

NNHS Annual Report 2012-2013

Overview

Nilgiri Natural History Society endeavors to redefine life, nature and humanity through an ecologically sound and socially responsible value system. It aims to permeate manifestations of actions and thought processes across all walks of life. Inspiration and imagination are core to the Nilgiri Natural History Society.

The Society was started in 2010 by a group of individuals who have been working in the region of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve for 15 years and more. These individuals are part of Keystone Foundation and have decided to launch the society to include people who believe that ecological societies are possible, where people and biodiversity coexist. The Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve is a region, which is alive with these examples, and the society seeks to understand and learn from them.

Foreword

Entering our third year, it gives us immense pleasure to be reaching out to more individuals, and seeing more participation and more inspiration. From April 2012 to March 2013, we have had a diversity of exciting activities open to members as well as non-members alike, ranging from nature trails to pottery workshops to scientific talks. It is great to see school children almost always on the forefront, which to us, amounts to sowing the seeds of ecological sensitivity in young people.

In the Society's newsletter we have tried to cover several conservation concerns in the region and featured voices of indigenous people, conservation biologists and development workers. We earnestly hope you have enjoyed reading from the platter this year.

We would like you to know that your candid feedback is important for us to be more vibrant and engage further with our common concerns, our common landscape – the Nilgiris, our common future on this living planet.

ACTIVITIES

Workshops

Kota Pottery Workshop

The Kota pottery workshop was held on the 14th of July at the bee museum, Ooty. Cinthamani a local potter from Trichigadi wowed the crowd with her incredible throwing abilities. After the demonstration the participants tried their hand at the wheel following which there was a discussion on the anthropological aspects of the Kota tribe and the importance of pottery in their ceremonies as well as their day to

day lives. It was a highly interactive session and Cinthamani graciously answered all questions posed by the participants.

Workshop on Herbs

A workshop on herbs was held at the Woodhouse farm, Ooty on the 1st of September. Fifteen students from the Blue Mountain School attended this workshop along with some members of the NNHS. The workshop started off with a talk by Dr. Selvaraj (TNAU) on improving our quality of life by eating healthy and combatting common ailments with the use of herbal remedies. This was followed by a visit to the nursery and a walk around the 12.6-acre organic farm. During the walk the participants got to sample some of the herbs growing on the farm and also enjoyed three different herbal decoctions.

Kurumba Painting Workshop

A Kurumba painting workshop was held at the Bee Museum on the 26th of September under the guidance of Krishna, a Kurumba artist from Vellaricombai, near Mamaram. Around 20 participants watched on as Krishna demonstrated the intricate strokes used to create these unique paintings. This conventionally established art form is done using natural inks that are collected from forest plants. After the demonstration, participants were given a chance to try their hand at the Kurumba painting technique. In the end all the work done by the participants was judged and the piece done by Ms Tamilarasi from the Lawrence School, Lovedale was awarded a prize for the best depiction of the Kurumba style of painting.

Pugur Workshop

A Toda embroidery workshop was held at the Bee Museum from the 17th to the 20th of October at the Bee museum. This distinct form of embroidery done by the Toda community is called Pugur meaning flower. It is done using red and black wool on a plain white cloth. Around 15 participants took part in this workshop, which was headed, by Devakili and Rasendi of Bikkapathy Mund. Both women, well versed in this craft, taught the participants the basics of this type of embroidery and also some intricate motifs commonly used by them. The ladies also spoke about the cultural and social aspects of their tribe and spent time interacting with the participants giving them a brief insight into their lives.

Shades of Clay

A nature inspired clay-modeling workshop was held at the Bee museum on the 9th of February. Around twelve participants took part in this workshop where they learnt the basics of clay modeling using terracotta clay. They then let their creativity run wild and made some beautifully textured mugs and small plates.

