

## Sandesh Kadir



Sandesh Kadir with his camera gear in Agumbe while filming *Secrets of the King Cobra*. Photo courtesy: [www.felis.in](http://www.felis.in)

*Sandesh* in Hindi means ‘message’. True to his name, Sandesh Kadir uses his photographic skills to narrate stories and helps propagate the message of wildlife conservation to a larger audience. A wildlife biologist by training, Kadir is a highly acclaimed filmmaker and has been bestowed with both national and international awards for his films. His first book, *Sahyadris: India’s Western Ghats, A Vanishing Heritage* was a well-received coffee-table book which highlighted the need to conserve an endangered mountain ecosystem. His recent documentary for National Geographic, *Secrets of Wild India: Elephant Kingdom* received the Best Television Series award at the International Wildlife Film Festival earlier this year in Missoula, Montana. This conversation over a cup of coffee soon after the screening of *Elephant Kingdom* (Box 1) at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore unravels his passion for filming wildlife and the urgent need of ‘communication for conservation’.

*A fascinated young boy...*

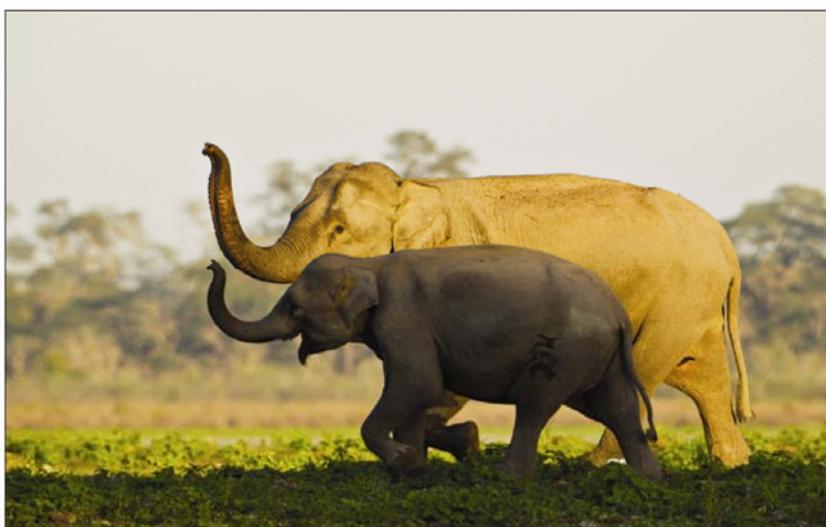
As a 14 year old, I loved drawing and spent most of my time making sketches. At the same time I liked being close to

nature and spent my days and nights in the field. It was my early childhood curiosity that generated my interest in natural history later. My father allowed me the use of his camera. It was an old manual camera which I used as a documenting

tool, clicking the world around me. Before I went out with it, my father told me, ‘set the camera at F5.6 on a cloudy day and adjust to F11 on sunny days’. With as little information as that I used my camera to document everything from

### Box 1. Documentary review: *Elephant Kingdom*\*

Kadir’s documentary, *Elephant Kingdom* is a story about the unique ecosystem that surrounds Kaziranga National Park located along the Brahmaputra floodplain in North East India. The documentary meticulously weaves short stories on life in the jungle. The story revolves around a mother elephant and her newly born calf whose survival (drought, fire and flood) has been narrated by Sir David Attenborough in his magical voice.



An elephant herd sniffs the air while walking onto the banks of Sohola Bheel in Kaziranga National Park. Photo courtesy: Sandesh Kadir.

Kaziranga is one of a handful of places remaining, that endangered one-horned rhinoceroses call home. A 2 min sequence of the dung beetle rolling the rhino dung ball has been beautifully captured. As a cinematographer, Kadir has done a remarkable job. The short stories and sequences captivate the viewer’s attention throughout the 44 min 59 s of the film. The incredibly rich landscape of Kaziranga is home to great herds of giant grazers – Asian elephants, wild buffalo and the one-horned rhinoceros which dominate these plains. This region is also home to the Royal Bengal tiger and the world’s largest venomous snake – the king cobra.

