

Bandipur Beckons

ILLUSTRATED MONTHLY NEWSPAPER



Share your experiences in Bandipur

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Bandipur Beckons

Bandipur, a fraction of the Indian forest-land, once used by bullock-cart owners to repair their carts, was also haven for sandalwood smugglers, living along with a diverse set of tribes, wildlife and a vibrant landscape.

Nobody seemed to know Bandipur more than any other 'green patch' on the Indian map, until 1972 when it became one among the nine tiger-reserves under the Project Tiger initiative of the Indian government. The declaration of the Bandipur Tiger Reserve was possible only after relocating the human settlements from inside the allocated Bandipur National Park. It eventually took the government around 20 years to realise that the set of people who were still living on the fringes of the National Park continued degrading the protected natural habitat, due to the increased demand for timber, firewood and other forest products by the ever-growing human mass. To solve this, the government came up with a set of ecotourism guidelines which mainly focussed on providing alternate livelihood to these people, so that they do not further impose pressure on the forest.

This is where I enter the Bandipur-scape. The thirst for working in an area which is home to a vivid wildlife scenario, along with an attractive remuneration to work as a professional naturalist, brought me from 2000 kilometres, only to see a pair of leopards crossing the road at noon, on the very first day that I reached Bandipur.



Photo Courtesy: Sukanta Das

The eagerness to experience nature at its purest form and wildlife getting wilder, kept me venturing into the wilderness again and again. Every time, there is something new that I experience and learn, provided I had patience and respect for nature, which she deserves. I rediscovered my interest in understanding behaviour of wild animals and finding new facts from day-to-day observations became new most favourite business. Storing the track road map in mind was perhaps the biggest challenge as I and my driver were both new to the tourism zone of Bandipur. (Contd on Page 2)

ALARM CALL

Bandipur Beckons is an endeavour to bring you the ensemble of life around the Bandipur National Park, where the landscape is represented by a matrix of thick undisturbed forest, which is home to diverse floral and faunal assemblage, quite frequently interspersed with habitat threatened by human activities, eventually endangering the inhabitant wildlife. This, perhaps broadly describes the scenario in and around any other National Park in the country.

This e-news-letter will be solely dedicated to bring about the dynamic man-nature interaction in Bandipur National Park. The focus of this journey would not only be on wildlife conservation but also to emote the essence of this vibrant ecosystem called Bandipur. We are a host of people to whom Bandipur is an integral part of our lives. This e-newsletter would not only be a mouthpiece and a forum that would bring forth the truth from the ground realities but also celebrate the spirit of it.

This is our humble effort to reach out to more people and showcase the uniqueness of this Eden. We also strive to make people appreciate the nature more, through this newsletter. Bandipur has more to it than just the diverse wildlife. Here we would also like to share the culture and stories of people whose lives are intertwined with nature.

Following are the specific goals that we aim to achieve through the subsequent monthly publications of Bandipur Beckons.

Goals

1. To portray the day-to-day stories of the land where wildlife thrives alongside relatively dense villages, as well as under tremendous pressure from tourism – a landscape approach
2. To portray the stories of the lives of such people who survive in the land of the leopard and the elephant, with constant conflict, but still remains protective about their natural heritage – an anthropocentric approach
3. To portray the story of threats faced by the rich flora and fauna of the place, with particular emphasis on the species that are generally neglected, as well as those potential threats to wildlife that are usually taken for granted – a wildlife-centric approach
4. To take Bandipur as a case study, document the chief factors plaguing the stakeholders of this landscape, and provide a template for the rest of the similar areas.
5. To unravel the other face of Bandipur: Bandipur is not only about tigers and elephants and gaurs and wild dogs. These enigmatic animals put Bandipur on the world-map, no doubt, but the rich cultural heritage, diverse ethnic groups, local rituals and beliefs, that centre around the forest and its animals needs to reach the world, in order to spread the awareness how traditional knowledge can be used as a tool to get back to our roots and encourage people's participation in conserving our natural treasure.

BANDIPUR BECKONS TEAM

'Let nature take its course'

Often as revelers and as 'holidayers', people leave their sensible sides behind and are happy to do without it. The condition of many tourists visiting Bandipur is more or less the same. Their focus is solely concentrated in making their holiday picture perfect, which is often at the cost of the wildlife.

