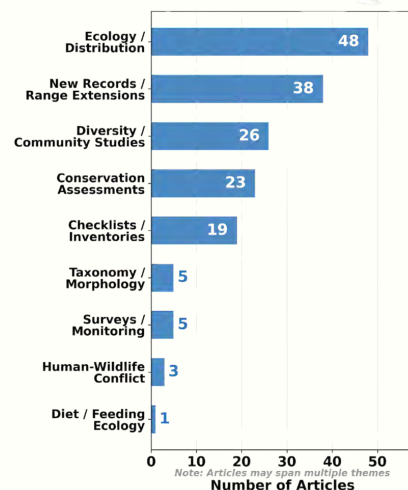
Research Themes: Ecology and distribution studies dominated (48 articles), followed by new records and range extensions (38), diversity and community studies (26), conservation assessments (23), and checklists/inventories (19). Taxonomy and morphology studies accounted for 5 articles.

Article Types: Of the 213 publications, 67 were full Articles, 47 Communications, 38 Short Communications, 32 Notes, 6 Reviews, 2 Book Reviews, 1 Response & Reply, and 20 in the March 2026 issue.

**Taxonomic Group Breakdown
213 Publications (Apr 2025 - Mar 2026)**



**Research Themes
213 Publications (Apr 2025 - Mar 2026)**



B. Ravichandran*, Latha Ravikumar, Chaithra Shree, Paloma Noronha & Sanjay Molur
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Citation: Ravichandran, B. L. Ravikumar, S. Chaithra, P. Noronha & S. Molur (2026). Journal of Threatened Taxa. Zooreach Annual Report 2025–26. In: *Zoo's Print* 41(3): 35–36.

Human-Elephant Coexistence in Coorg & Erode



Background

The Human-Elephant Coexistence Project is one of the pioneer programs by Zooreach across India and southeastern Asia since 2000. As part of the initiative the team has conducted perception studies, education outreach, and training workshops for various stakeholders across the region.

In 2025, the team played a crucial role in understanding perceptions of people across Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve in Tamil Nadu and Coorg in Karnataka towards elephants, human-elephant interactions, casualties, habitat loss, and other factors affecting coexistence in the landscape. Throughout the fieldwork, in both the locations a wide range of emotions were encountered, including anger, frustration, sadness, fear, and surprise. While many community members recognise the underlying causes of the issue, fostering coexistence requires sustained engagement at the community level and careful consideration of diverse perspectives.

Activities conducted during the reporting period 1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026

Perception studies conducted focused on understanding human experiences related to elephants and other wildlife, with particular emphasis on identifying zones characterised by high, medium, and low levels of negative interactions. Additionally, we documented incidents involving human casualties and property damage attributed to elephants, along with details of compensation provided by the forest department for crop and plantation losses. The studies were conducted over a period of three months across Coorg (Ponnampet and Virajpet taluks were identified as the primary study areas) and Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve (villages in Germalam and Hasanur ranges).

Key achievements and outcomes

- The team conducted 700+ perception studies across both the study areas.
- 50+ villages in Coorg and Sathyamangalam were reached out to.
- The study was inclusive of all stakeholders including, local residents, plantation owners, labourers, panchayat members, farmers, daily wage labourers, school teachers, forest department officials, and students

Challenges faced

- In Coorg, since the coffee estates are huge parcels or land, a lot of the field time goes in to travelling from one place to the other. Additionally, coffee is a labour-intensive industry, thus making it difficult to be able to talk to the workers other than lunch breaks.
- In Sathyamangalam, majority of the people are daily wage labourers and are not in the village throughout the day, leaving the team with a very small window to conduct the studies.

Participant numbers and locations

The study team consisted of six members. Koshik, Sidharth, Sushanth, and Trisa took part





in the perception studies in Coorg; Sidharthan and Trisa conducted the surveys in STR, while Koshik, Nethra, and Yadu helped with translation of all the interviews. Additionally, in Coorg the team was supported by Sumanth Bindumadhav, Vinod Krishnan, Dr. Anupam Thammaiah Chekkera, and Kavan from Humane World for Animals.

Key partnerships and collaborations

The team collaborated with Humane World for Animals for the project activities and Manipal Institute of Technology for knowledge support. The team also worked in communication with Tamil Nadu Forest department.

Acknowledgments

The HECx team would like to thank Humane World for Animals team for their continued support and assistance throughout the project timeline and field work. Thanks to Dr Deepika Shetty from Manipal Institute for Technology for helping us structuring the questionnaire and arranging the data. Additionally, we would like to thank the team at Zooreach including, Mr R. Marimuthu for helping us

connect with the forest department, Dr Sanjay Molur for helping in project planning and implementation, and the admin team, Latha and Rajesh for their continued support.

Future plans/next steps

The team at present will continue the study across both the study areas and expand across other surrounding regions. The final goal of the project is to plan outreach in the regions with all the associated stakeholders, to build coexistence in the region and help build a stakeholder-led conservation action plan for elephants you in the region.



**Humane
World for
Animals.**

Koshik V. Rao*, Sidharthan & Trisa Bhattacharjee
Zoo Outreach Organisation, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. *c-koshik@zooreach.org

Citation: Rao, K.V., Sidharthan & T. Bhattacharjee (2026). Human-Elephant Coexistence in Coorg and Erode. Zooreach Annual Report 2025–26. In: *Zoo's Print* 41(3): 37–38.

Human-Elephant Coexistence HECx awareness programmes



Background

Human-Wildlife negative interactions (HWNl) between humans and wild animals are a common issue worldwide as human populations continue to expand into areas that were originally occupied by wildlife. This expansion leads to habitat loss and fragmentation, forcing wildlife to live in closer proximity to human settlements. The consequences of such negative interactions include crop destruction, reduced agricultural productivity, competition for grazing lands and water resources, livestock predation, injury and loss of human lives, damage to infrastructure, and an increased risk of disease transmission between wildlife and livestock.

Although there is no permanent solution to human-wildlife negative interactions, their impacts can be significantly reduced through effective management and collaborative approaches. This involves understanding the underlying causes of negative interactions,

implementing integrated mitigation strategies, and engaging local communities as active participants in conservation efforts. By focusing on prevention, mitigation, and coexistence strategies, it is possible to promote a more harmonious relationship between humans and wildlife.

