

Taking botany to masses: a certificate course in field botany

The Agharkar Research Institute (ARI), Pune, under the aegis of the Maharashtra Association for Cultivation of Science (MACS), is a vibrant research institution financially supported by the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India. MACS, besides conducting research in the frontier areas of pure and applied sciences through ARI, also aims to reach out to the masses through its several science popularization programmes. The outreach programmes mediate opportunities for sensitizing common people to efforts in science so that they begin to appreciate novel ideas and associate events in informed ways. One such activity initiated by MACS in collaboration with Nisargsevak, a Pune-based NGO, is a comprehensive learning package for amateur plant lovers. The course titled 'Certificate course in field botany' is an orientation for enthusiasts who have an inclination to knowing and understanding our rich plant world. This course is coordinated by the botany group of ARI.

Pune has been the cultural capital of Maharashtra. In the past decades, it has also emerged as a knowledge hub with the booming of information technology along with several educational activities and movements. There has been an ever-increasing number of amateur enthusiasts who are conscious about environmental issues, concerns of biodiversity and conservation, which is a welcome trend. A number of activities are organized by local groups and NGOs concerning various aspects of the environment, which include film festivals, informative lectures by distinguished guests, discussion groups, tree walks, plantation drives, etc. The most popular activity 'Vriksh parichay' (introduction to trees), was first initiated by late V. D. Vartak, MACS, in the late seventies, now fre-

quently being organized by many voluntary organizations in and around the suburbs of Pune. The city itself is still blessed with a balanced combination of exotic and indigenous flora in the gardens, along the roadsides and hilly areas around. Many places projected as potential sites for eco-tourism are located in and around Pune, providing rich glimpses of the plant diversity in the Western Ghats and its surroundings. Such programmes consistently receive an overwhelming response from the participants. The involvement of people in such programmes and environmental movements is a reflection of their interest in flora and fauna of the city and its vicinity. This has resulted in valuable outcomes for both the academic world as well as the society. Evidences of these can be noted in the recently published books, CDs and educational materials from various agencies in Pune. The high demand for these materials is a testament to the overwhelming response from a large receptive audience. All these developments point to the growing appreciation of efforts towards creating awareness about biodiversity conservation, and a feel for the environment from different sectors of the society.

To nurture the interest of amateurs, a 'Certificate course in field botany' has been offered by MACS in collaboration with Nisargsevak from 2007 for four consecutive years. This course is primarily aimed to introduce people to the richness of plant diversity found in surrounding areas. Lecture sessions are designed to cover fundamental topics concerning morphology, classification of plants and ecology required for understanding the flora and vegetation. Practical sessions are organized following theory for easy understanding of the various parts of the plants, structural organization of floral

parts and diversity therein. Participants are taken to different locations covering a variety of habitats and forest types in Pune and its surroundings to acquaint them with the native flora. Since the course is offered by an academic institution and is carefully structured, it has received tremendous response from a wide range of participants. The appeal of the course can be gauged from the eclectic background of participants who pursue the course. The course has had Ayurvedic practitioners, doctors, photographers, trekkers, landscape developers, teachers, botany lecturers, policy makers and environmentalists. More than 250 people have benefitted from this course till now.

The above developments come as a pleasing relief to a global concern of biodiversity diminishing at an alarming rate, especially in our urban habitats. Efforts towards conservation of natural resources and effective management of our biodiversity acknowledge the significance of contributions from such local initiatives towards sensitization and conservation of our biodiversity. This course stands out not just as an effort towards creating awareness among people, but also assuring transfer of authentic knowledge in meaningful and channelled ways to a passionate audience. It is also hoped that this initiative, in the long run, will contribute towards building momentum for people's participation in environmental conservation without compromising on academic rigour and our rich wealth of knowledge inherited over generations.

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