



ANNUAL RESEARCH SEMINAR 2016

SACON's Annual Research Seminar (ARS) was conducted on 25th May, 2016 at the Conference Hall of the Tamil Nadu Forest Academy (TNFA), Forest Campus, R.S. Puram, Coimbatore. Dr. Shomita Mukherjee, Principal Scientist, SACON, welcomed the Chief Guest, Dr. N. Krishnakumar, IFS, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests



Dr. K. Sankar delivering introductory talk; Dr. N. Krishnakumar IFS & Dr. R. K. Srivastava, IFS on the dais



View of the gathering



Dr. N. Krishnakumar delivering inaugural talk

and Head of the Forest Force of Tamil Nadu, the Chairperson of the ARS, Dr. B. Ramakrishna, Director (Retd), Zoological Survey of India and Chairman of the SACON Research Monitoring and Advisory Committee (RMAC) and the other dignitaries, from various other organizations who attended the event. SACON Director, Dr. K. Sankar presented the Opening Remarks after which Dr. N. Krishnakumar delivered the Inaugural Address and Dr. Rajiv K. Srivastava, IFS, Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Director, TNFA, delivered the Special Address. This was followed by the release of SACON publications that included four technical reports, two newsletters, six posters and a documentary video. The releases were as follows:

Technical reports:

1. Impact of Hara Wind Power Project on Wildlife including Migratory birds and Raptors at Harapanahalli, Davangere, Karnataka released by Dr. Rajiv K. Srivastava, IFS.
2. Assessment of conflicts between peafowl and farmers in Coimbatore, released by Shri Raghuram Singh, IFS, Addl. Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Tamil Nadu.
3. Population status of Rhesus Macaque (*Macaca mulatta*) in Himachal Pradesh, India, released by Dr. R.S. Prashanth, IFS, Director, Institute of Forest Genetics and Tree Breeding, Coimbatore.
4. National Nature Camping Programme at SACON, released by Dr. V.S. Vijayan, Founder Director, SACON.

Newsletters:

- 1). SACON NEWS, released by Dr. B. Ramakrishna, Chairman, RMAC, SACON.
- 2). SAROVAR SAURABH released by Dr. S.N. Prasad, former faculty, SACON.

From the Director's Desk

The past 3 months have been extremely fast paced and enormously rewarding for SACON. We are continuously aiming to build a diverse and engaging culture at SACON because I believe it is essential for propelling our Centre towards achieving greater heights. My entire team at SACON showed amazing talent, hard-work and dedication in the last 3 months of my joining this Institute. I am so proud to share that we as a team put up the first alumni meet at SACON, the first internal annual research seminar (IARS), the annual research seminar (ARS), late Dr. Bhupathy memorial lecture by Dr. Susheel Kumar Dutta, guest lectures by Dr. André Dhondt, Cornell university, USA and the Biostatistics Course for the research personnel by Dr. K. Thiyaesan.

The current issue of the SACON NEWS highlights these events. These are just examples of some of the work underway and I am confident that we shall pave the way for our next generation of talent. A big thank you to all my wonderfully efficient colleagues, splendid staff and dynamic research personnel, as any of this would not have been possible without all your wholehearted efforts.

We shall keep delivering!!!

Dr. K. Sankar
Director

Sub-continent. After the inaugural session there was a Group Photography session and tea followed by the Technical Sessions of the Seminar. There were a total of 14 presentations in four thematic sessions, viz. Ecological Studies, Ecological Studies-Islands, Conservation Studies and Environmental Impacts and Monitoring. Three presentations were made by SACON Faculty members and 11 by the researchers. Each session was presided over by a panel consisting of a Chair and two Co-chairs. The researcher's presentations were evaluated by a panel of judges who were members of the RMAC.

The Director, SACON invited some dignitaries to share their opinions and remarks on the ARS in the Concluding Session. Dr. Y.V. Jhala, Scientist-G, Wildlife Institute of India, commented on the high quality of the presentations and congratulated SACON on the wide range of topics studied. He advised researchers to understand the statistical tests they utilise in their analysis and explain these in a simple manner in presentations. Dr. R. Geeta, Professor, University of Delhi & Member, RMAC-SACON expressed her satisfaction with the arrangements and also the high quality of research and presentations. Dr. A.J.T. Johnsingh commended SACON

Posters:

1). Impacts of Wind turbines; A comparison of case studies from Gujarat & Karnataka, released by Dr. Lalitha Vijayan, former faculty, SACON. 2). Poster on Owls of Andaman Islands, released by Dr. Ravichandran, IFS, Chief Conservator of Forests, Andaman and Nicobar Islands. 3). Four species posters released by Shri. Raghuram Singh, IFS:

- | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| a. Lesser Flamingo | b. Smooth-coated Otter |
| c. Greater Adjutant Stork | d. Edible Nest Swiftlet |

A Video CD titled "A Day in Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve: A Lifescape to Experience", was also released by Dr. A.J.T. Johnsingh, Dean (Retd.), Wildlife Institute of India.