Activities conducted during the reporting period 1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026

As part of the awareness initiative, 33 Human-Wildlife Coexistence (HWCx) street plays, eight Human-Elephant Coexistence (HECx) street plays, and five school awareness programmes were conducted to educate local communities and students about safe practices and coexistence with wildlife.

Key achievements and outcomes

Through street plays and awareness programmes, community members and students were thoroughly informed about



Street play: Highlights the significance of Lord Vinayaga (Elephant God) in Hindu mythology as the remover of obstacles.



The villagers who enthusiastically watched and engaged with the street play



The Forest Range Officer formally inaugurating the HECx school awareness programme for students

Students engaging in the programme by posing with elephant masks and awareness booklets

HWNI and Human-Elephant negative interactions (HENI), including wildlife behaviour, causes of negative interactions, and the importance of coexistence. Participants were also introduced to a variety of practical “dos and don’ts” related to wildlife encounters from an individual safety perspective, helping them understand how to protect themselves and their families from potential risks

posed by wild animals. These programmes provided practical guidance and safety advice for people living in areas where wildlife interactions are common.

Challenges faced

The implementation of activities was occasionally delayed due to the time required



The street play effectively portrays how uncontrolled tourism disrupts wildlife and damages their habitats



Villagers and forest frontline staff participating as the audience of the street play



Highlights the harmonious coexistence between humans and wildlife in the past

to obtain permission from the relevant authorities.

interaction areas were distributed to villagers.

Participant numbers and locations

A total of 6,000 community members and 400 students benefited from the programmes. The activities were conducted in the Nilgiris, Coimbatore, Anamalai, Kodaikanal, and Dharmapuri Forest Divisions.

Acknowledgments

We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to Tamil Nadu Biodiversity and Greening Project for Climate Change Response (TBGPCCR, Tamil Nadu Forest Department), Asian Elephant Support, USA and SWORD Adhiaman Kazhaikuzhu, Krishnagiri.

Key partnerships and collaborations

Forest Department, local NGOs, village head & headmaster/headmistress of the schools.



Measurable outcomes

- 🐘 Forty-one street plays and five school awareness programmes were successfully conducted.
- 🐘 The programmes reached around 6,000 community members and 400 students.
- 🐘 Awareness activities covered 41 villages and five schools across the target areas.
- 🐘 Four-hundred elephant booklets in the vernacular/local language and 400 elephant masks were distributed to students as part of the awareness programme. Additionally, 6,000 notices containing important “dos and don'ts” for people living in human-wildlife negative



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Citation: Marimuthu, R.(2026). Human-Elephant Coexistence HECx awareness programmes. Zooreach Annual Report 2025–26. Zooreach Annual Report 2025–26. In: *Zoo's Print* 41(3): 39–41.

Classrooms for Coexistence

Background

Children today are growing up increasingly disconnected from nature, with fewer opportunities to learn about wildlife in meaningful ways. At the same time, they are future decision-makers and community influencers who can help shape more positive attitudes toward the natural world. Building awareness and understanding at an early age is therefore essential for fostering responsible behaviour and promoting coexistence.

The Classrooms for Coexistence programme was developed by the Zoo Outreach Organisation, with support from Coromandel International Limited, to address this gap. The program introduces school children to the idea that wildlife is an integral part of our shared environment and that safe and respectful coexistence is possible. Through engaging educational materials, activities, and discussions, the initiative aims to replace fear with knowledge, encourage empathy for wildlife, and empower students to become ambassadors for coexistence in their communities.

Activities conducted during the reporting period 1 April 2025 – 31 March 2026

As part of the awareness initiative, 11 school awareness programmes were conducted in October 2025, with follow-up activities carried out in February 2026.

Key Achievements and Outcomes

Increased awareness among students about daily-life wildlife, including insects, amphibians, reptiles, and birds commonly found around homes and schools.

- 🦋 Students demonstrated improved observation skills, sharing real-life wildlife encounters and environmental observations.
- 🦋 Strong engagement from teachers and students, including student-led initiatives such as the ocean conservation drama.
- 🦋 Reinforcement of ecological concepts such as pollination, food chains, habitat loss, adaptation, and ecosystem balance.
- 🦋 Students showed improved understanding of the importance of biodiversity and coexistence with wildlife.

Challenges Faced

- 🦋 Large student numbers in some schools required sessions to be conducted in multiple batches.
- 🦋 Limited infrastructure in certain schools made logistics and classroom management challenging.



Using jenga blocks to demonstrate the interconnectedness of all life. © Tandrili Baruah



The sit and stand assessment method help the team understand the knowledge base of the children. © Payal Molur

- 🐼 Eklavya Residential School, Ooty – 80 students (Grades 6–8)
- 🐼 Government Tribal Residential School, Hasanur, Erode – 50 students
- 🐼 Government High School, Germalam, Erode – 50 students
- 🐼 Vidya Vanam School, Anaikatti, Coimbatore – 65 Kids
- 🐼 Northern Lights academy, Coimbatore – 50 kids

Locations covered:

Coimbatore, Chennai, Cuddalore, Erode, The Nilgiris, Ranipet, districts of Tamil Nadu.

- 🐼 In some cases, teacher participation during sessions was lower than expected.
- 🐼 Weather conditions occasionally forced programme modifications, such as shifting outdoor sessions indoors.

Participant Numbers and Locations

- 🐼 Through these awareness programmes, a total of 751 students from 11 schools were reached.
- 🐼 Panchayat Union Middle School, Thyagavalli, Cuddalore – 30 students
- 🐼 Panchayat Union Middle School, Manthoppu, Cuddalore – 55 students
- 🐼 Government Higher Secondary School, Periyakuppam, Cuddalore – 111 students
- 🐼 Government Higher Secondary School, Ranipet – 100 students
- 🐼 Government ADW Higher Secondary School, Karai, Ranipet – 45 students
- 🐼 Government Higher Secondary School, Kathivakkam, Chennai – 115 students

Key Partnerships and Collaborations

Zoo Outreach Organisation (programme implementation), Coromandel International Limited (programme support), Namma School Namma Ooru Palli (NSNOP), School Education Department, Tamil Nadu, Chief, District, and Block Education Officers, NGC District Coordinators, District Eco club Coordinator, and local education stakeholders Headmaster/ Headmistress and other teachers.



