

## A congregation of young conservation scientists\*

Student Conference on Conservation Science–Bangalore (SCCS-BNG) is an annual event aimed at facilitating exchange of research ideas, methods and networking in the field of conservation science. A sister conference of SCCS-Cambridge, it is organized by the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bangalore, National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS), Bangalore and Madras Crocodile Bank Trust (MCBT), Chennai. SCCS-BNG focuses on bringing together students from South and Southeast Asia and Africa. More than 80 student presentations, 45 workshops, 8 plenaries, including 4 public talks were organized as a part of SCCS-BNG 2013 held recently. With over 300 participants from 14 different countries, this conference was bigger and better than those in the previous years.

Lectures were delivered by globally renowned conservation biologists on many different topics. Nigel J. Collar (BirdLife International, Cambridge, UK) delivered the Ravi Sankaran Memorial Lecture instituted in the memory of the late conservation biologist Ravi Sankaran of the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History. The talk ‘Inglorious bustards’ focused on the plight of the Great Indian Bustard (GIB; *Ardeotis nigriceps*), a critically endangered grassland bird. Collar drew examples from the research done on other bustard species found globally and the lessons one can learn from these to conserve the GIB. The main threat to the bustard species found around the world is habitat loss. Conversion of grasslands into agricultural or pastoral lands or plantations has negatively influenced bustard populations globally. The key to saving the GIB from becoming extinct is by conserving its habitat, as captive breeding and re-introduction programmes are expensive and not always successful. Patricia Wright (Stony Brook University, New York, USA) spoke on the efforts made

by her team to conserve the fauna and flora of Madagascar. An island country, Madagascar has a unique biodiversity not found elsewhere. Wright spoke on her research on lemurs – the unique group of primates found only in Madagascar, and the challenges they face in conserving the species and its habitat.

Romulus Whitaker (MCBT), the ‘reptile man’ of India provided a personal insight of his long journey as a conservationist with its many twists and turns. MCBT is the country’s first reptile park, which has now graduated to be one of the very few centres of research in the field of herpetology. Nirmal Kulkarni (Mhadei Research Centre and Wildernd Nature Resort, Goa) spoke about his team’s efforts in securing the future of Goa’s wildlife by preserving forested private lands to act as corridors for wildlife. Kay Holekamp (Michigan State University, USA) spoke on the effects of anthropogenic activities on the behaviour of wild carnivores based on her research on spotted hyenas (*Crocuta crocuta*) in the savannahs of the Masai Mara Nature Reserve and Amboseli National Park, Kenya. Wolfgang Dittus (Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, USA) delivered a talk titled ‘Demography: a window to the evolution of primate societies’ based on his 45-year long behavioural study on the primates of Sri Lanka, especially on the toque macaque (*Macaca sinica*). He touched upon the issues related to paternity and inbreeding avoidance and conservation. T. N. C. Vidya (JNCASR, Bangalore) spoke on the behavioural and social organizations of elephant herds in South India. The Indian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) like its African counterpart, lives in herds with a matriarchal hierarchy. Herds usually consist of closely related females and their young, whereas the young males form bachelor herds and the adult males prefer to roam alone. Vidya’s talk focused on the associations, behaviour and genetic relations of Indian elephants in order to understand social organization and dominance relationships. Wayne M. Getz (Berkeley School of Mathematics, University of California, USA) spoke on the research done by his team on

anthrax epidemiology in zebra, elephant and springbok in Etosha National Park, Namibia.

SCCS-BNG 2013 also premiered a documentary titled ‘Chilika – Jewel of Odisha’ by Shekar Dattari, showcasing the story of Chilika, Asia’s largest salt-water lagoon on the east coast of India. Home to the Irrawady dolphins and numerous migratory birds like greater and lesser flamingos, pintails and shovelers, Chilika lake is a treasure trove to a unique assemblage of biodiversity. The documentary touches upon the prevailing conservation issues like over-fishing and unregulated dolphin tourism, which threaten the existence of the numerous water bird species and the rare Irrawady dolphins.

Apart from the lectures by renowned conservationists, 45 workshops were organized by experts working on multiple issues and disciplines in conservation science. Workshops such as Basic GIS and remote sensing, Data consultation, Freshwater biology: concepts and techniques, etc. aimed at honing the skills of the participants in their chosen fields.

Student talks and poster presentations were among main focus of the conference. Students from 14 different countries presented their work. Prizes consisting of cash awards, magazine subscriptions and selected books on conservation were awarded for the five best oral presentations and three best poster presentations.

A session on ‘Who’s who in conservation’ was also organized. This session provided a platform for the conservation agencies, including NGOs, research institutions and university departments to showcase their work and an opportunity for the conference participants to learn about the work of these agencies as well as discuss possible career opportunities and collaborative work.

The organizers and members of the advisory committee hope to receive and present more studies relating to the social aspects of conservation science in the future conferences.

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