

Nilgiri Natural History Society

Annual Report 2015-16

Overview

Nilgiri Natural History Society endeavours 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

The Society was started in 2010 by a group of individuals who have been working in the region of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve for 20 years and more. These individuals were a part of Keystone Foundation and 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

Activities

1. Workshops

Human – Wildlife Interactions Stakeholder Workshop

The stakeholder workshop at Coonoor was the last of the series initiated by Keystone Foundation and Nilgiri Natural History Society (NNHS) to facilitate conversation between farmer groups and the forest department to share their perspectives on human – wildlife interactions and discuss the key issues that lead to conflict. Some of the main concerns expressed during the discussion were the need for subsidy to build electric fences (or other such barriers) to protect agricultural fields, and the lack of communication and clarity from the forest department regarding compensation mechanisms. The issue of waste management in urban areas was highlighted, considered to be one of the main factors that escalate the interactions between humans and wildlife in these landscapes. Other issues discussed were the need for increasing communication between different governmental agencies governing this region, as well as better planning in the development of infrastructure, taking into consideration the needs of wildlife. Everyone present at the workshop displayed great interest in trying out the basic observation and monitoring systems to better understand animal movement and behaviour.

Conference on Human – Wildlife Interactions

A conference on Human - Wildlife Interactions was organised by Keystone Foundation, NNHS and Tamil Nadu Forest Department, Coimbatore Circle, in Kotagiri on the 6th and 7th of October, 2015. The conference began with Mr. Pratim Roy (Director Keystone Foundation), Mr. I Anwardeen IFS (Conservator of Forests, Coimbatore Circle), and Dr. AJT Johnsingh delivering individual addresses. There were presentations and discussions on the themes of the conference, 'Human Influence and Wildlife' and 'Communication and Collaboration' during different sessions which ran through the day.

Some of the major takeaways from the conference were:

- Threat perceptions and its relation to public outcry, and the need for landscape based conflict mitigation.
- Need of a mid-ground to manage conflict on a daily basis.
- No room for an either/or solution, the onus of responsibility for dealing with conflict lies with everybody.
- Need to think and learn how to co-exist with animals, and perhaps cater to this with a different mode of education.
- Discussion on fencing and the isolation and fragmentation of functional ecosystems, as well as the different conservation models that had worked in the past, the varied roles of the Forest Department and the perception of its roles in society.
- Concluded with discussion on available means of communication and collaboration among the stakeholders and how best to access them.

There was an overall consensus on the need for greater collaboration between different arms of the government, and acceptance of shared responsibility for environmental concerns. There was also a suggestion that NGOs could help facilitate collaborations and empower communities to engage with the department. Stress was laid on the importance of sharing of information and transparency in action. It was decided different approaches towards mitigating the issues of conflict would be tried out within the ecological boundaries of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, such as raising awareness, influencing perceptions, and simple mitigation measures.

Beat Box with Birdsongs

NNHS organised a sound art project to promote conservation awareness. The 'SkyIslandBeatBox project' is a collaboration between musician Ben Mirin from New York, photographer Prasenjeet Yadav from Bangalore, and V. V. Robin, a bird ecologist from the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS) to take bird songs to a larger audience. The troupe conducted a workshop at 'A Place to Bee' restaurant on 12th September as part of their tour. In this workshop, participants made original music using a combination of bird songs and beatbox as a means of spreading awareness about birds and their conservation. The troupe screened a video created with music composed with bird songs and mixed with high-quality photographs and footage of some birds endemic to the Western Ghats and Nilgiris.

Puppetry on Pollination

Dr. Bhanumathi from 'Pavai Centre for Puppetry' in association with NNHS conducted two workshops for children at the Adi Dravidar Middle School, Doddabetta and Mavanalla Tribal Residential School on the 26th and 27th of November 2015, respectively. Each workshop lasted for four hours and the theme, pollination was introduced to children between the age group of 11-13 years. The focus of the workshop was to raise awareness on the importance of pollinators in different biomes. The children were taught to construct simple hand puppets and to come up with a five minute presentation based on their understanding of the theme.