A single visit to the national park is enough to sample the ignorance of most tourists. The National park resembles a City during the holiday season with holidayers taking several rules for granted. Many go to the extent of asking for directions towards the nearest swing assuming that the National Park is just like any other amusement park.



However what is amazing is the general insensitivity towards the nature and wildlife people often exhibit.

Using the flash to take pictures of a languid tiger taking a fill at a nearby water hole or munching chips and very conveniently getting rid of it inside the National Park are only some instances that can be quoted to testify the insensitivity.

The jungle is just a get away for the city dwellers, perhaps a holiday which gives them the much needed relief sans any responsibility, hence this behaviour. A slight admonish from a nature lover may turn out to be detrimental as the city dweller has the cheek to turn back and ask you to mind your own business. (Contd on Pg 3)

Where destiny meets dreams

Bandipur is a perfect confluence of destiny and dream for me. My tryst with Bandipur started around 20 years back, when I was a child, merely five years old.

During a late evening drive across the Mysore-Ooty Highway, our car ran out of fuel, leaving us stranded in the middle of the forest at the mercy of nature. It was a full moon night and nature played tricks with us. The moonlight hood winked us to believe that behind every shadow lurked a secret, consumed by the sounds of millions of crickets, startled by the occasional hooting of an owl, we prayed for the best, while we prepared for the worst. Even the few vehicles passing by us refused to help. After hours of being stranded within the forest limits, a truck-driver passing-by proved to be our blessing in disguise. He agreed to lend us some fuel to salvage the situation.

We headed back to the camp and on the way, met a huge camp-elephant – a tusker in the middle of the road. Nervous and irritated of our untimely presence, it charged at us. All these incidents in the minds of a small child experiencing a forest for the first time in his life, made him promise, in broken words in my aunt's ears, that "I shall never again visit a jungle", as she held me tight with the touch of assurance.

Now, after two decades, with a camera on my back, I frequent this green Eden as much as I can and even a day away from Bandipur seems like an eternity-such is the irony of life!

As a nature lover and a wildlife photographer, this place has given me the springboard to achieve my dreams. Bandipur attracts me philosophically, creatively and silently. Today at the helm of my youth, I realize this is the place which instils the feeling in me of being free and complete. Bandipur is not just about the rich wildlife, the people here also play an extremely crucial part to make it so special for me. The smiling face of the villagers conveys the message as appropriately as the local language would have. I happened to make many friends here who have helped me develop a comfort zone which makes me feel completely at home here.

You are never lonely in Bandipur, even if you are alone. Even when I am penning down my thoughts in a friend's research station, a Chital's alarm call breaks the silence of the night, as the passing cloud wraps the moon, dropping the curtains of the night.

ABHIROOP GHOSH DASTIDAR



Photo Courtesy: Abhiroop Ghosh Dastidar

Bandipur Beckons

From Page 1: My geo-locating device was a great help and I started recording the whole track road on it, which literally showed me path on rainy days! Language being the next constraint, the only directions that I could provide to my driver was either 'left' or 'right', or in some cases 'go straight'! Finally, together with the assistance of my driver, and other Forest Department staff, I mastered navigation inside the park with relative ease.

Among innumerable unforgettable experiences that I faced inside the Park, some of them definitely get etched in my mind forever. The time when we were charged by a herd of elephants, I, first time in my life perhaps, experienced mind-numbing moment, only to realise later, that it was a 'mock-charge'. No matter how 'mock' a charge from an elephant is, it still remains an elephant-charge! It is not that all the mysteries and adventures lie only inside the park. The fringes are also equally full of surprises that include the variety of snakes that venture into human habitation in search of frogs and mice. In terms of visual delight, topper of the list is when I saw a male and a female tiger with four cubs along with them, all in spot in August 2009, feasting over a sambar-deer kill. It is moments like this that I chose Bandipur, or rather, sometimes I sense that Bandipur has chosen me instead!