The Brahmaputra is one of the world’s greatest rivers, making its way through Tibet into India to enrich the forest grasslands with nutrients. The ecosystem captured over six months shows life during drought, fire and flood. The film is informative and helps convey the urgent need to conserve our forest cover.

For more details visit: <http://www.sandeshkadir.com>

\*Based on the film screening organized by the Students’ Association, Centre for Ecological Sciences in the new Biological Sciences Building Auditorium at Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore on 10 May 2012.

a bird to a grasshopper. Gradually, my love for the camera grew.

*What did you study and when did you start as a wildlife photographer?*

During school, biology interested me the most, but later on I got forced into the mainstream. My family sent me to the US to study hotel management. This was not what I wanted to do. But being in the US gave me a lot of freedom to explore my love for wildlife and photography. A brief stay in the US expanded my view of the world and made me realize that I could actually build a career in photography and documentary filmmaking. I started with three jobs while in college – a photojournalist at the college news paper, a laboratory assistant for my research station in Mexico (Gorgas Science Foundation) during the weekdays and on the weekends I worked at a sanctuary called the Sabal Palm Grove. I earned my first camera, a Nikon N6006 out of these jobs. All three jobs were interconnected.

It was also the time when not much wildlife photography was done and the epitome was the *National Geographic Magazine*. The pictures fascinated me and I dreamt of doing something of that scale. At that time (early 90s) internet was in its infancy, so it was difficult to get direction about where to go. With no direction I felt like a frog in the well, as there was no interaction with the outer world.

*Your first assignment...*

Around 1998–99, I was the President of the student science club, The Gorgas Science Society at the University of Texas/Texas Southmost College in Brownsville. We raised enough money to get 20 students to India. This was the time I dropped out of college because my college gave me an opportunity to shoot a documentary as an apprentice to John Bax, a well-respected 70-year-old documentary filmmaker. Unfortunately, John backed out at the last moment. My Director, Lawrence Lof asked me if I'd like to continue with the documentary on my own. I was a young lad (19 years) and at that age, if someone asks if you can swim across the Atlantic, you'll probably say yes. And I said, 'Yes' (smiles). I had no experience and was naïve to the world of videography. Digital video was new and had recently arrived in the market.

We came to India and shot, but while editing in the US, I realized that I had used my video camera for capturing fantastic static shots like how you would typically use a still camera. I had missed out on the element of motion in video. Though the compositions were good I failed to use video to build sequences and tell stories. It was only when I started editing that I learned to be a storyteller. I had to learn everything on my own as there was nobody to tell me my mistakes.

*Did you take a course to hone your photography skills?*

No, I do not have a formal training in photography, but I am a technology geek and love learning new technology. The video camera (brand new) arrived the day I was leaving for India. On the entire flight back to India I read the instruction manual. I had never used a video camera before. I was thrown into a situation where I had to step up to the plate. So I started learning about the camera in and out.

*On travel and wildlife*

I started off even before photography. I was always interested in nature, wildlife and natural history even as a kid. I maintained that curiosity in photography and natural history. I think if I was not given a camera, I would have become a wildlife researcher.

*On being a cameraman versus other roles*

I like being behind the camera. As a cameraman I need not worry about scripting, editing or related jobs which allows me the interrupted joy of immersing myself in the wilderness.

*On being a writer*

I lost half my hair while writing my first book. It takes a lot of mental power, concentration, focus and time to write. It takes a lot of effort to bring research elements into it. For instance, to write captions (150 words) a lot of information has to be put in for a popular audience to understand. But I enjoyed the experience thoroughly. Now I'm writing my second book, again a coffee-table book about the Eastern Himalaya with Kamal Bawa, my co-author.

