

2019 UNESCO Sultan Qaboos Prize for Environmental Preservation awarded to Ashoka Trust, Bengaluru, India

The 2019 UNESCO Sultan Qaboos Prize for Environmental Preservation has been awarded to the Bengaluru-based Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), India. This is in recognition of its socially just environmental conservation and sustainable development activities. The Prize is awarded every two years, and consists of a diploma, a medal and a cash endowment of US\$ 100,000. It is funded by a generous donation by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos Bin Said Al Said of Oman^{1,2}. To date, 15 organizations from as many countries and individuals from 5 countries have received this prize. It is the first time that the prize recipient is from India. The award ceremony was held on the first day of the 9th World Science Forum in Budapest, Hungary from 20 to 23 November 2019, under the auspices of UNESCO³.

ATREE was established in 1996 by Kamaljit Singh Bawa to address the environmental challenges in India⁴⁻⁶. He has been serving as the President of ATREE since its inception. He is an evolutionary ecologist and a conservation biologist with significant contributions in the field of population biology of tropical forest trees. His work has led to new approaches for the conservation of tropical trees along with the sustainable use of non-timber forest products (also known as non-wood forest products). His multifaceted background decisively made ATREE unique through its interdisciplinary approach to address issues of environmental degradation and economic development. The organization has implemented a wide range of environmental work encompassing the diverse environments throughout India, including the Eastern Himalaya, the UNESCO Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve and the Western Ghats World Heritage Site, Vembanad lake, Kaziranga and Manas National Parks, the grasslands of Kutch, the wetlands of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, and urban landscapes of Karnataka⁴. These regions are considered hotspots for their extraordinarily diverse species of flora and fauna. ATREE has made noteworthy contributions in Sikkim and Darjeeling regions using the participatory approach for improving environmental conserva-

tion leading to the creation and promotion of sustainable livelihoods⁴.

In January 2001, ATREE along with the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India organized a two-week contact programme in conservation biology for graduate and postgraduate students. The very first course had lectures on various topics of conservation biology by leading experts from India and abroad. The seven days of field work complemented the theoretical lectures and gave the participants a direct experience of conservation science in the field. ATREE has been organizing such training programmes in different parts of India (evident from the advertisements in this journal). Among the NGOs related to the environment, ATREE has the distinction of starting doctoral programmes. It produced three Ph Ds in the academic year 2012–13. The doctoral training includes rigorous course work in natural and social sciences. The Ph D degrees are awarded by Manipal University, Karnataka.

ATREE published the first map of semi-arid savanna grasslands of India. In 2003, ATREE launched the journal *Conservation and Society* (<http://www.conservationandsociety.org/>) and in 2007 the magazine *Current Conservation* (<https://www.currentconservation.org/>). In 2008, ATREE led the team that created the 'India Biodiversity Portal' (<https://indiabiodiversity.org/>) using open-source software. In 2013, ATREE was recognized as a 'Scientific and Industrial Research Organization' by the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, Ministry of Science and Technology, Government of India. In 2016, the Society for Conservation Biology-Asia Section selected ATREE as the winner of their Distinguished Service Award in recognition of its extraordinary contributions to the conservation of biodiversity and capacity building for sustainable development in India. In 2016, ATREE was admitted as an Observer NGO by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Secretariat. The Observer NGOs can attend negotiating sessions of the UNFCCC, conduct policy outreach events on the sidelines of the negotiations, and showcase their research through exhibits in the

negotiations venue, thus reaching out to climate negotiators, intergovernmental organizations, civil society groups and media.

Bawa and Nitin Pandit received the Sultan Qaboos Prize on behalf of ATREE. Pandit is serving as the Director of ATREE since 2018. He has held various appointments, such as the President of the International Institute for Energy Conservation and the Chief Executive Officer of the World Resources Institute's office in India. The diverse activities and the rich experience of ATREE are an excellent example to emulate. Its experience can benefit many countries across the globe.

The inaugural prize was awarded in 1991. The deadline for submitting nominations for the 2021 Prize is 15 July 2021 (refs 1, 2). It is the first Arab Environmental protection prize to be awarded at the international level⁷. The other major science prizes instituted by the Middle Eastern region are the King Faisal International Prize for Science by Saudi Arabia⁸ and the Mustafa Prize for Science by Iran⁹.

1. <http://www.un-qaboos-prize.net/>
2. <http://www.un-qaboos-prize.net/> and <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/ecological-sciences/man-and-biosphere-programme/awards-and-prizes/sultan-qaboos/>
3. <https://worldscienceforum.org/>
4. <https://www.atree.org/>
5. Bawa, K. S., Balachander, G. and Raven, P., *Science*, 2008, **319**(5860), 136; doi: 10.1126/science.1151835.
6. Ganeshaiah, K. N., Shaanker, R. U. and Bawa, K. S. (eds.), *Tropical Ecosystems: Structure, Diversity and Human Welfare*, Oxford & IBH Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 2001.
7. Khan, S. A., *Curr. Sci.*, 2018, **114**(2), 252; 2016, **110**(1), 15.
8. Khan, S. A., *Curr. Sci.*, 2019, **116**(4), 517; 2018, **114**(10), 2014; 2017, **112**(6), 1088–1090; 2016, **111**(5), 936–937; 2016, **110**(7), 1140–1141; 2015, **108**(7), 1202–1203; 2014, **106**(4), 500; 2013, **104**(5), 575; 2020, **118**(6), 858.
9. Khan, S. A., *Curr. Sci.*, 2016, **110**(6), 961.

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