Photo Courtesy: Sukanta Das

All these encounters were part of my job but what made it seem at home were the people of Bandipur. It was rather easy to read their minds as their simplicity was unmatched. They helped me learn to speak Kannada in no more than six months and accepted me within their social-circle without any hesitance. They were happy to share their experiences and stories, which in turn helped me, understanding Bandipur from a whole new perspective.

With all its beauty and glamour, Bandipur National Park and its adjacent areas, which have been declared as eco-sensitive zones, stands firm as one of the best potential sites where the Indian tiger can have a safer home. However, it is threatened by many factors, one of the most overlooked ones being the deteriorating water-table. The surface water stocks in waterholes and large water-bodies have reduced drastically over the last few decades and the underground water-table continues to go down every year. This is caused mainly by collection of sand and stones from the dried-out streams during dry seasons. This, to my mind, seems to be most important threat to the landscape of Bandipur, even more than habitat-loss or poaching. Immediate reforestation measures at permissible areas maybe an immediate answer to slow down the degradation of this habitat, which calls for immediate awareness campaigns amongst the youth and children of the society. I am happy to have dedicated my life towards achieving such a goal, and continue to get mesmerised by Bandipur every single day!

SUKANTA DAS

Bandipur to me

It has been over 20 years since I first came to Bandipur and five since I made Dhole's Den my home. Making it a home has been a long journey for me, let me share with you some details which have so far been known only among a close group of friends.

Having travelled the length and breadth of India and after residing in an alien land for 12 long years, I was convinced that I was not going to let my roots find a firm ground in Europe. I had never really left India thus chancing upon Bandipur was more like a homecoming to me. I came to Bandipur with an idea of finding my roots in a place where I haven't lived earlier. However I must admit that it did not seem like a strange land at all. Although the people spoke a different tongue and the environs were wilder than the city life I had led so far, it was simply adventurous from the very onset.

Eventually I made a home out of Bandipur and it was finally finding a place where nature manifested itself in all its glory. Bandipur still retains the essence of the wild which rules the place and have not yet succumbed to human control. There is a whiff of fresh air here that does not come through the air-conditioner and does not have a propeller that gives it a push, but is laced with the smell of earth, truth, and at times, wild. Bandipur has given me the freedom that I was looking for. It let my spirit loose and opened my senses to things that can only be perceived by being here.



If not for Dhole's Den- our safari-homestay here, I would not have realized the array of hidden treasures which I previously remained unaware of. We humans are hunters and gatherers and for once I did realize that my life is more than acquiring material things; it is more about 'living'. My home, built on a farm, is therefore christened 'Uhuru', meaning 'freedom' in Swahili.

These woods made me discover and realise the connection that I felt with animals, particularly the canines. Dhole's Den was the reason I decided to have a dog at our place and was eventually introduced to our native-breeds by our consultant who, single-handedly worked out the entire eco-friendly measure at Dhole's Den. The more I read about hounds, more interested I became about their clan. Hounds, I realized were the closest I could get to wild dogs and the wolf, both the species towards which I have a special liking.

We are still on a voyage of discovery in our lives here in Bandipur, and we do have tremendous hopes from this place that we call home. One of which we have fulfilled already, a place which we share with like minded guests and people at Dhole's Den. For those who haven't yet experienced the magic and awe that only Bandipur has to offer, I extend my friendship and welcome you to Bandipur.

KARTHIK DAVEY



Photo Courtesy: Karthik Davey

'Let nature take its course'



From Page 1: Many suggest that spelling out the basic rules to the ignorant lot can be helpful. Making stringent amendments to the existing rules and regulations can also prove to be helpful in maintaining order. Some rules like a lower limit for children to be allowed in safaris and not permitting any eatables inside the forest can be given due consideration.

While some tourists are known to spoil the peace in the jungle not all can be painted with the same brush. Urbanisation does not always make people insensitive towards the nature, there are many nature lovers who are as comfortable in an urban atmosphere as they are outside the city limits. Common perception deludes one to believe that city dwellers lack knowledge towards wildlife and its conservation hence they behave in such arbitrary manner. But there might be more to this theory- many may just risk the safety of others and themselves to get a good picture or a good glimpse of a rare species like a rare species while not understanding the intricacies of animal behaviour. Some prefer to follow suit and do what the others are doing despite knowing the rules. Also, many hardly care if they are breaking rules or putting the animal in a stressful situation. However there is still a section of people which is growing in number and truly care and are dedicated to the cause of wildlife. Nature lovers need to step up and take the responsibility of creating awareness for the conservation of wildlife and hope that the tourists respect the nature.

