



Agasthya

A newsletter on the Natural History, Ecology and Conservation of the Agasthyamalai region, Western Ghats, India.

A ray of hope?

In 2006, ATREE and the Tamil Nadu Forest Department launched a clean-KMTR campaign. The following year, we negotiated for an official ban of plastic in the reserve. This year, we moved to a more holistic approach; 'be a better ancestor' urging the pilgrims to be responsible and enjoy a greener festival. Some of our monitoring efforts by volunteers helped shift the attention of the press from the grandeur of the festival to the impacts that such festivals have on the environment. We are also seeing more local stewardship emerging to safeguard our environment, but the issue of how we reconcile this festival which is an age old tradition, with the issue of



The 2010 logo with the message 'Be a better ancestor' designed by Paramesh M conservation remains.

As I write this editorial, the news of Sabarimala stampede is breaking, with reports of heavy loss of life. Sabarimala

which has its setting in Periyar Tiger reserve, is similar to Sorimuthaiyan in many ways. In contrast, Sabarimala has a wider footprint, with people pouring from several states while the Sorimuthaian temple is fortunately still restricted to 2 districts. There is a value of keeping this festival small and maintaining its quaintness. We see an opportunity for the temple administration to set a trend by setting up an environment committee and bring more players from line departments and the civil society to manage the festival. Raja, the temple trustee was open to this suggestion, and we hope to see this happen in the coming year!

Soubadra Devy

The campaign theme moves from 'No Plastic' to 'Be a Better Ancestor'

ATREE's Agasthyamalai Community-based Conservation Centre has been working towards a 'Plastic-free Kalakad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve' during the annual *Aadi amavasai* festival since 2006. ATREE's efforts have resulted in plastic ban in the entire KMTR, but still awareness among local people about sustainable use of forests and polluting Tamiraparani river is abysmal. Hence, this year ATREE adopted 'be a better ancestor', as the campaign slogan with the main theme being saving the Tamiraparani river for future generations. We conducted meeting with the district administration, media, temple authorities, local NGOs and forest officials. After our

meeting with the collector in 2007, he issued a press release instituting a ban on plastic



The cycle rally saw an enthusiastic participation. Photo: M. Mathivanan

usage inside the forest. This year the collector urged people to reduce prolonged camping in. Awareness programmes were conducted at Alangulam town from where a large number of people visit the temple. A cycle rally was conducted and students from

Jayaraj Annapackiam Nadar College participated in the event and Mr. Venkatesh, Deputy Director of KMTR flagged off this rally. This rally covered 20 km and Lions club of Alangulam and Merit soap sponsored food and T-shirts for the students. ATREE's 'Nature Talkies' children troop performed cultural programmes which was recorded and broadcast by Jeniffer TV channel during prime time. All our programmes focused on reducing prolonged camping in forests. We were supported by the government departments and public to make the pilgrimage greener and sustain it for the next generation.

M Mathivanan

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Will Susan get evicted from her home?

Susan-Holme a euphorb cactus became a familiar plant not only among 'Clean-KMTR' campaigners and the Forest Department staff but also with campers. Campers spill over the rock area during festival, cut the plants or clean the rocky area around their base which destroys the habitat of these mute plants. ATREE, Forest officials and Temple Trustees decided to protect the plants from the onslaught of campers. One strategy was to familiarise the plant among the campers. During the pre-festival awareness campaigns, pictures of the Susan-holme euphorb cactus and its occurrence nowhere else in the world except in that region was stressed. A few display boards with picture of the plant and other information about its rarity and an appeal for protection of its habitat were installed in the area.



'Just holding on'
Photo: R Ganesan

Interestingly, our team reported that some children remembered the name and the plants location close to the temple. We really were an elated bunch basking at the success of campaign, when a green brigade (student

ambassador) ran to us with news, that campers had started pitching their tents and cloth-lines not only on the tree but also on the metal display boards.