Trails

Rangaswamy Pillar Trek

The trek to Rangasamy pillar on the 21st of July proved to be quite exhilarating. Twelve, members and non-members took part in the trek to the pillar, which lasted about four hours. The beginning of the trail was a bit challenging because of the steep slope but was soon made easy by the gentle undulating terrain that followed. The hike took us through alternating grasslands and evergreen sholas with spectacular views of the surrounding hills and plains. We concluded our trail at the end of a rock face with a view of the monumental Rangaswamy pillar, which stands at a height of some 400 feet.

Mullur-Mandarai trail

This nature trail through the eastern slopes of the Nilgiris covered a total distance of 15km through varying landscapes. A group of about ten participants started the walk from Mullur through some tea gardens, which were gradually replaced by evergreen forests past the Glenburn estates. From here the group walked to Vellaricombai, a Kurumba settlement where they got a chance to interact with Krishnan- a Kurumba artist who was gracious enough to let us see some of his art, which he had done using natural inks collected from the surrounding forests. From here the group headed down to Kunjapannai, which lies at an elevation of about 800-1000msl. At this elevation both the vegetation of the upper and lower reaches of the Nilgiris thrive. This area, which is also an excellent location for birding, presented us with several sightings including the Hill myna, Blacked-naped Monarch, Chestnut-headed Bee-eater and a Crested serpent eagle. The trek ended at Mandarai, which offers some spectacular views of the surrounding hills and valleys

Taranadmund trail

On the 22nd of December about ten participants started the trail from Taranadmund, a characteristic Toda settlement that can be accessed via the Ooty-Gudalur road. Tarannadmund is a vast wetland-grassland complex high in biodiversity. The trail began through dense wattle plantations bordering the village before opening up to pristine sholas and small watering holes. Our guide Aradukuttan explained the cultural importance of this trail to the Todas on account of the sacred groves that are found there. The trail concluded over rolling grasslands offering panoramic views of the Sigur plateau.

Oland-Mulli Trail

The trail from Oland estate to Mulli on the 23rd of February was not for the faint hearted. The steep gradient of these slopes made it one of the most difficult trails organized by NNHS thus far. Oland lies on the Coonoor slopes and Mulli is a reserve forest near Pillur Dam bordering Kerala. The trail started through some tea estates and patches of deciduous forests that were gradually replaced by large tracts of elephant grass interspersed with scrub vegetation. Thirteen members and non-members took

part in the trail.

Talks

Flora and Fauna-A first hand perspective

A talk on the Flora and Fauna of the Nilgiris took place at the Bee museum on July 25th. The speaker Ramneek Singh took the audience through a series of photographs of rare and endemic orchids, flowering plants and also some of the fauna present in the Nilgiris. The changing landscape of the Nilgiris was the overriding topic of the day. A lot of emphasis was placed on the detrimental effects of invasive plant species like Acacia and Eucalyptus. The event had a good turnout of about fifty participants.

Awareness Program on Snakes

A snake awareness workshop was held at the Bee Museum on the 8th of September under the banner of the Nilgiri Wildlife & Environment Association (NWEA). Twenty-five people including students from the Blue Mountain School took part in this educative program aimed at creating awareness about snakes and the erroneous perceptions associated with them. The workshop started off with the screening of a wildlife documentary 'A million snakebites'. This was followed by a presentation by Mr Sadiq Ali of the NWEA on the different venomous and non-venomous snakes of India following which the participants got a chance to actually handle some of the rescued snakes, non-venomous of course. The session ended with a live demonstration of a snake rescue operation!!

Talk on the Birds of the Nilgiris

A talk on the Birds of the Nilgiris took place at the Bee museum on the 10th of November. The Speaker Dr. P.J Vasanthan, an avid birder for the past two decades gave the audience a brief introduction to the topography of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR) and the different forest types and climatic conditions prevailing here. Following which he showed several photographs of endemic, endangered, migratory and resident bird species that inhabit these slopes. The key issue that came up continually during the talk was the steep decline in numbers of certain species due to habitat loss and global warming over the past several decades. Thirty-five participants including children from various schools around the Nilgiris took part in this workshop and discussion that followed.