Colour challenge game to help with observation skills in nature. © Koshik Rao



Students showcasing issues that plague the ocean and what should be done to save it through drama.
© Koshik Rao







murugappa




Coromandel 
FUTURE POSITIVE


ZEN
ZOO Educator Network

Measurable Outcomes

-  Over 750 students directly engaged through workshops and follow-up sessions.
-  Students demonstrated over 80% recall accuracy of ecological concepts in follow-up assessments in some schools.
-  Increased student participation in nature observation activities and wildlife documentation.
-  Several schools requested additional sessions and career guidance programmes related to conservation.

Future Plans / Next Steps

-  Conduct additional follow-up workshops and advanced sessions in participating schools.
-  Develop career guidance sessions on conservation and wildlife biology for interested students.
-  Expand the programme to more schools in rural and tribal regions of Tamil Nadu.

-  Introduce student-led biodiversity observation projects to further strengthen ecological awareness and engagement.

Acknowledgments

Zoo Outreach Organisation extends sincere thanks to Coromandel International Limited for supporting the programme and to the school administrations, teachers, and students who enthusiastically participated in the workshops. The contributions of programme facilitators and local coordinators were instrumental in the successful implementation of the sessions.

Payal Molur*, Priyanka Iyer, Sidharthan, P. Kritika, Tandrali Baruah & R. Marimuthu

Zoo Outreach Organisation, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. *marimuthu@zooreach.org

Citation: Molur, P., P. Iyer, Sidharthan, P. Kritika, T. Baruah & R. Marimuthu (2026). Classrooms for Coexistence. Zooreach Annual Report 2025–26. In: *Zoo's Print* 41(3): 42–44.

Communicating with colors

What if you can think and talk in colors? Isn't it amazing that anyone in the world can understand you with just colors and lines even when you don't speak their language?

Poojitha was given this opportunity to express ideas and solutions through art when she joined Zooreach as an intern (now a happy member here) in June 2025.

The projects she was involved in were:

I. The Shoal Project

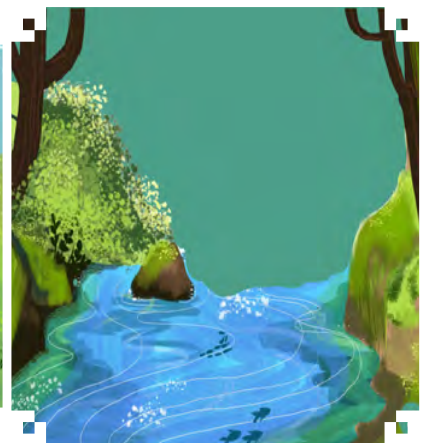
The Shoal project is about an endemic fish named 'Miss Kerala' *Sahyadria denisonii*, and she helped the team with collecting information and converting them into simplified and creative content.

Payal Molur developed the education materials and my role was to write and use colors to communicate. This led to the making of the cover page of the education packet and the tunnel book. Aakanksha Komanduri helped us with the illustrations in the Education Manual.

Kritika made this beautiful and huge map depicting the west flowing rivers of the Western Ghats. Animal and plant sticker were made by Kritika, Pannagasri, Elakshi, and Poojitha.

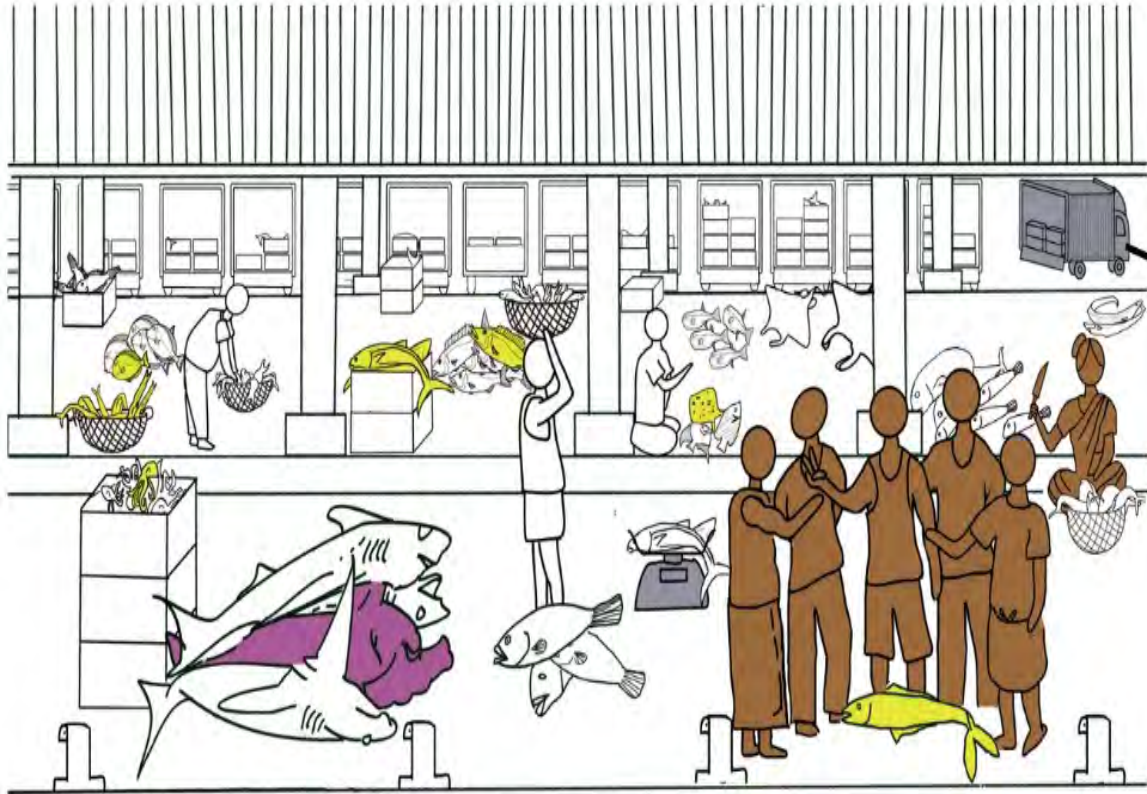
Through this, children learn about the elevations and where an animal lives along with the fish Miss Kerala in different ranges and also the threats.

Priyanka was involved in making the different and cute versions of our very own mascot – Denise.



IOcean

For IOcean, the team made illustrations which depicts the journey of a fish from the Ocean to our plates. This can be seen in Ayla's day out in the principle 6 in our 'Magic of the Ocean' website. One of the many interesting games from The Magic of the Ocean shows which rock personality you have! It is called 'Which Rockstar are you?' from principle 2. Take this and you will find cute rock characters with hands, legs and face! Kritika, Nethra, and Poojitha had a fun time making them.



