



# Agasthya

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

## Dedicated conservation action

The most significant event during the last three months in the Agasthyamalai region was the annual Sorimuthaian temple festival held during the new moon day in August inside the tiger reserve. The challenge this year was in effective implementation of the ban on plastics. The forest department showed admirable leadership thanks to some very enthusiastic officers who made sure the people, vendors, shop keepers are all checked in the most professional way for plastic materials before they enter the reserve. Jahnvi and others writes about this in greater detail in this issue. The issues related to the festival go beyond plastic waste, there is loss of habitat for some plants, wildlife retreats or is killed by



Banners conveying the ban on plastics  
Photo: T. Ganesh

the traffic and water gets polluted. ATREE did a comprehensive survey to study all these effects and the report is due soon.

ATREE is now inviting

proposals from civil society groups under its Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund initiative to connect fragmented forest patches. The Agasthyamalai-Periyar landscape is one such area for funding and we encourage people interested in working in this landscape to look up [www.atree.org](http://www.atree.org) for more information.

As before, we have received encouraging feedback on Agasthya from several different people and we deeply appreciate their help and encouragement. We would have more new and interesting stuff coming up soon as we near completing year two of Agasthya.

T. Ganesh

## Protecting Karayar Forest – a Divine offer to Sori Muthaiyan

Few years back when I visited the Karayar Sorimuthaiyan temple, I saw few large cacti on the banks of Karaiyar closer to the road leading to the temple. To my surprise they turned out to be a plant discovered just two decades ago from the same location called *Euphorbia susanholmesiae*. Many of us are familiar with the cactus plant – ‘Kallie’ planted along the fences to keep away cattle. The cacti found in the forest around the temple are a special kind not found elsewhere in the world. In general, plants are threatened by various factors where as this *Susanholmes* cactus is threatened by the devotees who visit the temple during the *Aadi*



A Susanholmes cactus destroyed due to camping  
Photo: R. Ganesan

*Amavasai* festival. Devotees cut and clear them to camp in the rocky slopes. They also pitch their tents using the plant for support. They also dry their heavy wet clothes on them causing the branches to break. Some people even cook

underneath the plants which kills them. The individuals found here are the last few left over from such destructive activities. Similarly, some miles away, another rare cactus called *Euphorbia santapau* or the *Santapau* cactus found in Agasthyar peak is also destroyed by devotees while they trek to worship Sage Agasthya at the peak. The forest around Sori Muthaiyan temple is home to many such rare plants and animals. Avoiding their destruction in this abode is the best form of worship the devotees can offer to Sori Muthaiyan.

R. Ganesan

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## Policing vs. preaching

Two years of volunteering for the anti-plastic campaign during *Aadi Amavasai* at the *Sorimuthaiyan* Temple has been a unique experience for me. It was like witnessing a sea of humanity engulfing the forests. Within a span of three days, buses and other vehicles endlessly pour in bringing thousands of people who come all prepared to camp, lock, stock and barrel. Apart from basic requirements, some even bring along their pet dogs and neighbours! And just like that the forest transforms. Every nook and corner is occupied; the rocks along the river turn into



Plastic covers being replaced with cloth bags by ATREE's volunteers and Police personnel  
Photo: Jahnvi Pai

open toilets; the river froths; trails and open places are littered and an unpleasant stench envelopes the surroundings. The situation only worsens each day and this entire gala and gaiety culminates in complete mayhem with litter strewn across the forest floor.

This was the general scenario both years but there was an obvious difference in the success of the campaigns. Last year's campaign was less successful in spite of announcements in villages through local media, banners and street plays about the

ban on plastics as it was neither followed nor enforced. This year, our pre-festival campaigns were more aggressive and focused. In spite of this, people still brought plastic covers which were confiscated at the entry point and not allowed into the sanctuary. The shop-keepers were also given strict warnings by the Forest Department before setting up stalls which was diligently followed. While all these measures led to considerably less litter, the success of the campaign was largely because of full cooperation and implementation of the ban by the Police and the Forest Department. It is probably unfortunate that policing is more effective than preaching but this experience definitely underlines the need for better support by concerned officials without which all other efforts are futile.

**Jahnvi Pai**

## Confluence of interests of stakeholders for clean and plastic-free KMTR

ATREE's anti-plastic campaign in KMTR started in 2004-2005 as a small scale persistent waste collection from a congregation of pilgrims in Manimuthar, a religious enclave within KMTR. It caught the attention of local popular media and newspapers. Following that, during a meeting with the Tamil Nadu Forest Department in 2006, the incumbent Field Director of KMTR, Mr. Ram Kumar asked us to initiate a similar campaign in the Mundanthurai part of KMTR to tackle the large scale littering and disposal of waste by the gargantuan numbers of pilgrims visiting the temple of Sorimuthaiyan during the *Adi-amavasai* festival. Since then the campaign has

been an annual event.