Early communication systems in human-elephant conflict management

A talk on early communication and warning systems in human-elephant conflict

management was held at the Bee museum on the 4th of December. The speaker Dr Anand Kumar, a wildlife scientist at the Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) at Valparai started the talk by emphasizing the importance of involving the local communities in the management of elephant-human conflict and also increasing their tolerance towards elephant presence in altered landscapes.

The predominance of elephant-human conflict in the Valparai plateau due to rainforest fragmentation has led to negative interactions between people and elephants. The research team at NCF has established a conflict response unit (CRU) with local tribal people to track elephants in human inhabited areas until they move into surrounding protected areas. Based on the information from CRU, local informants, and the Forest Department personnel, three kinds of early warning measures are deployed to alert people about elephant presence within plantations and reduce fatal encounters with elephants: message on cable television network, bulk SMS, and mobile-operated flashing red LED lights in strategic locations.

The project is researching the effectiveness of such measures, by monitoring and quantifying conflict incidents, response calls received from people to early warning messages, and adoption of methods by the local community. The research has important applications in developing sustainable participation by local community and application of early warning measures in the management of human-elephant conflicts in fragmented landscapes.

A lively discussion followed the presentation and several members of the NNHS asserted on the importance of adopting similar programs in tackling man-animal conflicts in the Nilgiris.

A talk on ecology, management, conservation and welfare of the Asian Elephant

A talk on ecology, management, conservation and welfare of the Asian Elephant was organized by the Nilgiri Natural History Society (NNHS) at the Bee Museum on the 19th of December. The speaker Mr Surendra Varma an expert on welfare of the Asian elephant used a slide show to illustrate the issues faced by these magnificent mammals both in captivity as well as in the wild. While most studies on elephant conservation use a more quantitative approach, Mr Varma takes on a more qualitative MO. He states that just numbers cannot be an indicator of how the species is doing in the wild and a more thorough research has to be done on physiological and psychological health of the elephants if we are to assess how future generations will fare. Mr Varma held the attention of his audience with his easygoing manner and passion in creating awareness about the plight of these animals. The talk was followed by questions from the audience, which was a good mix of college students and interested individuals.

A talk on Biodiversity Heritage Sites (BHS) and their role in promoting in-situ conservation.

Dr. S. Subramanya, entomologist and ornithologist -University of Agricultural Sciences, Bengaluru, gave a talk on Biodiversity Heritage Sites (BHS) on the 2nd of February at the Keystone campus in Kotagiri. These BHS's are areas that hold significant biological diversity outside of protected areas. The act provides provision for each of the State Biodiversity Boards to identify and declare BHS in each State under section 37 of the Biodiversity Act 2002. The BHSs are particularly important because they can be a tool for in- situ conservation and empowers the local bodies to manage them after declaration. So far, only 4 BHSs have been declared: all in Karnataka. Two sites from Kerala and one site from Andhra Pradesh are being considered for the same. The talk focused particularly on one of the BHS's in Karnataka: The University of Agricultural Sciences, GKVK Campus, Bengaluru, one of the first university campuses to be declared as a BHS in India. In addition to the process that went in to get the 1380 acre campus declared as a BHS, The talk also delved upon the significance of the GKVK campus for the city of Bengaluru, it in being the last remaining green patch left in the metropolitan. Dr. Subramanya also highlighted the importance of the floral, faunal and unique agro biodiversity of the campus and the ecosystem services and livelihood opportunities that it provided.

Tribes of Brazil

A talk on the indigenous people of Brazil took place at the Bee Museum on the 27th of February. The speaker Sarah Dee Shenker from survival international spoke about the uncontacted tribes in Brazil with a special emphasis on the Awa Indians who are suffering greatly due to loss of habitat.