One of the Illustrations from Ayla's day out

II. The Chamba Project

Our team working in Chamba are involved in restoration of the Himalayan region and also in the conservation of the Chamba Scared Langur along with outreach programs.

Poojitha had the opportunity to make some stickers as a part of the outreach program to be distributed to children.

Illustration of Chamba Scared Langur



Logos

This was a tricky part. Logos for The Himalayan Restoration Project and the Himalayan Black Bear project were made. The instructions given were to make it look simple. After a few attempts, Poojitha was successful in making them look good and also simple.



Journal of Threatened Taxa & Zoo's Print Covers

Vol. 17 No. 3 (2025)

The illustration of a Bag Moth was made when Poojitha got so amazed by the amount and the number of things the bag worm carries on its back.

Vol. 17 No. 8 (2025)

The Little Andaman illustration by Priyanka conveys that the humans have power to either destroy or safeguard our land and biodiversity.

Vol. 17 No. 9 (2025)

The nine Indian vultures was made by Poojitha in the month when Vulture Day was celebrated.

Vol. 17 No. 10 (2025)

A Warty Hammer Orchid, a male thynnine, Flame Lily *Gloriosa superba* and a bag worm was drawn and painted by Pannagasri using color pencils and water colors.

Vol. 18 No. 1 (2026)

The Golden-headed Lion Tamarin was made by Kritika. She made this beautiful piece using watercolors and acrylics.

Vol. 18 No. 2 (2026)

Digital illustration of *Impatiens chamchumroonii* was one of the first whole plant illustrations Poojitha has done after the making of Chamba stickers and it turned out good!

Zoo's Print

Vol. XLI, No. 1, January 2026

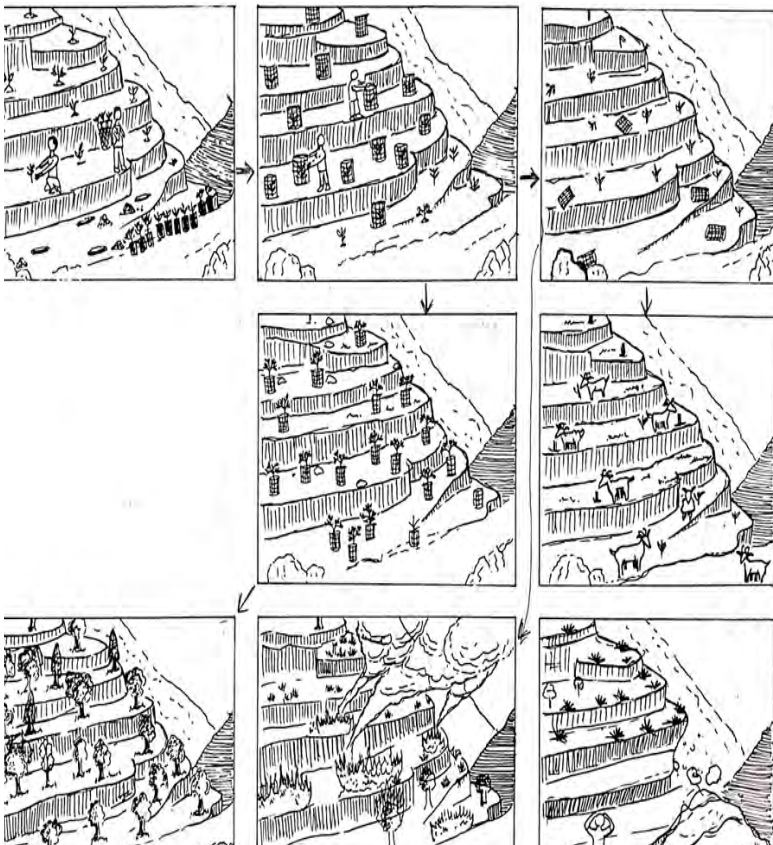
Special edition of the Zoo's Print has all the reports and activities done by the RHATC batch of that year. It is made by all the artists in the group. This beautiful illustration of Lesser Florican *Sypheotides indicus* male in a lush grassland was made by Shreya Yadav, Srijita Pal and G. Pannagasri of RHATC batch 2025–26.



Posters

Posters are one of the best ways to reach people of any age and background through art! Kritika made these informative posters for the Chamba Project to educate people of the consequences of their actions and the dos & don'ts after planting native trees on their land.

All the illustrations which were made involved so many emotions flowing through us and reaching the paper in colors. We hope it touches every heart and gives enough information and inspiration to especially those whose language we might not be able to speak.



Poster made by Kritika

Acknowledgments

We really thank Sanjay Molur for giving us this opportunity to work towards conservation in our own way and Payal Molur for guiding us in the Shoal Project. We are also grateful to all our peers in Zooreach who have given us invaluable suggestions for the illustrations and to other team members – Aakanksha Koman-duri, Nethra Prem, Elakshi Molur, G. Pannagasri, Shreya Yadav, and Srijita Pal who speak the same colors for conservation!

Dupati Poojitha*, P. Kritika & Priyanka Iyer
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Tamil Nadu, India. *c-poojitha@zooreach.org

Citation: Poojitha, D., P. Kritika & P. Iyer (2026).
Communicating with colors. Zooreach Annual Report
2025–26. In: *Zoo's Print* 41(3): 45–48.

Learning Beyond the Office: How Zooreach Staff Bring Back Knowledge from the Field

Conservation work thrives not only in forests, oceans, or classrooms, but also in the spaces where people gather to exchange knowledge at conferences, workshops, and collaborative meetings. Over the past year, members of the Zoo Outreach Organisation (Zooreach) participated in a wide range of national and international gatherings. These engagements allowed staff to learn new skills, share field experiences, and bring fresh perspectives back into Zooreach programmes across India.

Conservation Planning Workshop for the Assam Roofed Turtle

Date: 02–05 April 2025

Location: Guwahati, Assam

Zooreach Representative: Dr. Sanjay Molur and Priyanka Iyer

Role: Workshop Facilitator

The workshop organised by Aaranyak brought together forest department officials, researchers, and conservation experts to develop a conservation strategy for the 'Critically Endangered' (CR) Assam Roofed Turtle *Pangshura sylhetensis*. Participants identified priority actions related to research, habitat management, and outreach to guide coordinated conservation efforts.

