

Conservation Education Network.

The Network.

Conservation Education Network is an assemblage of people working on conservation education to interact and share experiences, concerns, assess strengths – weaknesses and explore avenues for collaborations. An open network, it believes in learning for life using hands, heart and mind. Members are teachers, non government organization personnel, trainers and consultants who interact frequently by way of email as also meet each year for annual-retreats to deliberate on their experiences and perceptions. These retreats are organized at separate locations each year to enable the participants to get an exposure and as a corollary present an opportunity to learn from

A. Programs undertaken by the host organization.

B. Natural values offered by the landscape.

1st retreat was organized at Navdarshanam (Tamil Nadu, India) and gave the members space to introduce themselves and their actions. I have fond memories of the campus that followed a rule by which electricity could be consumed only to the extent generated on the campus and as a result participants were not allowed to put the projector to use. A pertinent lesson of the need to conserve resources in day-to-day lives and practice what one preached. One presentation that I found of great interest also shared the concept and benefits of allotting time for participants to reflect and ruminate in course of conservation education programs. This was pertinent for them to not only absorb the program actions but also think ahead on the lines.

2nd retreat was organized at Auroville (Tamil Nadu, India). The location provided enough fodder for thought as participants were exposed to invigorating actions that included restoration ecology program which had transformed a landscape bereft of shade and water to a forest thriving with porcupines and civets. Also eye-opening was visit to a school where solar energy, waste-segregation and recycling had been take up with students involved at each stage; hands-on learning.

Hosts and landscape.

Introduction to the host organization Keystone Foundation set up the stage for the 3rd retreat during October 2010. Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve and the Nilgiri Natural History Society were an integral part of this introduction. Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve is a fascinating ecosystem of the hill ranges of Nilgiris and its surrounding environments covering a tract of over 5,000 square kilometers. It spans the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala and includes protected areas. Formed by members of Keystone Foundation the Nilgiri Natural History Society endeavors to redefine life, nature and humanity through an ecologically sound and socially responsible value system.

Keystone Foundation's programs include livelihoods, conservation, culture and people, environmental governance and organic market development. Their projects in and around the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve include Shola restoration, honey collection–marketing and conservation education. There was a talk on bees and

honey collection. Of particular interest to me were the sloth bears (*Melursus ursinus*) that came to Keystone Campus at Kotagiri (Tamil Nadu, India) for honey. One of them was seen running away with 2 bee and honey bearing slides, one in each arm. Bee-boxes, which house these slides, have since been shifted but bears still visit the campus! Session on their conservation education program that focused on 'barefoot educators' was intriguing as well. An appealing concept, it had elders share their knowledge on medicinal plants and other wildlife as also myths - legends with younger folk in and around their villages. Oral knowledge is thus transferred to the young generation that is not as connected to the natural values of the landscape as their grand-parents. The session came to an end with elders (who had come all the way to Kotagiri) inviting the participants to their villages!

Participants went for an enthusing walk to Longwood Shola; a Reserve Forest and an Important Bird Area (Birdlife International 2010) in Kotagiri. This patch of 100 – 150 acres, located amidst tea-estates, plantations and villages, besides other species is also visited by the mega-fauna like gaur (*Bos gaurus*) and leopard (*Panthera pardus*). Organizations in Kotagiri put in time and effort towards this forest that also acts as a prime and perennial water-source for 15 villages downstream. While most Sholas currently do not boast of trees as tall; this small patch gives an idea of what the Nilgiris once were!

Visit to Bee Museum - Green Shop at Ootacamund was also organized. Participants initially saw a film by Keystone Foundation on the practice of honey collection in the landscape and its being rooted in the cultural practices titled 'Honey hunters of the Blue mountains'. This was complimented by a talk on varied aspects of the practice of honey-collection in the landscape. The museum also hosts an impressive display of posters and interactive material on wildlife species that occur in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. Participants then moved on to make purchases from the Green Shop that stores forest-honey, embroidered products by women from Toda community, products from bees-wax and other items.

Deliberations on Conservation education.

In the paragraphs below I share discussions participants had on select topics. The idea was to share experiences, agree–disagree, learn from each other and widen horizons and not to necessarily reach a definite conclusion.

Expert views.

Dr Vasavi was invited as an expert on education and her interesting talk was titled 'Elements towards ecologies of Knowledge'. It outlined the 3 pronged crises one encounters today; ecological, economic and social as also brought out the overlaps and interlinks in issues confronting conservation, education and culture. Her talk had me put across a question that has been on my radar for a while now. Why conservation education is accorded low priority even within conservation circles; this also by people who otherwise talk of it being pertinent for conservation. Her take on this was different from what little I had discussed on this. According to her most conservation practitioners today hail from a segment of the society that espouses a very urban mindset and for whom forests are still distant. Wildlife as a consequence espouses values of glamour and exotica. As a result of this higher weightage is

accorded to being with and around wildlife as opposed to indulging in education and awareness action with other segments of the society.

Curriculum.