Unfortunately, one of the Susan-Holme plant and the display board next to it fell due to the weight of the tent. We had to seek the help of men in uniform to persuade the campers to remove the tents and cloth-lines. The campers expressed innocence about the rare plants after they were apprised by their own children about 'Susan'.

Susan anchors herself daintily on rocky crevices through her thick and fibrous roots forming a mat which surrounds the trunk of the plant. This root mat acts as a sponge in trapping the run-off rain water over the rocky surface and accumulates soil and other muck to support their nutritional demands. The root mat around the trunk also provides habitat for a few other herbaceous plants. Chances of seeds produced by the surviving few trees land in the thin

layer of soil and muck over the rock are remote making it rare and vulnerable.

R Ganesan

The King stuns the police on duty

Ever wondered what a King Cobra sighting would do to the unfamiliar eye? Well, a busy schedule for the policemen guarding the bridge at Mundanthurai during the festival had an event like this to offer. This huge snake made them exclaim with awe because for the first ever time

they were watching one, as big as the King that we had chanced upon! The snake was seen struggling to swim across the swirling waters of the Servalaar and was being seen hardly twenty feet away from us. Its stocky head jutting out of the water's surface, pulling with it the submerged body and the sunlight at noon managed to cast a striking sight.



The strong currents in the Servalaar river at the Mundanthurai bridge where the King Cobra was sighted.
Photo: Rajkamal Goswami

The strong currents ensured that the sighting would last only for a minute, as the snake was drawn downstream. A superfast-sprint across the bridge carried me to the dormitory, where I was quite excitedly drawing my colleague's attention

to the presence of this unfamiliar snake. About fifteen minutes of combing at the riverside had left us with no traces of the snake, when it once again managed to send another bunch of people bathing in the river into a tizzy, as it swam past them! Frantic moments of searching between a

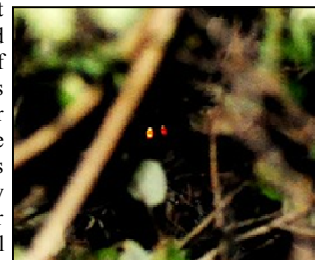
few of us allowed Seshadri to spot the snake again. A few of us watched it resting on the root of a littoral tree for a few minutes, as the snake started drifting downstream again.

Later, barely a few hundred feet away from the riverside, the bunch of women and children who had retreated while bathing, jubilantly took to the pictures and videos of the snake from our cameras. And, the policemen's joy knew no bounds, when they realized that they had indeed seen the King Cobra which they had all heard of and never seen before!

Prashanth M B

Ghosts of darkness

The Puckle's path is a 4.5 km loop jeep trail in the Mundanthurai range of KMTR well known for consistent encounter and sightings of many animals and birds. For the last three years it was regularly monitored for diurnal animal sign & encounter surveys. What would it be like to venture inside it at night has been a long curiosity! When Saleem, my co-surveor seemed to be game for a night survey we picked up our torches and walked into the darkness. The 2 night surveys seemed quite productive as we encountered two bears, a leopard as well as a herd of about 7 Chitals. We also saw quite a few slender lorises and two species of civets: the toddy cat & the brown palm civet! After each 4.5 km stretch (transect) we lie down on the tar road, looking up at the sky and feeling at one with the universe! With the blaring day traffic during the SMK festival, only the nights, quiet & still, allowed us to soak the aura of the jungle. Thanks to forest department, who closed the road for the night traffic, amidst the uproar from the community.



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Rajkamal Goswami

Life after death

The discovery of a Sambar kill in a streambed near Karaiyar during the festival, was followed with speculation and various versions of the story on of what might have happened in shadows of the night. We decided to zero in on the 'actual' by setting up a camera trap to see who comes to feed on the



Site of Sambar kill: Dholes during the day and leopard at night.
Photo: K. S. Seshadri

kill. Three of us got impatient and went to check out the camera in the middle of the night and almost walked into two glistening sapphire blue eyes of what we were sure was a leopard on the road! The next day, two more of us had a mysterious encounter with some animal yelping like domestic dogs and later stole a glimpse of 4

wild dogs bolt into the forest from the kill.