2. Trails

Longwood Shola

After a slow start to the year our activities started rolling with the usual enthusiasm with a call from the Nilekanis requesting a trek through Longwood Shola. This is by far one of our most popular trails and we have requests for conducting these on a regular basis. The accessibility of the trail along with its relatively easy nature and at the same time set in a rare forest like a Shola gives it a special level of popularity. We have advertised this trail on our website and also placed posters about it at some select hotels in the district.

Tarnadmund trail

A special landscape, sacred to the Todas and very typical of the Nilgiris is the forest and grassland around the Toda hamlet of Tarnadmund. We organised one trail here that was well received and something we hope to continue in the future. We have had a number of discussions with indigenous village groups that are heading eco-tourism initiatives (Banagudi Village and Kodithenmund) in collaboration with the Tamil Nadu Forest Department in the region and are planning modes of working together.

Mullur – Mandarai trail

A trail was organised to the dry deciduous forests adjacent to the Mamaram toll gate. The trek started in a plantation and continued onto the forests around Kunjappanai and Mandarai. The trek was led by Mr. Shivalingam who is an avid birder and is familiar with the landscape and the various flora and fauna of these forests.

3. Talks:

Are all cats gray in the dark?

Explored through coats, quotes, tails and tales:

Dr. Shomita Mukherjee, principal scientist at Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON), Coimbatore has been working extensively on various small cats in North East India. She gave a talk on the diversity of small cats like the Jungle Cat, Marble cat, Leopard cat, Clouded leopard and the Fishing cat which aren't necessarily given the same importance and conservation status as the big cats (Tiger, Lion & Leopard).

Introduction to Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve:

The students from Sri Prakash Vidya Niketan from Vishakapatnam on their visit to The Nilgiris were given a talk on the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR) by the Nature Educator of Nilgiri Natural History Society. The talk covered the landscapes, people and diverse life forms that make the NBR special. The current status of key species in this region was also highlighted. The students were very eager to know more about the NBR as well as issues that posed a threat to its ecology.

Outreach Sessions

NNHS has been conducting a series of talks with the Nature Club, at The Lawrence School, Ooty. These talks have covered a series of modules (Where the Kurinji Blooms – a conservation education manual developed by Keystone Foundation) as well as a few specialist talks as well. The motive behind these talks and discussions has been to increase awareness and sensitivity to the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve.

Dr. Salim Ali, and Man – Animal Interactions in India

On the occasion of Dr Salim Ali's 119th birthday, Tara Gandhi, one of Dr. Salim Ali's students spoke of his life, his work and the inspiration behind her new book 'Birds, Wild Animals and Agriculture.' The talk covered human animal conflicts with emphasis on conflict with wild animals and resolutions in the context of agriculture. Crop management and sensitising people to the plight of animals with shrinking habitats using community level projects was a key element of the work in mitigating conflict.

4. Conservation Education:

Nature Education Program for Schools

Isha Home School: We held a 2-hour workshop to create a room for discussion between the students, their accompanying teachers, and our nature educator. A documentary screening, Kurumba art and painting, and beeswax candle making stations were set up for the kids. Instead of indoctrinating the kids into a school of thought, we encouraged the students to themselves create an understanding of bees and the ecosystem. Constructive arguments and questions were exchanged between the students and our nature educator, most of which were answered. Truth be told, it seemed like we learned more from the children that day.

Brindavan Public School: Almost 150 students of classes 4th and 5th participated in the viewing of two short documentary films about Nilgiris and its biodiversity. They even took part in an exciting game 'Predator & Prey' that taught them about how different organisms interact in nature. Two student volunteers Anushka Kale and Sujith Jonathan helped us conduct this program.

Lawrence School: In March we organised a trek for the students of the Nature club and we have resumed our weekly Friday meetings where current conservation issues such as biodiversity of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, deforestation, identification of native species, and the threat of alien invasive species are discussed. We also plan on running activities such as creation of a plant nursery of native species and a small afforestation program.