7th Field-Based Training on Advances in Wildlife Research with Special Emphasis on Sloth Bear Conservation in India

Date: 09–13 April 2025

Location: Mount Abu, Rajasthan

Zooreach Representative: Amrin Ansari

Role: Workshop Participant and Presenter

The training organized by the International Association for Bear Research and Management (IBA) and Wildlife and Conservation Biology Research Foundation



7th Field-Based Training on 'Advances in Wildlife Research' attended by Amrin Ansari. © WCB Team

(WCB Research Foundation) focused on field research techniques such as camera trapping, animal sign identification, vegetation studies, and wildlife health monitoring. Amrin also presented research on human–bear interactions in the Himalayan region.

Snake Conservation Scoping Workshop

Date: 16–17 April 2025

Location: Lonavala, Maharashtra

Zooreach Representatives: Dr. Sanjay Molur, Trisa Bhattacharjee, and Payal Molur

Role: Workshop Facilitator and Organizer

A 2-day scoping workshop for conservation of snakes in the Western Ghats was organized in Lonavala, Maharashtra to get all the stakeholders on a single platform to set aside opinions and differences and work towards a common goal of snake conservation. This led to the formation of the Snake Conservation Coalition of the Western Ghats with the unanimous decision by the participants to have to Secretariat at Zooreach propelled by Dr Sanjay Molur who was the brainchild of the scoping workshop.



Trisa Bhattacharjee attending the Biodiversity Working Group at the GLF Asia Community and Action Week 2025 and playing the game Solution Trees. © GLF Team

2025 GLF Asia Community and Action Week

Date: 21–24 April 2025

Location: Jakarta, Indonesia

Zooreach Representative: Trisa Bhattacharjee

Role: Speaker

Organised by the Youth in Landscapes initiative of the Global Landscape Forum, the event brought together young leaders and practitioners working on landscape restoration. Trisa presented the Himalayan Restoration Project, highlighting experiences in landscape restoration and community-based conservation.

Species Management Planning Workshop for Small Wild Cats in Assam

Date: 21–26 April 2025

Location: Assam

Zooreach Representative: Dr. Sanjay Molur and Priyanka Iyer

Role: Facilitator

The workshop organized by Aaranyak brought together forest department officials, researchers, and conservation practitioners to develop science-based strategies for conserving six small wild cat species in Assam. Using participatory planning tools developed by the IUCN SSC Conservation Planning Specialist Group, participants identified threats, research needs, and collaborative conservation actions.



Trisa and the team doing the biomapping activity in Mount Halimun Salak National Park. © Ana Yi Soto

Landscape Leadership Camp 2025

Date: 25–29 April 2025

Location: Mount Halimun Salak National Park, Indonesia

Zooreach Representative: Trisa Bhattacharjee

Role: Participant and Presenter

The programme explored community-based agroforestry models and landscape restoration approaches through field visits, mapping exercises, and discussions on education and community engagement in conservation.

International Congress for Conservation Biology (ICCB 2025)

Date: 15–19 June 2025

Location: Brisbane, Australia

Zooreach Representative: Dr. Sanjay Molur

Role: Award Recipient

Dr. Molur received the Society for Conservation Biology's Distinguished Service Award, recognizing his long-standing contributions to conservation science, including leadership in IUCN species assessments and biodiversity initiatives across South Asia.

3-Day Hands-on Training Workshop on Integrative Taxonomy of Marine Organisms

Date: 19–21 June 2025

Location: Chennai, Tamil Nadu

Zooreach Representative: P. Kritika

Role: Workshop Participant



3-days Hands of Training Workshop on Integrative Taxonomy of Marine Organisms attended by P. Kritika. © Sathyabama Team

The workshop organized by Sathyabama Institute of Science and Technology introduced participants to integrative taxonomy methods combining morphological identification with molecular tools such as DNA analysis to better understand marine biodiversity.

1st Indian Seagrass Conference (ISC-2025)

Date: 20–22 August 2025

Location: Chennai, Tamil Nadu

Zooreach Representative: Tandrili Baruah

Role: Session Presenter

In the conference organized by Sathyabama



Tandrili Baruah presenting seagrass stories at the Indian Seagrass Conference. © Chinmaya Ghanekar

Institute of Science and Technology Tandrili shared experiences from community-based seagrass outreach along the Tamil Nadu coast, highlighting participatory learning tools such as the “Food Chain Jenga” game to demonstrate trophic relationships and ecosystem balance.

Tropentag 2025

Date: 10 September 2025

Format: Virtual (Hosted from Germany)

Zooreach Representative: Trisa Bhattacharjee

Role: Panelist

The discussion focused on tropical landscape multifunctionality and how landscapes can support biodiversity, livelihoods, and climate resilience simultaneously.

Trends and Challenges of Invasive Alien Species of Kerala

Date: 8–9 October 2025

Location: Aaralam Wildlife Sanctuary, Kerala

Zooreach Representative: Sidharthan

Role: Seminar Participant

Participants discussed the growing ecological impacts of invasive species in Kerala's ecosystems, including the spread of non-native fish species in freshwater habitats.

Alliance for Conserving Freshwater Ecosystems (ACFWE)

Date: 9–10 October 2025

Location: IISER, Kolkata

Zooreach Representative: Priyanka Iyer

Role: Participant

The meeting convened at IISER Kolkata brought together organizations working on freshwater conservation across India to discuss collaboration, data sharing, and strategies to address pollution, habitat degradation, and governance challenges affecting rivers and wetlands.

IUCN World Conservation Congress 2025

Date: 9–15 October 2025

Location: Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Zooreach Representative: Dr. Sanjay Molur

Role: Forum Member and Speaker

Dr. Molur contributed to discussions on conservation funding, philanthropy, and freshwater ecosystem resilience, drawing from decades of conservation planning experience. He also represented Zooreach, member of IUCN in policy decisions through the forum's meet.

Restoring Natural Ecologies Conference 2025

Date: 27–30 October 2025

Location: Guwahati, Assam

Zooreach Representative: Dr. Sanjay Molur and Trisa Bhattacharjee

Role: Speaker

The presentation highlighted youth partnerships and funding opportunities supporting restoration initiatives across India.