The Sambar which was killed by a pack of dholes as we deduced from the clues, was fresh when we first saw it and there were a plethora of organisms from ants, millipedes, wasps and a zillion flies feeding on it. The night was taken over by a leopard which walked into the dry rivulet. It gorged a heavy free meal before



The exercise was indeed worthwhile as we caught a glimpse of life in jungle unfold under the cover of darkness especially on the night of 'Amavasya' a new moon night of the festival. The camera had beautifully captured the drama of life that may well be going on at this very moment as I sit in a concrete jungle to write this.

being shown off by the dogs. The wild dogs, as we saw from the images were feeding from about 9pm to about 1 am and stopped for a while only to resume at 5 am again. This was indeed quite a lively and exciting drama put up by nature and played by some of its best actors.

K S Seshadri

Will Sorimuthaiyan go the Sabarimala way?

I have never been to a pilgrimage centre nor visited temple deities in hills. Crowds anywhere deter me. Still I dared into the festival at Sorimuthian Temple in KMTR. The sheer number of people visiting the temple, that too inside a tiger reserve was mind boggling. Imagine the shock that the denizens will be subjected to with such a sudden and violent intrusion into their territory by human beings. At the end of it, there was feel good factor about campaigning and research that measured the impacts of the festival. I pondered over what the future holds for the place. When I visited the temple for the post festival clean-up, the shops were still there and people were thronging the temple. A month later when I visited the temple again with the Anthropological Survey of India team, people were still there and waste was strewn all around.

Sabarimala today, from what I have read, is now having a good number of people visiting the temple during the off-season and the area under the temple administration has grown and encroached more forest lands. The temple authorities are planning a small township. Will SMK remain a quaint festival and or will it grow to a monstrous dimension?

There lurks a danger of religious groups hijacking the entire festival. They might draw crowds all year round and from outside the region too.

Patrick David

Tiger not burning bright

The activities of our team around the *Aadi amavasai* festival in KMTR have increased, from merely campaigning against the use of plastic to monitoring the impact on wildlife, all which demands resources.

As a part of annual ritual of fund-raising for this effort, I approached a few malls in Bangalore for permission to put up a stall during a weekend just before the festival. The Forum Mall readily agreed while all other malls had refused.

The stall was set up on Sunday with the help of volunteers. It was quite interesting to sit and watch people's attitude towards a cause related to the environment. Diverse people walked by our stall, there were those who would look at our stall and just walk away and those who would come over check out the products and leave. Worst of all were the ones who waste our time asking questions but buy nothing and ones who ask us for products that we did not have. This would make me wonder why people

fail to understand that this is not a commercial venture and hence cannot cater to their tastes. Some would even suggest designs that they preferred. However, it was heartening to see that there were some people, especially students, who couldn't afford to buy, our products but would give a small donation, and some who picked up every product we had just because it was for a cause. However, we would be disappointed when people would listen to us and just walk away without even offering a small donation. Then immediately, our spirits would be lifted when some sweet soul would empathise with us. I would still say that tiger burns bright seeing volunteer's energy mainly kids from Bangalore schools who



The fund-raising stall at Forum Mall in Bangalore.
Photo: Abhisheka K

worked very hard convincing the visitors to fund our cause by buying products. Having said that, by the end of the day we had sold most of the products we had carried.

Abhisheka K

Digging beneath the plasticky concern

It seems like elements of our life are being taken apart bit by bit, and sold back to us in attractive packages. From education to holidays, computers to “eco-friendly” organic vegetables, from baby showers to funerals, many unimaginable things come in packages that suit different pockets. Thus, the most sought after packaging material – the plastic bag – has today become part and parcel of our existence.