Hebron School: Around 40 children from Hebron School came to Kotagiri to understand restoration and importance of Shola forests. This was organised by NNHS in collaboration with the teachers at Hebron.

Nature Education Camps at Village Centres

Summer camps to engage the indigenous youth from different parts of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve have now become a regular feature of our work and the children of the areas look forward to it too. At each camp we spend time on activities, games and discussions on how they perceive their immediate environment. This year the camps were held in Punanjanur/Srinivasapura Colony, Aracode/Banglapadigai, Nilambur, Dhimbam and Pillur in the months of April/May.

The summer camps kicked off at Punanjanur in BRT hills, where the *Sholiga* kids seemed a bit shy to express their creative side but were a fantastic group when it came to outdoor activities. They related to topics like web of life with games and they also possessed an appreciable amount of knowledge on their cultural practises, forest foraging particularly medicinal plants.

The next camp was at the Irula hamlets of Galidhimbam and Mavanattam which are located in the core area of the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve. The kids here were particularly good at expressing their imagination through art and storytelling.

The camp at Nilambur had 12 kids (9 of whom were girls) from Nedumkayam, a Paniya hamlet. Elders from the nearby Paniya hamlets shared their knowledge on the variety of wild foods that were native to the area and on how to cook them.

The camp in Pillur area was held for a day at Pillur dam and the next day at the gorgeous 'Neeradi', an Irula hamlet on the banks of the Bhavani River. The 15 kids from the hamlets in the vicinity of Neeradi were an energetic and intrigued bunch, who interacted with us for long hours on both the days in spite of the scorching summer heat. We discussed the issue of damming a river, the basic idea behind them, livelihoods associated with it and its effect on the fragile ecosystem.

The final summer camp was at Banglapadigai in Aracode area with about 25 kids from the nearby Irula hamlets. Three elders well over their 50s were entrusted with this responsibility. One was a Headman, a goat herder cum medicine man and one who had a dangerous encounter with an elephant and yet lives

to tell the tale. The children listened with great excitement to these elders who recounted many stories and songs about their folk.

What we did learn at these camps was that the indigenous children are very sensitive to the changes in their environments and foresee their landscape being devoid of trees in the coming years. They believe wildlife will become rare, more dams will be built, more tar roads, lots of automobiles and big houses. They see themselves having to leave their remote landscapes in search of livelihood options.

Documenting the ecology, culture and conservation of the Sacred Bikki (*Elaeocarpus serratus*)

In February NNHS was awarded a project by the Natural Heritage Division of INTACH Delhi to survey the status of the *Elaeocarpus serratus* ("Bikke" in Badaga dialect or commonly known as the Malabar/Nilgiri Mock Olive tree) and *Elaeocarpus tuberculatus* (Nilgiri Rudraksha tree). These trees are venerated as sacred trees by most of the hill communities in the Nilgiris, as well as used for medicinal purposes. Population surveys to assess status of these trees as well as a survey of the myths and beliefs associated with these trees are being conducted in the various habitations as well as in the neighbouring sholas. This project gave us an opportunity to hold discussions on culture and conservation with a number of elders of the communities around the Nilgiris and to also spread awareness on the need to conserve special trees. Saplings of *Elaeocarpus* were distributed, a report was prepared and posters in Tamil and English were also made.

Events:

World Wetlands Day

For the World Wetlands day NNHS conducted a walk around the wetlands and interacted with school children at our Happy Valley Restoration plot which is in the town of Kotagiri. In the first week of February we started to clean up the site and also put up name boards for some of the common trees. Students from the local schools joined us to plant some trees and later we did a small birding trail around the site. Indeed sighting the black and orange flycatcher there was a happy moment.