Conservation Education

1. Rishi Valley School, Madanapalle

The NNHS organized an educational tour of the Nilgiris on the 19th, 20th and 21st of September for the children of Rishi Valley School (A.P). Day one of the tour started with a picturesque ride on the Nilgiri mountain railway followed by a visit to a tea factory in Coonoor where the children got a chance to view the tea manufacture process at first hand. The group travelled on to Ooty to tour the Bee museum where they learnt some fun facts about Bee ecology after which they watched the documentary The Honey Hunters of the Blue Mountains. The next day the group captained by Historian Rev. Philip K Mulley visited some important landmarks in Kotagiri, namely Sullivan's memorial in Kannerimuku, Longwood Shola and Kodanad View point. The Reverend spoke to the children on the history, the people and the changing landscape of the Nilgiris. The evening was spent touring the Keystone campus in Kotagiri under the guidance of Sam, Saneesh, Suganthi, Anita and Bala of the Keystone conservation team who kept the kids engaged while they explored the different facets of the organization. An evening of festivities followed with music by the Kurumba tribe from Banagudi. The kids and Keystone staff all danced around a bon-fire to the haunting tunes of the Kurumba musicians. The last day was spent visiting different tribes around the Nilgiris. Namely the Kotas, Todas and Irulas. The students were divided into four groups and each of these groups was taken to a different village where

they got a chance to interact with indigenous communities and get a sense of their day-to-day lives and also participate in some of their livelihood activities for a day. It was three days of fun-packed activities where learning was the principal goal.

2. Camfort International School, Coimbatore
Eighteen students from the Camfort International School visited the Bee Museum on the 16th of February as part of their educational field trip. The children learnt about the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve through a presentation by Sumin George of the Keystone Foundation followed by the screening of the movie 'A fragile treasure.' Following lunch they took a short nature walk around Mary's hill road during which they recorded their observations. They returned to the Bee museum for a tour and a Kurumba painting workshop.
3. Isha Home School, Coimbatore
Twenty-five students from Isha Home School visited the Bee museum on the 20th of February. The children were taken on a tour of the museum followed by a screening of the movie- Honey Hunters of the Blue Mountains. The visit ended with a Kurumba painting workshop where the kids created some incredible pieces of Kurumba inspired art.
4. A workshop on Elephant conservation was organized by the NNHS on the 20th of November at the Government School in Pillur. Around 30 students from Standard 8 and 9 participated in this workshop. The event started with the screening of a movie on Elephants followed by an interactive presentation by Sudhakar and Madhesh who have been working on conservation education with the Keystone Foundation for several years. Children were quizzed on their knowledge of elephants and were also given the opportunity to put their creative sides to use in a drawing competition. Winners were awarded prizes and all participants received certificates from NNHS.
5. World Wetland Day' 2013- To mark the World Wetland Day, NNHS organized a conservation education programme in Kotagiri. Over 40 children from three schools participated – Blue Mountain, Hillford and CSI. The day began with an introductory talk by Sumin George of Keystone Foundation, with a focus on hill wetlands of the Nilgiris. He also highlighted the case study of the wetland restoration project initiated by Keystone in 2006 as an example of conservation action with the support of villagers and local school children. The children were then taken on a walk to the Happy Valley Restoration Project site where they planted some native shola tree saplings.

Events

Gaur In My Garden

A documentary film titled Gaur in my garden was screened at the Bee Museum on the 14th of February. This documentary film, directed by Rita Banerji follows the Indian Gaur, a large ungulate whose loss of habitat has caused an increase in human-gaur interactions and has subsequently led to rise in the number of conflicts. The event had

a turn out of about twenty people.

Nilgiri Traditional Food Festival'2013

A traditional food fair was organized by the NNHS at McIver Villa, Coonoor. The focus of the fair was millets, a grain that was once so popular in the Nilgiris that it occupied over 10,000 acres of cultivated land before the advent of tea. This grain now covers less than 1000 acres. A display of several native millets, beans and seeds along with some traditional kitchen utensils highlighted the importance of these fast disappearing jewels. The pinnacle of the event was however the food that consisted of several dishes prepared with traditional local ingredients. The event had a turnout of about 40 people.