

Linking kids and conservation: some thoughts on the vacation training programme

In urban areas the most convenient way to relate with nature, especially among urban kids is to watch 'nature television' or during the occasional visit to a zoo or national park. To make kids aware of nature and its conservation, 'environmental education' courses are included in the curricula, but the way these are taught has however been deplorable, with no connection to the real environment. Introducing students to bio-resources conservation at the secondary school level in a semi-structured but non-formal ambience with activities that promote observations, interactions and learning is needed to excite young minds towards conservation of our natural resources. Non-destructive field-based activities need to be designed and students made to observe nature, ask questions about what they see, discuss with scientists, elders and peers. Such activities also need to focus on the environment that the students are exposed to and provide opportunities for them to engage and relate with it.

The vacation training programme (VTP) on bio-resources, a national programme funded by the Department of Biotechnology, New Delhi, attempted to inculcate learning about our natural resources for school-leaving students as early as

2002. This interactive programme runs for three to four weeks during summer vacation in several cities in India. Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) at Bangalore, has been conducting this programme since its inception in 2002. The programme was designed to facilitate interactive learning by providing an informal environment that not only provokes questioning, but also provides opportunities to acquire attitudes, values and skills needed to protect and improve the natural environment.

This course which has been running in several places throughout the country has proved to be an eye-opener to the students in cities and surrounding areas. The children are directly in contact with experts from various fields. It gives them an opportunity to learn hands-on, about disciplines about which they only had a theoretical and textbook understanding. Children can explore laboratories, forests and other places which expose them to real-life situations and the challenges one faces to solve problems in the conservation of our bio-resources. VTP therefore helps students look at problems and issues from a very fresh and unbiased perspective. It also helps build team spirit and at the end of a course all the

students want to work together and find solutions to problems that the society is facing like traffic and green spaces, solid waste management, etc.

Over the last several years over 100 students have attended the programme. While some students have taken up courses in environmental science and related subjects, many are finding their own ways to create awareness in their residential areas or institutions. It is not necessary that all students will become scientists, but the programme does make them think about the importance of environment and bio-resources in our lives, no matter what profession or course they choose. This may be a small step, but a cost-effective initiative by the Government that provides a platform to create young conservation champions who will be future guardians of our environment and would ultimately reach out to the larger community to conserve our bio-resources.

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