Moth Night, 2015

Moths are the sibling group of the butterflies that outnumber their charismatic counterpart in species richness by about 10 times. There is a staggering diversity (ca. 160,000 species) within moths, be it in their sizes, colours, shapes or habits; and yet we know very little about these little marvels of evolution because of their mostly nocturnal habits, and shy and less flashy nature. Begun in 2011 and celebrated every July, National Moth Week (NMW) is an annual, global citizen science initiative whose aim is to spread awareness and interest in moths.

NNHS along with Keystone Foundation in Kotagiri, organized an evening with the moths for the second consecutive year on July 25, 2015 at The Nature Interpretation Centre, Longwood Shola in Kotagiri. The

event was a success with around a dozen participants who were keen on knowing more about these denizens of the night. The weather was not the best for watching moths but still we could observe a number of species from families such as Geometridae, Eupterotidae, Tineidae, etc., including a newly emerged adult moth in the process of expanding its wings.

Careers in Conservation

NNHS conducted this event to facilitate conversations between students, and ecologists and scientists working in the field of conservation. The event also aimed to increase awareness of the range of activities that come under “conservation” as well as provide information on the different ways in which one can become a part of these activities. Some of the organisations that were kind enough to participate were Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF), World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), Wildlife Research and Conservation Society (WRCS) and Zoo Outreach Organisation.

Students from Emerald Heights College, Providence College, Stanes School, Lawrence School & Government Arts College interested in a career in conservation interacted with eminent ecologists and scientists. The students had a chance to see some of their work first hand, as well as engage with them in conversation regarding their work and the story of how they got there.

The highlight of the event though, was the ‘Drum Circle’ which couldn’t have taken place without the invaluable help of Keith Mendonce (percussion coach) and Abhishek (music enthusiast) whose brainchild it was.

Wildlife Week Celebrations, Tiruppur

NNHS and Keystone Foundation were part of the Wildlife Week Celebrations organised by the Government of Tamil Nadu and the Forest department. We had information posters, books and stickers for sale at our stall, which was one of the rare ones which showcased the lesser known diversity of insects of the Nilgiris. There were a number of interested visitors at our stall who also wanted to become members of the society.

Tamil Birders Meet, 2015

NNHS participated at the Tamil Birders meet which took place at the Tamil Nadu Agriculture University, Coimbatore. The agenda behind the meeting was to highlight the need to collaborate for better monitoring and understanding of birds from across the state. Another aspect which was highlighted was to increase communication between birders across the state.

Outreach and Awareness programmes

A series of outreach programmes and education activities has been initiated by Keystone Foundation and NNHS in the Hasanur, Punanjanur and Sigur regions. The most recent camp was conducted for school students at the Keystone Resource Centre in Punanjanur. A wide array of activities were planned and implemented giving the children an opportunity to better their already sharp observational skills.

The children gained an insight into the complex dynamics of how the environment works and what factors are crucial when making observations in the field.

NILGIRI NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

144A, Sargan Villa, opp Hill Bunk, Ooty -632001

BALANCE SHEET AS ON 31.03.2016

Notes and significant accounting policies forms an integral part of accounts

Ooty

31.07.2015

As Per our Report of Even Date Attached
Society

For M/s. Nilgiri Natural History

For M/s .Srivatsan and Gita (007177S)

Anita Varghese

Chartered Accountants

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Income and Expenditure Account for the Year Ended 31.03.2016

Notes and significant accounting policies forms an integral part of accounts

Ooty

31.07.2015

As Per our Report of Even Date Attached
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Anita Varghese

Chartered Accountants

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Anita Varghese (President)

Meenakshi Venkataraman (Secretary)

Sumin George Thomas (Treasurer)

Robert Leo

Pratim Roy

Tina Jagatbir Singh

T.Samraj

Staff

Gali Prudhvi, Nature Educator

The bylaws and registration documents of the Society are available online at <http://nnhs.in>

ORGANISATIONAL INFORMATION

Nilgiri Natural History Society is registered under the Tamil Nadu Societies Registration Act, 1975 (Tamil Nadu Act 27 of 1975)

Registration No. 54/2010

REGISTERED & MAILING ADDRESS

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