Namma School Namma Ooru Palli Regional Conclave

Date: 03 November 2025

Location: Salem, Tamil Nadu

Zooreach Representative: Rengasamy Marimuthu

Role: Participant

The conclave brought together government representatives, NGOs, and corporate partners to strengthen collaboration and support government schools across Tamil Nadu.

NSNOP School Engagement Workshop

Date: 17–18 November 2025

Location: Chennai, Tamil Nadu

Zooreach Representative: Rengasamy Marimuthu

Role: Participant

Discussions focused on strengthening collaboration with schools and improving programme planning and monitoring systems under the NSNOP initiative.

Snake Rescue Lab Workshop

Date: 8–9 December 2025

Location: Bengaluru, Karnataka

Zooreach Representative: Dr. Sanjay Molur and Amrin Ansari

Role: Facilitator



APAC Leadership attended by Tandrili Baruah in Hong Kong.
© Sonika Manandhar

The workshop brought together snake rescuers and conservation practitioners to discuss scientific rescue protocols, safe handling practices, and the development of standard operating procedures for snake rescue in India.

APAC Explorer Leadership Workshop

Date: 8-12 December 2025

Location: Hong Kong

Zooreach Representative: Tandrili Baruah

Role: Participant

The workshop, organized by the National Geographic Society, focused on collaborative leadership. Through group activities and exercises, participants explored communication, negotiation, and team-based project planning for conservation initiatives.

BioConserve Summit 26

Date: 30 January 2026

Location: Bengaluru

Zooreach Representative: Dr Sanjay Molur

Role: Participant

The one day conference on biodiversity in campuses was organized by Infosys and Indian Institute of Human Studies in Bangalore where several CSRs, institutes, organizations, NGOs, and individuals dealing with urban sustainability, biodiversity, and circulation were presented and discussed.



India Animal Welfare Forum 2026

Date: 31 January 2026

Location: Mumbai, Maharashtra

Zooreach Representative: Dr. Sanjay Molur

Role: Panelist

Hosted by the Upadhyaya Foundation, Dr. Molur participated in a panel session along with three other partners of the newly formed Snake Conservation Coalition of the Western Ghats on snake conservation, addressing myths about snakes and emphasizing science-based approaches for human–snake coexistence. The official website of the Coalition was also launched.

National Conference on Climate Change and Livelihood Scenario in Dryland

Date: 20–21 February 2026

Location: Bhuj, Gujarat

Zooreach Representative: Dr. Sanjay Molur

Role: Keynote Speaker and Panelist

The conference organized by Gujarat Institute of Desert Ecology highlighted the ecological and livelihood importance of India's dryland ecosystems. Dr Molur presented a keynote address on dryland ecosystems and the conundrum faced by this unique ecosystem due to various issues including climate change. He also was a panelist on the subject along with six other experts.

MAGSCON

Date: 24–26 March 2026

Location: MAHE, Manipal, Karnataka

Zooreach Representatives: Dr Sanjay Molur, Priyanka Iyer, Trisa Bhattacharjee, and Poojitha Dupati

Role: Panel Moderator, Presenter, and Exhibition Stall Manager

The Manipal Global SDG Convergence is a 3-day event organized by MAHE to showcase the best practices followed by all stakeholders in promoting sustainable development. Dr Molur will be moderating a panel of experts on Climate Action, Biodiversity & Conservation, and Food Security on 24 March 2026. In addition, Priyanka Iyer, Poojitha Dupati, Aakanksha Komanduri, and Trisa Bhattacharjee will man the exhibition stall promoting the organization's works as well as Trisa Bhattacharjee will be presenting two posters at the conference.

Conclusion

These conferences, workshops, and meetings demonstrate the diverse ways in which Zooreach staff engage with the wider conservation community. By participating in national and international platforms, team members gain new knowledge, share field experiences, and build collaborations that strengthen conservation initiatives. The insights gained from these gatherings continue to inform Zooreach's work across landscapes, species conservation, environmental education, and community engagement.

Tandrili Baruah*, Trisa Bhattacharjee, Amrin Ansari, Priyanka Iyer, P. Kritika, Sidharthan, Dupati Poojitha & Sanjay Molur

Zoo Outreach Organisation, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. *tandrili@zooreach.org

Citation: Baruah, T., T. Bhattacharjee, A. Ansari, P. Iyer, P. Kritika, Sidharthan, D. Poojitha & S. Molur (2026). Learning Beyond the Office: How Zooreach Staff Bring Back Knowledge from the Field. *Zooreach Annual Report 2025–26*. In: *Zoo's Print* 41(3): 49–53.

Interns and Volunteers Contributing to Conservation at Zooreach

Internships and volunteer engagements provide an important bridge between academic learning and real-world conservation practice. At the Zoo Outreach Organisation (Zooreach), interns and volunteers support ongoing conservation initiatives through research, outreach, documentation, and community engagement. Over the past months, several young contributors assisted in projects ranging from species conservation assessments to community-based conservation programme. The following interns contributed to different initiatives at Zooreach.

Nethra Prem

Duration: 17 May – 19 June (1 month) and 1–5 January (5 days)

Projects Associated With: Butterfly Red Listing; Human–Elephant Coexistence Project; Ocean Conservation Education and Action Network Initiative; Outreach Programme for Classrooms for Co-existence program, Ooty

During her internship, Nethra Prem contributed to multiple conservation programmes through research, content creation, outreach, and translation work. She assisted in research for the butterfly Red List assessments and prepared digital



Nethra Prem in the Classroom for Coexistence program at Ooty. © Payal Molur

illustrations for the “Magic of the Ocean” platform. She also translated perception data collected from communities for both the human–elephant coexistence project and the IOCEAN programme. In addition, she supported outreach activities by assisting in a two-day workshop conducted for students at the Ekalavya Tribal School in Ooty for the Classroom for Co-existence program.

Through this experience, she gained a deeper understanding of how to conduct systematic research and identify reliable sources of information. Working with community perception data also helped her appreciate the diversity of views within communities and the importance of carefully analysing information to extract meaningful insights. Reflecting on her experience, Nethra highlighted that effective conservation requires a combination of research, enforcement, and outreach. She noted that education plays a key role in addressing misconceptions and shaping environmentally responsible behaviour. She also observed that interactive methods such as games can be powerful communication tools, helping simplify complex environmental issues and making them engaging for communities.

Yadunandan Narendran

Duration: 1 week

Project Associated With: Human–Elephant Conflict Zone Transcriptions

Yadunandan Narendran contributed to the human–elephant coexistence project by translating audio recordings and perception data collected from communities living in conflict-prone areas. His work helped make local perspectives accessible for analysis and documentation.