*Do you script first and then shoot or vice versa?*

For a wildlife photographer, opportunities are rare. And when it comes you have to capture it depending on which the script can be altered. Script is an outline to drape your story on. It is easy to include a mini story in the larger story and you can have many stories in one entire documentary. You should be opportunistic and not be tied down to a script.

*How important is it to merge scientific knowledge and filmmaking?*

Symbiosis is required between researchers and filmmakers. My first book came out in association with the President of the Bangalore-based Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), Kamaljit S. Bawa, who is also a Distinguished Professor of Biology at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Moreover, almost all the documentaries by Sir David Attenborough are based on decades of work by scientists. As filmmakers we can help take a researcher's work to a different level and spread the message to a wider audience. I like building such collaborations.

Scientist + filmmaker = winning combination (I can't remember who said this, but it's certainly true!).

*Challenges faced*

I do not feel working in adverse conditions to be a challenge. The real challenge lies in getting the permits, permissions, etc. At times a shoot gets cancelled because we fail to get permissions. Atop there are rules to abide. For example, Indian laws are uniform. While shooting at Kaziranga, we faced the difficulty of entering the national park. The rules read morning 6 to evening 6. However, the sun rises here at 4 a.m. It is crucial to be in the park at dawn to get the best light and also the best behaviour. Working in parks in other countries, the rule reads sunrise to sunset. It is during this time that you may get the rarest glimpse of the forest and you cannot afford to miss it. So it is very important to establish a working relationship with the park managers and rangers so that they allow you to work with maximum efficiency. Rest is trivial, like leeches, rain and food.

## IN CONVERSATION

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A rhinoceros wallowing at dawn in a bheel in Kaziranga National Park. This was shot during filming for the documentary, 'North-eastern Diaries Chapter 1: Kaziranga – Land of the Rhino and the Tiger'.

While shooting *Elephant Kingdom*, the most challenging sequence was to shoot the rhino dung sequence and looking for the dung beetle. It was only in April that the beetle appeared. This is less than a 2 min sequence in the film.

### *Upcoming projects – documentaries or books?*

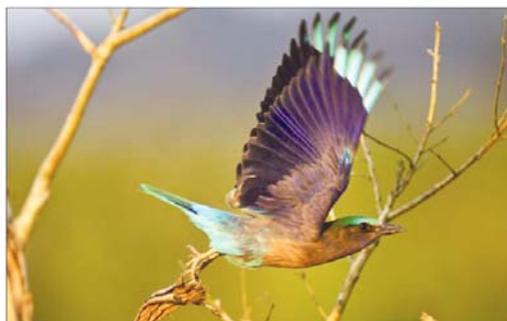
I just finished working on a documentary on clouded leopards, which I believe should be screened soon. Apart from it, we (Bawa and I) are working on a coffee-table book, *Himalaya: Mountains of Life*, highlighting the biodiversity of the Eastern Himalaya due in fall 2012 (October).

### *Tips for wildlife photographers and amateurs*

My only piece of advice to all nature lovers is to not restrict your love of nature and the natural world to tigers or narrow down your approach to only seeing and photographing the Big-Five. We are lucky to be in India where we have many species at our doorsteps. There is no need to rush to places like Bandipur, Nagarhole, Kanha and other popular



Tiger – Nagarhole National Park. Photo courtesy: Sandesh Kadir.



Indian roller takes flight – Kaziranga National Park. Photo courtesy: Sandesh Kadir.

national parks. I would like to encourage photographers to see with new eyes and spread out to places where people have not been before to reduce the pressure of tourism. This will allow for photographic documentation of new areas and highlight the importance of places often neglected while taking the pressure off from the more popular places. There's a whole new world out there apart from tigers, leopards and elephants. I'd encourage photographers to explore new places, look through a macro lens and highlight the beauty and importance of preserving the lesser known places and species.

### *On conservation, message for all*

All of us can do our part and what each one of us can do is to alter our lifestyles slightly and do small things like save electricity, water, fuel, etc. – reduce, reuse, recycle. Jane Goodall says it best – 'Together we can save the world.' She means that there should be a domino effect.

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