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GROWING PAINS

Problem peaks

Vithal Nadkarni | June 29, 2013

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TREASURE TROVE: The Himalayas continue to throw up new species. (Left) A moth endemic to the mountains

Renowned biologist Kamal Bawa, who foretold the Uttarakhand tragedy, says that the young mountains are beset with a unique set of growing pains.

The effects of climate change are being felt throughout the world, but few places are changing as rapidly as the Himalayas, "biologist Kamal Bawa said during this interview, conducted in Mumbai a few weeks before excessive rains led to widespread destruction and loss of lives in Uttarakhand.

Bawa, an India-born scientist and professor of Biology at the University of Massachusetts in Boston was speaking in

the context of the new coffee-table book titled Himalaya: Mountains of Life he has written in collaboration with award-winning photographer Sandesh Kadur. The book, which focusses on the Eastern Himalayas, highlights the landscapes, traditional lifestyles and biodiversity of the magnificent region, stunningly captured in the photography. Prescient of the current tragedy, the book also attempts to drive home the impact of development and imbalance created in the eco-system in its wake, through essays that question the exploitation of rivers for hydro-electric power, and a look at how the growing population in these parts has put pressure on its resources.

The author, who won the Gunnerus Sustainability Award in 2012 for outstanding scientific work that promotes sustainable development globally and is also president of the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) in Bangalore, is best known for groundbreaking biological discoveries made in Central America and in India, in the Western Ghats and the Himalayas. He is a firm believer that the majestic range, despite its many ecological hurdles, will be a life source for years to come. "At 70 million years, the Himalayas are the world's youngest mountains and like teenagers everywhere, they are beset with a unique set of growing pains. But we must not ever lose sight of their absolutely awesome life potential," he says. Excerpts from the interview. . .

"There's trouble on the roof of the world, " you write in the climate change section of your book. "The Himalayan glaciers are melting and water is seeping through the roof, combined with increasing temperatures (which will all) affect the way we live. " Could you elaborate?

The effects of climate change are being felt throughout the world, but few places are changing as rapidly as the Himalayas. Our work has shown that temperature in the Himalayas has increased three times the global average in the last 20 years. Locals say already there's less rain in the nonmonsoon periods and bursts of excessive during the monsoon.

Moreover, since eight of Asia's largest rivers originate in the Himalayas, changes in water flow due to climate change, exacerbated by wide-spread deforestation and construction of

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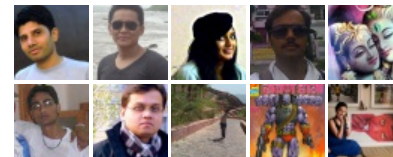
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hundreds of hydro-electric dams are going to radically alter the ecology of these great rivers in hitherto unimagined ways. One cannot therefore but be concerned, extremely concerned, about the highly disruptive impact of all these changes on the lives of people in the mountains and downstream.

What else is happening on the leaking roof of the world?

Many small glaciers have already disappeared and the larger ones are retreating at a jaw-dropping rate of 10 to 60 metres per year. Many plant species of rhododendrons are flowering earlier while shifting their ranges to higher altitudes. Species already living near the tops of mountains, however, have nowhere to go and could therefore become extinct.

The spread of mosquitoes to higher altitudes is another ominous sign of the worrisome shape of things to come. Crops, domestic animals and humans could all be affected by the potentially pestilential colonists of new habitats.

With the title of the book 'Himalaya : Mountains of Life', you indicate that the hills continue to be a wellspring of existence.

What is extremely gratifying, despite all the pressures from modern India and a massive loss of so much of its natural heritage, new species continue to be discovered in the Himalayas right into our 21st century. In February 2012, for instance, scientists reported the discovery of three new species of amphibians called caecilians. This is a group of creatures that's almost unknown because they spend their whole lives underground.

Similarly, in the decade since 1998, over 16 new species of snakes have been discovered and described, from a black wolf snake with white bands to a brand new green pit viper. Some, like the large arboreal Pseudocalotes lizard, described nearly a century ago, are being 're-discovered' or 're-named'.

The Himalayas, which are outstandingly rich in plant and animal varieties, also tower over the spiritual and cultural history and geography of India.

Absolutely, the extraordinary diversity of life in the Eastern Himalaya is matched by its cultural and ethnic diversity. Every major religion with its associated traditions is represented here. In the final analysis, cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity of the Himalayas are inexorably linked with the diversity of plants and animals because similar forces - namely, evolution in remote mountain valleys and isolated peaks - have generated both the richness of living organisms as well as the diversity of human cultures and traditions. We have a sacred duty to protect it as best as we can for future generations.

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