This year the campaign was larger in scale and ambition than the previous years. Along with the awareness campaigns, manual collection and frisking pilgrims for persistent wastes we also had scientific monitoring activities to evaluate and assess the impacts of the large scale influx of pilgrims on the forest. Tamil Nadu Forest Department's help and co-operation in providing better logistics was noteworthy. They provided full logistical support and easy availability of hygienic food in the stalls that were put up in the zone of maximum impact where most of our personnel and volunteers were active. Besides,

accommodation was free and food was subsidized in the forest guest house. Forest staff helped us to screen and frisk the incoming pilgrims, makeshift shacks, tents, petty shops for persistent wastes. The officials of the forest department recruited during the festival provided lot of moral support by not only taking interest in our activities but also making sure that our movements were unrestricted in the reserve and encouraging our efforts throughout the campaign. We are thankful to the Department for the support and cooperation.

**Rajkamal Goswami**

## Common man's access to natural areas

Kala-kad & Mundun-thurai, words associated with plunder and savagery, presented a strange combination, during my first visit to this wildlife reserve. In contrast and reality, I was witness to some bubbling finesse, in the form of dance, music, culture, worship and celebrations that were part of the annual Sorimuthaiyan festival. The savagery, not to forget was present in the form of long-jammed convoys of vehicles, the influx of lakhs of visitors and the impact that one such gathering would have on these forests. A situation which has trickled down from the past, and one that lacks any immediate solution.

Time spent while monitoring the density of vehicles, collecting water samples and counting run-over creatures on roads, for the traffic and road-kill surveys were also

rewarded by sightings of wild creatures in the vegetated, hilly landscape. However, considering man's quest for serenity, the lasting scene, witnessed by myself, Ganesh and Chetan far away from the temple area was that of a few aged gentlemen, who

had set up a tent along the river and enjoying solitude. It's a privilege that is unavailable to the common man and if



Visitors to the forests seen along the riverside deep inside the forest.  
Photo: R. Ganesan

available, is at the cost of an expensive sum of money. Very similar to the raging social issues involving regulated access to parks and tanks in urban areas, not to forget the very access to livelihood sources from these places

for many others.

**Prashanth M. Badarinath**

## Conservation education is a boon to school teachers

ATREE has Five Community Conservation Centres (CCCs) spread in two states of south India. There are 3 in Karnataka located in BR Hills, MM Hills and Kanakpura, and 2 in Tamil Nadu at Natham and KMTR. As part of the activities of CCCs in KMTR, we introduced Conservation Education (CE) programs for students as well as teachers. The KMTR team has been engaged in such activities since 2002. Till now, only students from local schools were the target group for our educational programs but now we have spread our reach to the teachers as well.

Recently we organized a workshop on Conservation Education for School Teachers in which we tried to assess the level of

knowledge the teachers have and how it can be enhanced. Twenty three teachers from eleven schools participated in the workshop. In a unique 'Ranking environment concerns' activity we divided the teachers in to 5 groups according to their area and asked them to list and rank environment concerns of their locality. Sanitation problem was highlighted by all five groups. Most of the participants found the workshop very helpful to understand the concepts of the environment and they decided that they would take it one step forward by imparting the same to their students.

**Mathivanan M.**



Teachers playing the 'web of life' game.  
Photo: Tamilazhagan

## Perspectives and attitudes of forest fringe villagers

The preliminary analysis of our data on perspective of villager's conservation attitude towards KMTR has not shown any surprising results. The most important result we found was that conservation attitudes did not change because of Eco Development Program (EDP) being implemented around KMTR for the past 14 years. The variables that best explained their attitudes were age, perception towards eco systems services, knowledge of flora and if their village as a whole reported a frequent occurrence of crop raids. Age was negatively related to conservation attitudes; it is probably so, as the older people have seen their

community being traditionally dependant on forests and now see that the right has been taken away. Those who perceived ecosystem as a service provider had a much better conservation attitude to those who did not. The inverse relation of knowledge of flora could be because those who knew about the flora were probably more dependant on fuel wood extraction than others and hence reported an indifferent attitude towards conservation. Those villagers who belonged to villages which had more crop raids reported a much better conservation attitude than who belonged to villages with lesser crop raids.

Surprisingly, distance from the forest is not correlated with conservation attitudes. This could be so, because villagers may own lands away from their own village. The villagers themselves being affected by crop raid did not have a significant difference in attitude to those who did not. Further analysis of our data may show more interesting results with some conservation significance especially with respect to the EDP.

**Allwin Jesudasan**

## Adapting ecology research to include people

I came to the Singampatti field station as an undergraduate intern from the New College of Florida. I had planned a traditional field ecology research project in a pristine forest, developing my research plans using the huge quantity of scientific literature from uninhabited natural areas. Once I set my bags down at the field station, I realized that I would have to change these plans quite a bit: every part of the land around me had been strongly influenced by people. Despite this initial change of plans, incorporating the



Kids for bats

human element into my project was very rewarding.