TRENA MUKHERJEE

Photo Courtesy: Shreejata Gupta

Simply Bandipur!

I live in Bandipur purely out of a professional necessity: that is what people who know me officially, get to hear. I live in Bandipur purely out of self interest: yes, that is what people who know me otherwise, know. The self interest is PEACE!

I was born and brought up in one of the most densely populated cities in India- Kolkata. Later, for education, I have travelled around bigger cities, interspersed with time spent in quaint country-sides. It was during these temporary experiences of living in small towns, or sometimes villages, I realised that deep down I am a small-town girl. I like to see few people around myself, I like to hear few cars and buses plying in my vicinity; I want to know the faces that surround me, and them to know me, I love their warm smiles that greet me every morning, in these hamlets. I want to be in places where walking along the roadside does not translate into a struggle for survival against the ill-mannered beasts on the wheels. I enjoy those late evening strolls where the dusk-light reminds you to get back home.

After the nightmares I experienced in the city, when I stumbled upon the opportunity of working around a National Park, it was, beyond doubt, quite a saviour. Working around a National Park meant living in one of the adjacent villages, which in itself was quite an exciting thought! Parents were confused, whether I realised what I was commencing, some friends were worried whether living in a village was cut-out for a city-bred like me, and some others were extremely supportive of my endeavour and entirely confident of my capability.

I arrived, therefore, with my field-equipments and home-appliances, to a cosy cottage in the middle of nowhere in Mangala village, adjacent to the Bandipur National Park. Around myself, all I could see was the Nilgiri range, changing its colour with the passing hours of the day, I could spend my entire life gazing at them. I arrived in Bandipur to study macaque-behaviour, thus, running after monkeys occupies most of my time. Apart from this however, there are plenty of activities that I end up participating in, sometimes more than I can accommodate! Bandipur gives you the energy to work, to think, to create and to dream! The wind and the soil here make you sturdy, and active!

There are several things that Bandipur has taught me, the most important of which is to take life less seriously. The *Bandipurians* have made me realise that all that I do should be in harmony with nature and with a hint of laughter. They work hard, always accompanied by enthusiastic smiles, they live in poverty, still welcome others to share their meal, they chase elephants in the night, singing songs, and they cry and laugh, all for this land! Perhaps this is the story of every other land that is away from the city, perhaps this is the story of many and their beloved city/town/village; but, like your home has no other alternatives in the entire world, Bandipur is one special corner of the world where I feel that I belong to!

SHREEJATA GUPTA



Photo Courtesy: Abhiroop Ghosh Dastidar

The *Bandipur Beckons* team



Abhiroop Ghosh Dastidar

Wildlife is Abhiroop's first love and Bandipur is his muse. A former journalist he is currently working in a Global P.R firm. An aspiring wildlife photographer, Abhiroop finds his true calling in nature. Abhiroop has received accolades and mentions from prestigious forums and magazines which includes National Geographic and BBC. If photography is his soul, wildlife is his heart, as Bandipur happens to be the perfect confluence of dreams and destiny for him.

Shreejata is a doctoral scholar, studying communication behaviour of bonnet macaques, *Macaca radiata*, in and around the Bandipur National Park. She is affiliated with the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore. Shreejata enjoys photography, birding and hiking in her free time.



Shreejata Gupta



Treena Mukherjee

Treena is a journalist working with a renowned publication based in Bangalore. Apart from being associated with Print Media, she has also worked in the electronic media. She is an avid wildlife enthusiast and this love towards nature has drawn her towards Bandipur.

Sukanta is a naturalist and an wildlife-enthusiast, who lives in Bandipur. He is one of the few people in the region who practices as well as professes eco-friendly life-skills and works towards sustainable living. Bandipur never ceases to enthral Sukanta, which is why he is content with home-away-from-home in this distant land



Sukanta Das