

Conservation of biodiversity and its communication*

A conference centred on the theme of biodiversity was organized by the National Centre for Science Communicators and Vigyan Prasar. Both these organizations are involved in science outreach and popularization through various media and platforms.

The programme included sessions on biodiversity in agriculture, conservation strategy, role of science communicators and presentations by students on their biodiversity projects. R. N. Ray (NCSTC Network, Bhubaneswar), in his talk on the role of student engagement in biodiversity conservation, observed that there is a lack of practical knowledge and awareness about biodiversity. Madhav Gadgil (Agharkar Research Institute, Pune) counselled that student projects can be made socially relevant if, for example, they hypothesize and prove that an environmental impact assessment (EIA) has been distorted in a particular region.

The keynote address by Gadgil highlighted the 'see no evil, talk no evil, hear no evil' stance of current EIAs. He advised that EIAs must be considered as genuine scientific exercises and 'must, like all science, be open to public scrutiny; should be firmly anchored onto the bedrock of facts; must deal with the whole system, eschewing a narrow sectoral approach; should be conducted as objective, impartial exercises; and not degenerate into exercises of pleading some special interests'. Shalini Sharma (The Institution of Engineers, Hyderabad) suggested that some changes are needed in EIAs, including greater transparency, more stringent public hearing and thorough assessment for expansion of any project.

Utilizing the skills of people by engaging them in activities such as fruit processing has helped empower rural people in Uttarakhand. This strategy of the use of technology coupled with rural wisdom



Posters exhibited at the conference venue by Vigyan Prasar.

was shared by A. P. Joshi (Himalayan Environmental Studies and Conservation Organization, Dehradun). Rupesh Gaikwad (Institute of Chemical Technology, Mumbai) highlighted the positive use of nuclear technology in agriculture for better crop production. He expressed that the media associates nuclear technology with the Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Chernobyl disasters and ignores reporting the positive uses. R. Gopichandran (Research, Innovation and Incubation Centre, Gandhinagar) put forth three propositions: (i) a scientifically-driven approach in agriculture, (ii) determination of ways to mitigate global warming due to agriculture, and (iii) environmental education and communication to become a part of science.

T. N. C. Vidya (Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research, Bangalore) traced the evolutionary history of the movement patterns of elephants. Aparajita Datta (Nature Conservation Foundation, Mysore) talked on hunting of wildlife and the 'empty forest syndrome' in Arunachal Pradesh. A better understanding of the motivations for hunting, community involvement and awareness is required, she concluded. S. Shivaji (Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, Hyderabad) highlighted the advantages of genetic methods in the conservation of fauna.

Two films by Shekar Dattatri (freelance filmmaker) were screened as examples of the use of the film medium to effectively communicate messages on biodiversity conservation. In his talk, Dattatri stressed the importance of an emotional connection with the audience. Bal Phondke (former editor, *Science Today*) indicated the radical changes in the print medium and emphasized the need to inform the audience about the various dimensions that underlie biodiversity.

Anuj Sinha (Vigyan Prasar, New Delhi) noted that the presence of science in the media is minor and though media sensationalizes news, journalists are a door to science for the public. D. Balasubramanian (L. V. Prasad Eye Institute, Hyderabad) compared science communication in India and abroad as being a one-way and a two-way street respectively. In India, it is usually an academician or a media-person who 'lectures', whereas in Germany or the US, the demand from the public is fed by science communicators who already have the relevant background, a spectrum of knowledge or at least appreciation. He pointed out that good science communicators weave science into everyday things.

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