First, I had to learn how to communicate across cultures. As part of the research, I conducted a census of all the fig trees and bat roosts in an area of 50 sq. kilometers. This census necessitated travel through rural villages, where many of the Tamil

people had never seen a foreigner before. The unexpected arrival of a lone American balancing complicated equipment on a bicycle inevitably attracted crowds of curious bystanders. I quickly learned a few words in the Tamil language, which allowed me to

demonstrate my binoculars, GPS unit and transect tape to inquisitive villagers. This cultural exchange was a highlight of my experience.

I also had the opportunity to participate in the ongoing educational projects with the village children. We held several educational activities for the Green Brigade, including projects about the ecological importance of bats, insects and plants. The children ended up helping me with my research by informing me where fruiting trees and bats were located. Biodiversity conservation in human-dominated landscapes, like Singampatti, is increasingly important. I believe that learning how to conduct research in this human-inhabited area turned out to be more useful for me as a scientist than if I had just conducted research in a forest reserve.

**Trevor Caughlin**

## Trekking with senior citizens

In the last week of October on a clear day, along with a crew of six assistants and a volunteer, I set out to Chinna Manjolai to carry out my field work. As we made our way to the middle of the forest in the luxury of a vehicle, I could hear serious discussion among my assistants about their past experiences inside the forest. At the same time I was also feeling that this trip may be futile, because all assistants



Enjoying a senior's moment  
Photo: Jayanth P.

were above the age of 55, one was 65 and moreover, our destination Netterikal is usually quite cold and misty, and such extreme weather may be too much for them. I had lost the hope of doing any work but still pushed on ahead. Once the vehicle dropped us to Sengalthari, we immediately started walking to reach Netterikal by evening. Though the trek is a gentle climb, we had to crawl through with 10

days of ration but reached without much trouble. During my past camping experiences with different age group, from youngsters to middle aged persons, I have not found much difference in their ability to work, but in this trip with senior citizens my first-aid kit emptied in just 10 days probably because I could not provide them with the "bottle"! It was a wonderful experience and I appreciate their energy and patience during field work at this age and their knowledge about the landscape outside the forest was fabulous, as compared to the youngsters.

Chetana H. C.

## Learning experience with ATREE

It's a great opportunity to learn with ATREE, a unique organization which fosters concern for humans as well as the forest and its inhabitants. NGO attachment was one of the three components of the 60-day Rural Agricultural Work Experience (RAWEx), which is part of our curriculum. I had an opportunity to visit the forests at Kakkachi in KMTR, an amazing trip for me. The mountainous landscape was awesome. I was exposed to various endemic species in the forest. It helped me understand the value of conservation and how people and the environment can live in harmony. I was also bitten by leeches, a new experience for us. I realized the difficulty of conducting research in these conditions. The Forest is spread over a

large area and we could only visit a small part of it. We were exhausted by the end of our walk, but brought back with us some unforgettable memories. ATREE's work is helping unravel the mysteries of this enchanting place. The trip also helped us gain a practical perspective about research with hands-on experience. The various campaigns using audio-visual aids to help sensitize people is an invaluable contribution by ATREE to civil society and will help in reducing pressure on the reserve and up-lifting of the rural populace.

**Sumi Robson**

*B.Sc., Final year Student, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Killikulam*

## Snippets from field

- Prashanth saw a Red-collared Dove at Ramanadi which could be one of the first reported sightings from the Agasthyamalai region.
- On 19th November, Seshadri and Vinod spotted a leopard cat walking on the road during late evening near Kodayar. Incidentally, the next afternoon, Vinod spotted a leopard cat resting behind a building near the EB office. This elusive cat had not been sighted in that area for quite some time.
- A rock python, about 6 ft long was sighted by Seshadri, Prashanth, Deepa and Murugan along the Manimuthar canal while returning from one of the owl surveys. The snake was very docile and did not show signs of aggression but swam to the safety of the forest by getting into the canal which had accumulated some rain water.
- A Slaty-legged crane with a deformity in its left eye was brought to Chetana and Seshadri by Jayapal, a school boy in Nalmuk on 8th November. This is the first record of the bird in that region. After photo-documenting, it was released in the forest where it was found.

## A seed with six Legs

Having evaded the bites of the hundreds of leeches and a Malabar pit viper, we continued to search the leaf litter for snails all along the Vellachi thodai trail. Soon, we came on to a clearing which had some rocks and a very sparse understory and immediately, all of us sat down in search of the snails. Half way through the process, I came across a cream



After a good meal  
Photo: Seshadri K. S.

colored object which looked like a seed and I picked it up and asked Chetan as to which seed it was. As I was about to hand it over to him, I noticed that the seed which I picked up had legs! All of them came closer out of curiosity and surprise to see what seed it was-

the seed I had picked up turned out to be a Tick! It was easily the biggest tick which we all had ever seen-the size of a thumb finger nail and more than a centimeter thick! Soon a photo documentation session followed and all the while, the tick lay haplessly on my knee without being able to move about thanks to its own weight! The tick must have had a very good meal or must have been a gravid female with hundreds of blood thirsty young ticks waiting to see the light of the day!

Seshadri K. S.



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