Through this process, he gained insights into the complex relationships between



Yadunandan Narendran photographing wetland birds. © L.K. Shatrudhan

people and wildlife in regions affected by human–elephant conflict. Listening to firsthand experiences from local communities deepened his understanding of the challenges faced by people living alongside wildlife.

Reflecting on the experience, he emphasised the importance of involving local communities in conservation initiatives. Hearing community perspectives reinforced his belief that conservation efforts can be more effective when knowledge and action come directly from the people who coexist with wildlife on a daily basis.

Adarsh Jagadeeshwaran

Project Associated With: IUCN Red List Assessment for Endemic and Near-Endemic Butterflies of India

Adarsh Jagadeeshwaran supported the Red List assessment process for endemic and near-endemic butterflies of India. His work



Adarsh Jagadeeshwaran helping a local in setting up a plant protector in Chamba. © Amrin Ansari

involved collecting information from research publications and compiling data on species' habits, habitats, and distribution ranges, particularly for species belonging to the Papilionidae family and some Hesperidae. Through this work, he gained exposure to the research processes involved in butterfly conservation and learned how to identify relevant peer-reviewed scientific literature. He also observed the rigorous and detailed nature of Red List assessments, which require careful evaluation of available scientific evidence.

This experience highlighted for him the challenges of conducting species-level conservation research, especially for organisms that have limited habitat ranges or insufficient scientific documentation. He also noted that many butterfly species remain understudied, making it difficult to assess their conservation status accurately.

Akshaj Jayesh Gopal

Duration: 1 month

Programme Associated With: Biodiversity Surveys

As a volunteer, Akshaj Jayesh Gopal assisted in invertebrate surveys, supporting species identification and documentation efforts. His work involved observing and recording biodiversity while learning systematic methods for documenting wildlife. Through the survey process, he gained insights into the ecological impacts of



Akshaj Jayesh Gopal taking part in the invertebrate survey with Zooreach team. © Pannagasri G

invasive plant species and how they can outcompete native flora, subsequently affecting invertebrates and other wildlife. He also learned practical methods for species identification and discovered resources that could help deepen his understanding of local ecosystems.

Reflecting on the experience, he noted that the survey work provided a clearer understanding of ecological interconnectedness and human impacts on natural systems. The experience also highlighted the depth of research and careful analysis required even for basic biodiversity surveys. For him, volunteering helped reveal the role individuals can play in understanding and protecting the natural world.

Lakshya Raj Singh Rathore

Duration: 14 July 2025 – 13 July 2026

Project Associated With: Himalayan Restoration Project (HRP)

Lakshya Raj Singh Rathore supported the Himalayan Restoration Project by assisting with community coordination, restoration activities, and outreach initiatives. He worked closely with local communities, helping coordinate meetings, calls, and updates from daily wage workers and nursery staff involved in restoration efforts. He also contributed to seed collection, nursery management, and plantation activities as part of the project.



Lakshya Raj Singh Rathore taking part in the restoration activities in the HRP project.
© Amrin Ansari

In addition to field-related support, he assisted in preparing outreach materials, including educational presentations for schools and colleges and digital content such as Instagram posts. His contributions helped strengthen communication between the project team and local communities while also supporting awareness efforts around restoration work.

Through this experience, he gained practical knowledge about Himalayan terrain, native and non-native plant species, and the ecological challenges involved in restoration projects. He also learned about nursery management, seed treatment techniques, and the logistical aspects of plantation work. Reflecting on his experience, he noted that restoration projects involve complex challenges, including difficult terrain, limited resources, and the need for strong community engagement. He emphasised that respecting local customs and working closely with communities is essential for the long-term success of conservation initiative.

Encouraging the Next Generation of Conservationists

Interns and volunteers bring fresh perspectives, curiosity, and enthusiasm to conservation work. Their contributions from research and documentation to community engagement, play a meaningful role in supporting ongoing initiatives at Zooreach. Equally important, these experiences provide young participants with opportunities to understand the realities of conservation, appreciate the complexity of ecological challenges, and develop skills that will support future work in biodiversity conservation and environmental education.

Tandrali Baruah*, Nethra Prem, Yadunandan Narendran, Adarsh Jagadeeshwaran, Akshaj Jayesh Gopal, Lakshya Raj Singh Rathore

Zoo Outreach Organisation, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. *tandrali@zooreach.org

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Kids Intern at Zooreach

Young Volunteers Contributing to Conservation

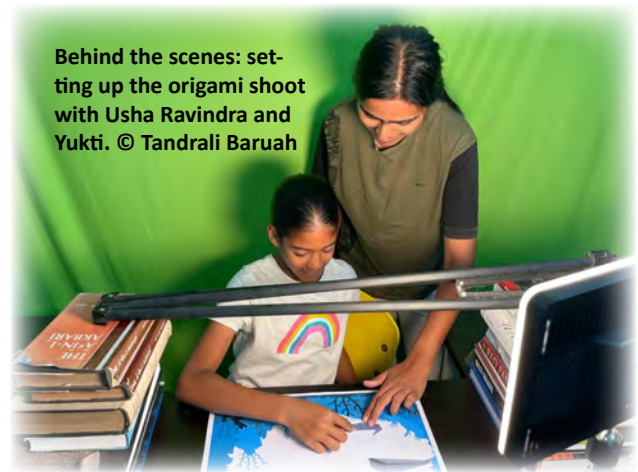
At Zooreach, young minds continue to inspire us with their creativity and enthusiasm for conservation. One such intern, Yukti Balakumar, stood out for her dedication and artistic talent during her internship from January to May 2025.

Yukti explored the world of marine life through origami, creating origami models of a manta ray, whale, turtle, crab, and fish. Her work beautifully combined art with awareness, helping make conservation more engaging and accessible for others.

What made this journey even more special was how it began. In the early days, we didn't have proper recording equipment. To film the origami tutorials, we improvised by stacking books on both sides and carefully placing a phone in between to create a makeshift stand. Despite these limitations, Yukti remained patient and committed.



A origami of a fish made by Yukti. © Tandrili Baruah



Behind the scenes: setting up the origami shoot with Usha Ravindra and Yukti. © Tandrili Baruah

As the days progressed, we were able to arrange a ring light with a tripod, which improved the quality of the recordings. Among all the creations, the manta ray proved to be the most challenging, requiring multiple attempts to capture each step clearly. Different colorful backgrounds were also used to make the videos more visually appealing and engaging.

