

A platform for conservation enthusiasts at IIT Guwahati*

The largest student-organized academic conference on ecology and conservation – YETI – was held in North East (NE) India last year. The event was meant to serve as a sociable and inspiring platform for young ecologists to present and discuss their work, exchange ideas and strike collaborations with contemporaries.

The first day started with a pre-workshop session by Yateendra Joshi (Pune) on the essence of good presentations and posters. The workshop included discussions on exploring data trends using R (a high-level programming language), how to get the most out of scientific papers in a short time, ethics in research and writing, preparing proposals and getting funding.

The pre-conference session comprised of lectures by some stalwarts of conservation, including Ravi Chellam, M. D. Madhusudan, Kartik Shanker and Suhel Quader. The conference consisted of oral presentations, speed talks on posters and workshops. Presentations were made on a wide range of topics such as laboratory experiments on freshwater snails, diversity in butterflies, use of invasive weed species for biofuel, and use of corridors by jaguars in Central America. Although the presenters were involved in regional, national as well as international work,

the event had a strong regional focus both in participation and presentations.

In the first plenary lecture, S. K. Barik (North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong) discussed gap analysis and forest structure, the implications of climate change and desertification, invasive species and relevant policy considerations. He emphasized that ecology should be made a hardcore science and an ecological approach should be fostered in the management of biodiversity. Abhijit Das (Aaranyak, Guwahati) gave a historical account of herpetofaunal research in NE India, while Ramana Athreya (Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), Pune) described conservation efforts and experiences in the Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary in Arunachal Pradesh. He highlighted that conservation in India is primarily a socio-economic issue. He also cited the role of tourism in conservation, and emphasized the need to understand local societal fault lines and harness human resources to meet conservation goals.

The second day was a combination of plenary and break-out sessions. The plenary talk by Deepak Barua (IISER) dealt with genes, phenotype, environment and their inter-connections. Kartik Shanker (Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore) explained the global patterns and mechanisms that affect the richness and range of species. The use of creative and intellectual abilities to design a good experiment was discussed by Suhel Quader (NCBS). He stressed that one should not hesitate to modify beyond the range of natural variation.

The last day had a panel discussion on conservation challenges in NE India. It was noted that an understanding of environmental conditions and related human contributions has increased significantly. However, there is an urgent need to address issues related to ecosystem degradation, biodiversity loss, and declining quality and depletion of natural resources through: (i) educating and training the public; (ii) building technical skills and (iii) integrating indigenous and scientific knowledge. It was emphasized that conservation issues need to be brought to larger forums outside the region, and efficient strategies need to be developed to address the diverse conservation challenges.

Some of the organized workshops were: (i) Ecology through numbers – aimed at showing that simple mathematical models of ecology can be learnt by anyone with basic skills in arithmetic and algebra and (ii) Basic statistics – providing an introduction to basic concepts in statistics.

Given the dramatic loss of biodiversity, it is necessary that forums like YETI should systematically discuss various dimensions of conservation biology. This would lead to a clearer understanding of ecology, evolution, behavioural science and conservation-related issues.

Biba Jasmine Kaur, Delhi Pollution Control Committee, Department of Environment, Government of NCT of Delhi, ISBT Building, Kashmere Gate, New Delhi 110 006, India.
e-mail: bibajasmine@gmail.com

*A report of the conference 'Young Ecologists Talk and Interact' (YETI 2011) held from 13 to 15 December 2011 at the Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati, organized entirely by student volunteers from across the country with support from several organizations.