The plastic bag has not spared the gods too. They aren't yet selling religion in a plastic bag but all its components have been engulfed by it. Having wrapped the religious offerings, hymns and prayers at temples, it is now on its way to take in the festivities at homes.

It is no wonder that the plastic menace reaches such alarming proportions at the Sorimuthaian temple during the annual *Aadi amavasai* festival. The all-pervading plastic cannot possibly evade

a “protected area” too. What caught the attention of the forest department officials who asked ATREE to take up the issue was the improper disposal of plastic bags that were strewn all over the forest floor. It is also no wonder that while dabbling with the plastic issue, we realised that the litter was only a symptom of a disease that lies deeper – the disease of commodification.

Commodification and all its fallouts coupled with ignorance can spell doom when it enters a fragile ecosystem. It might still be possible to clean up the soil and the river of the plastic mess but would it ever be possible to tackle the underlying disease that is probably the root cause of everything that ails the environment today? What is probably worse is that the very forces that cause degradation in one place are the ones that pay for cleaning up the mess elsewhere. This has been my only reason for

protesting against fund-raising in malls. In Bangalore alone, thousands of trees are being razed down to support malls and the lifestyle they promote. To me, fund-raising in malls means promoting a false notion among people that they have “done their bit” to nature. Why, it even amounts to commodifying redemption.

However, I also feel helpless about not being able to come up with a better alternative for raising funds without which the campaign can never take place. Finding myself in this sticky situation where principles and action cannot converge, I ask if conservation and commodification are two faces of the same coin. Can forests be conserved unless polluters who fund conservation projects realise that mere paying up will not really help the cause?

Jahnvi G Pai

Oh Tamiraparani

Recently there was reference in a TV channel of how Tamiraparani water adds to the taste and flavour of the local cuisine. Who in Tirunelveli and Tuticorin district would dispute the fact that Tamiraparani is their lifeline. A unique culture and lifestyle has evolved around this river. In recent times, this riverscape is fast changing. For instance, what used to be a quaint little festival of *Aadi Amavasai* in the Sori



Camping and other activities in the forest and by the banks of the river.

Photo: R Ganesan

Muthaiyanar temple which is located on the banks of Tamiraparani almost near the origin is growing in dimension and causing concern to the river. The river gets polluted due to the religious rituals and human use and abuse. Our preliminary findings during the festival suggest that the river water gets polluted through open

defecation, slaughtering of animals on the banks of the river, cooking, washing clothes and bathing. We tested the quality of river water at various points: downstream from the temple, one close to it and another upstream where the water is released from the dam. Our results showed very high concentration of coliform and chlorine



near the pollution-source and also downstream of the source. The kanis who use this water downstream complain of water borne diseases after the festival, and hence do not use river water during and for few months after the festival. The issue here is that it not only impacts a few households near the source but might also affect millions of people who depend on these waters downstream. We cannot

discount the pollution that accrues further downstream from industrial pollution and sewage release. There are lessons from Ganga and Yamuna experience. Tamraparani still has a bright future, if we act now.

Chetana H C

Out of sight, out of problem

In the middle of my earlier survey in SMK two years back in 2008, I realized that the pilgrims have started adopting ‘out of sight, out of problem’ strategy to dispose plastic ‘safely’-by burning. To my dismay, this year, half the people I interviewed said they disposed the plastic by burning them. Some of them even bury the plastic bags. Most people think that what is bad about plastic is that once eaten by an animal, it dies a painful death. By burning or hiding the plastic a few millimetres underground, they think they have solved the problem. They don't seem to be aware that when burned, plastic releases a host of poisonous

chemicals into the air, including dioxin, one of the most toxic substances known to science apart from carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide. Besides causing damage to individuals' health, some of these gases affect the ozone layer which protects us from the heat of the sun. This behaviour is not very uncommon as one notices people disposing plastic by burning in large cities as well. While there is widespread campaigning for the reduction of plastic, incineration of plastic is a neglected aspect which needs to be addressed at the earliest.

Allwin Jesudasan



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