An issue deliberated more than once was the fashion in which conservation education should be a part of the academic curriculum. Either it could be a separate subject in itself or by way of 'greening' of existing curriculum. Making conservation education a separate subject confers upon it desired space and design while the argument against making it a separate subject is the often quoted line that students (and their teachers) are already bogged down with a subject too many and the fresh subject (for them) is akin to an additional task forced upon them. The parallel fear being that of it being reduced to marks - grades by virtue of being a part of the system. Greening of all subjects, in other words inculcating issues environment related issues across the board, overcomes some of these issues but the argument against this approach is perhaps more severe. Larger politics of education have tuned it towards development read as dams, markets, shares, job-worthiness etc. This development by its very character has no space for nature for its own sake and conservation as a corollary will be such as suits the development paradigm of the day. Gruenewald (2004) goes a step ahead to challenge that environmental education will be ineffective in advancing its own goal of creating an environmentally or ecologically literate (Orr, 1992) citizenry as long as it continues to discipline itself within the norms of general education.

As an off-shoot of the deliberations above a discussion took shape on conservation education books for children. I harbour a feeling that the impact authors and publishers of these books claim is highly over-rated. Resource material including books are a crucial component of conservation education programs but to state that text-books for conservation education necessarily bring in desired impact appears somewhat far-fetched. I wonder if publishing the book is an end in itself or focus and energies on feedback from teachers, interactions with teachers and students who would work with these books form integral constituents of the process that brings out these books. As I write I recall a function we had at Baghmara (Meghalaya, India) where one of the actions was to distribute books in Garo language. These books lay in the store-room of our partner agency for a couple of years. This may be an aberration but these books in no way replace the role that interactions play.

Communications.

Members faced challenges when interacting with different segments of the society and a session had been planned on 'Communication strategies for different audiences'. Segments discussed included youth-associations, students, teachers, forest-department staff, personnel from non-government organizations, members of self-help groups, religious-bodies and volunteers. As participants shared their experiences from diverse situations across the country their co-participants chipped in with questions and comments. These deliberations touched issues that include:

- A. Communications; dire need to pay more attention to, which could also lead to separate strategy for each section of the audience.
- B. Investing in time; for nurturing relationships and trust as also to understand the nuances associated with location and stakeholders.

- C. Marketing; need to sell the concept of conservation education.
- D. Explore fresh avenues; possibilities of roles media could play to strengthen the cause or impact one to one interactions would have.

Blogs are an interesting tool for communication and the participants planned for a session on blogs in lieu of one that could not be held due to unavoidable circumstances. Blog of a member was discussed threadbare during the session at the end of which a fresh blog was created for another member. Most of those present seemed to agree that blog could play a pivot in process-documentation of their efforts. Questions on creation and maintenance of a blog were discussed; these include:

- A. Upload; can all files be uploaded on a blog; be they image files, music files or video files?
- B. Access; can access to blog be restricted? Do search engines pick up blog posts?
- C. Comments; could comments could be made by anybody? Was it possible to control them? Are they are seen by all visitors to blog?
- D. Presentation; can template of the blog be changed? How many posts can be seen on the home page?
- E. External products; what kind of external products are put on a blog? What is their utility? Are they free?

Values.

Another question I had was on Keystone Foundation's program that concerns bee-keeping and honey-marketing. Genesis of this lay in my discussion with colleagues earlier during the year where we discussed conserving nature for nature's sake, with the belief that all living beings had an equal right to life, and Saneesh's (Keystone Foundation personnel and group-member) talk during the 2nd retreat. He had shared of the dilemma he faced when elders asked him why he tells them not to hunt other wildlife species when he helps them in extracting and selling honey from bees; wild bees. I wondered if these are double-standards espoused by us conservation practitioners. Are we going to help the elders if their cultural practices consist of extracting tiger (*Panthera tigris*) skin for example? Are we deciding (for ourselves and others) what we will conserve and what we will consume?

Feedback on 2010 and suggestions for 2011 retreat.

The penultimate day had a session where participants put in their views on their experiences at the 3rd and their expectations from the 4th retreat.

- A. Talk by the invited expert was considered inspiring and discussion on communication strategies very relevant; it was suggested that the topics take a step ahead in the forthcoming retreat.
- B. Keystone Foundation's programs were deemed innovative and well organized and it was also observed that as an off-shoot of organizing retreat the host agency personnel got to interact with network members.

- C. The retreat was also regarded as an eye-opener that enabled one to interact with like-minded people and gain access to resources that otherwise would be difficult.
- D. Suggestions came forth to include field visits to conservation education projects in action as also activity based learning program depending on the venue of the next retreat.

Links.

Bee museum; <http://nnhs.in/beemuseum/>

Blog discussed; <http://mizoram-samrakshan.blogspot.com/>

Keystone foundation; <http://keystone-foundation.org/>

Longwood Shola; <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/sitefactsheet.php?id=18394>

Nilgiri Natural History Society; <http://nnhs.in/>

Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve; <http://www.nilgiribiospherereserve.com/>

Shola; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shola>

Sullivan's cottage; <http://www.sullivanmemorial.org/>

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Gruenewald, David A. 2004. *A Foucauldian Analysis of Environmental Education : Toward the Socioecological Challenge of the Earth Charter*, Curriculum Inquiry 34:1, 71 -107.

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