Yukti's internship is a wonderful example of how creativity can come together to support conservation education. Zooreach is proud to nurture such young volunteers who contribute meaningfully to spreading awareness about wildlife.

Tandrili Baruah* & Yukti Balakumar

Zoo Outreach Organisation, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India. *tandrili@zooreach.org

Citation: Baruah, T. & Y. Balakumar (2026). Kids Intern at Zooreach (January 2025– May 2025). Zooreach Annual Report 2025–26. In: *Zoo's Print* 41(3): 57.

What our supporters and funders have to say

Salesforce is proud to support Zoo Outreach Organisation's Himalayan Restoration Project, which is making meaningful progress in restoring degraded landscapes while strengthening community stewardship in the region. Through the planting of native species across multiple restoration sites, the development of a community-led nursery for future saplings, and active engagement with local communities, women's self-help groups, and schools, the initiative is creating both ecological and social impact. By combining habitat restoration with community capacity building and youth awareness, the project demonstrates how collaborative conservation efforts can help nurture resilient ecosystems and empower local communities to protect the Himalayas for the long term.

Warm regards,

Kiranmayi B

Senior Manager | India CSR



Zoo Outreach Organisation, host of the GLFx Himachal chapter, embodies a deeply collaborative and community-based approach to conservation in the western Himalaya. Their work demonstrates how restoration becomes stronger when local knowledge, community leadership, and science come together. Throughout our partnership, GLF has learned about the very active, community-driven work of the Himalayan Langur and Himalayan Restoration projects. Zoo Outreach Organisation's team works closely with farmers, youth, and women's self-help groups to restore degraded forest ecosystems while supporting nature-based livelihoods and magnificent wildlife.

What stands out in their work is the spirit of co-creation: community members are not only participants but also knowledge holders and partners who shape the restoration process. From raising native saplings to building local capacity and learning opportunities, their initiatives nurture both ecosystems and local stewardship.

As a GLFx Himachal chapter's host, Zoo Outreach Organisation has leveraged the GLF platform as speakers, facilitators, presenters, and active advisors to inspire collective action, showing how locally rooted leadership can regenerate landscapes and strengthen community agency across the Himalaya and globally.

Ana Yi Soto - on behalf of the Global Landscape Forum team.



Zoo Outreach Organisation's monthly international conservation magazine, Zoo's Print, has long been a vibrant platform for sharing field-based knowledge across South Asia. My association with the magazine spans many years—both through contributing my own research and by helping young field biologists refine and present their findings. Because Zoo's Print reaches an unparalleled network of individuals and institutions engaged in wildlife and nature conservation across India, I have often chosen to publish my earliest research outputs there, even when other journals offered the allure of an Impact Factor. The magazine's wide readership ensures that my methods, observations, and management-oriented insights reach those who can apply them directly in the field.



The March issue holds particular significance. One section pays tribute to Dr. Ajith Kumar, a remarkable conservationist who passed away in 2025, while the other highlights the year's achievements across the Zooreach teams. The special issue has been produced with exceptional care and depth. It not only honours a stalwart of Indian wildlife science but also introduces his legacy to many who may not have known him closely. Although my own interactions with Ajith were brief, reading this issue allowed me to understand him far more intimately. It is deeply saddening that the present generation will not have the opportunity to learn directly from his extraordinary knowledge and training skills

Best wishes for you and your work.

Dr. Lala Aswini Kumar Singh, Bhubaneshwar

We are deeply touched and impressed by the incredible work that Sanjay and his team at Zoo Outreach Organisation have been doing for many years. Their dedication to wildlife conservation, education, and protecting lesser-known species is truly inspiring.

The work they do is not only important—it is essential for safeguarding the biodiversity of our Earth. May their tribe continue to grow, and may their efforts inspire many more to join the cause of protecting our planet.



Sunita and Chetan Shetty, Pune

ZOO'S PRINT

Communicating science for conservation

ZOO'S PRINT Publication Guidelines

We welcome articles from the conservation community of all SAARC countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and other tropical countries if relevant to SAARC countries' problems and potential.

Type — Articles of semi-scientific or technical nature. News, notes, announcements of interest to conservation community and personal opinion pieces.

Feature articles — articles of a conjectural nature — opinions, theoretical, subjective.

Case reports: case studies or notes, short factual reports and descriptions.

News and announcements — short items of news or announcements of interest to zoo and wildlife community

Cartoons, puzzles, crossword and stories

Subject matter: Captive breeding, (wild) animal husbandry and management, wildlife management, field notes, conservation biology, population dynamics, population genetics, conservation education and interpretation, wild animal welfare, conservation of flora, natural history and history of zoos. Articles on rare breeds of domestic animals are also considered.

Source: Zoos, breeding facilities, holding facilities, rescue centres, research institutes, wildlife departments, wildlife protected areas, bioparks, conservation centres, botanic gardens, museums, universities, etc. Individuals interested in conservation with information and opinions to share can submit articles ZOOS' PRINT magazine.

Manuscript requirements

Articles should be typed into a Word document with no more than 800 words of text and 10 key References (Tables, Images with copyright information, and Videos are encouraged) and emailed to zp@zooreach.org. Include the names of one or two potential reviewers when submitting a publication.

Articles which should contain citations should follow this guideline: a bibliography organized alphabetically and containing all details referred in the following style: surname, initial(s), year, title of the article, name of journal, volume, number, pages.

Editorial details

Articles will be edited without consultation unless previously requested by the authors in writing. Authors should inform editors if the article has been published or submitted elsewhere for publication.

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ZOO'S PRINT magazine is informal and newsy as opposed to a scientific publication. ZOO'S PRINT magazine sometimes includes semi-scientific and technical articles which are reviewed only for factual errors, not peer-reviewed.

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Call for donations

In the first phase of the fundraiser for the **Sally Walker Conservation Fund**, we target three objectives.

- (i) **The Sally Walker Lifetime Award for Conservation**
- (ii) **The Sally Walker Training Programme in Conservation Biology and Application**
- (iii) **Communicating Science for Conservation through innovative education programs**

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In case you wish to know more about the **Sally Walker Conservation Fund**, please contact Dr. Sanjay Molur by email <sanjay@zooreach.org> or by phone +91 9677822997.