The video was screened for the gathering. Following this Dr. Sankar introduced Dr. Sushil Kumar Dutta who delivered the Dr. Bhupathy Memorial Lecture. Dr. Dutta is a Visiting Professor at the Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore and member of the RMAC, SACON. His talk addressed current trends in taxonomy of amphibians in the Indian



Dr. S. K. Dutta delivering Dr. Bhupathy Memorial talk

for the quality of research and researchers and urged all at SACON to take up long-term monitoring of the biodiversity of the SACON campus. He also urged researchers to use the invaluable resources in SACON's library. Dr. Sushil Kumar Dutta lauded SACON for the wide range of research topics and modern analysis used in research and expressed his appreciation for the organisation and the arrangements of the seminar. Dr. A.B. Shanbhag, Professor & Head (Retd), Dept. of Zoology, Goa University & Member, RMAC-SACON appreciated the efforts put in by the researchers for their high-quality presentations.

Dr. Mathew K. Sebastian, Principal Scientist, SACON announced the winners of the Photographic Competition that was held alongside the ARS.

Dr. Ramakrishna delivered the Concluding Remarks and congratulated SACON for the successful conduct of the event. He also appreciated SACON's contribution in conservation of endangered and endemic fauna especially in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

The ARS was concluded by the Vote of Thanks proposed by Dr. P. Balasubramanian, Senior Principal Scientist & Research Coordinator, SACON.

The first Alumni Meeting of SACON was conducted alongside the ARS. Dr. V.S. Vijayan, Founder Director of SACON presided over the meeting. About fifty former research fellows and Ph D Scholars of SACON met and discussed ways to network and strengthen the Alumni and collaboratively contribute towards the goals of their Alma Mater.

Dr. Shomita Mukherjee, shomitam@gmail.com

INTERNAL ANNUAL RESEARCH SEMINAR 2016



Dr. K.Sankar giving the introductory remarks



Shri. Qamar Qureshi

SACON's first ever Internal Annual Research Seminar (IARS) was conducted on 23rd May, 2016 at the Conference Room, GIS Building of

the Tamil Nadu Forest Academy (TNFA), Forest

Campus, R.S. Puram, Coimbatore. Dr. P.V. Karunakaran welcomed the Chief Guest and Chairman of the IARS, Shri. Qamar Qureshi, Scientist G, Wildlife Institute of India and the gathering. SACON Director, Dr. K. Sankar introduced the IARS after which Shri. Qureshi delivered the Opening Remarks. There were a total of 15 presentations in three thematic sessions, Avifauna Habitats, Ecological Studies and Assessment Studies. Three presentations were made by SACON Faculty and 12 by researchers. The event was concluded by the Chairman with a very eloquent speech in which he appreciated the effort put in by the researchers and faculty to make this a very successful event. He remarked on the high quality of presentations and the importance of the research done at SACON in the context of current conservation issues. Dr. Goldin Quadros proposed the Vote of Thanks.

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SACON ALUMNI MEET 2016

In order to bring together and build up a well-knit alumni network, SACON organized its first Alumni Meet on



25th May, 2016 as a part of its Silver Jubilee celebrations. In total, 50 Ph.D. scholars who completed their doctorates from SACON and research personnel who had worked in various research projects at SACON attended the meet. The event was held in the Conference Room of GIS Building at TNFA Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu on 25th May, 2016. Dr. K. Sankar, Director, SACON welcomed the gathering. The meet was inaugurated by the Founder Director of SACON, Dr. V. S. Vijayan, who stressed on the need for researchers to be socially committed and scientifically sound. The meet was also attended by some of the former faculty members of SACON namely, Dr. Lalitha Vijayan, Dr. S. N. Prasad and Dr. N. Sivaganesan. The participants recounted their nostalgic memories and expressed their willingness to collaborate with SACON in the coming years. The overwhelming reconnect with their prestigious 'Alma Mater' was appreciated and well received by the alumni community. The modalities of taking the SACON Alumni network forward was the major agenda of the discussion and responsibilities were assigned to select members of the alumni for starting an 'e-newsletter' and also updating the Alumni database. On this occasion SACON also brought out the 'SACON Alumni Profile', comprising of 68 individual profile pages and a list of 126 people so far registered with SACON alumni data base. The Alumni meet proceedings ended with a vote of thanks by Dr. P.R. Arun, Principal Scientist and Alumni Meet Coordinator. The meet was followed by a visit to SACON campus on the next day.

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A ROAD TO KILL

It was a pleasant Saturday morning of May 2016. Just after the overnight rains, I and Prafull got on a bike and started our journey towards Coimbatore city from SACON. The Anaikatty road that connects the institute with Coimbatore and Anaikatty is a State Highway. The road between SACON and Karl Kubel Institute is 3.5 km of a beautiful ghat section. This particular belt provided ample opportunities to enjoy the view of the blossoming green forests of Anaikatty Hills on each turn as we travelled. We were soaked in the beauty of the mountains wearing green blankets. We felt as if we were as much a part of this landscape as the elephants that roam around the campus; the leopard of our campus that no-one has seen; the spotted deer that roam around the campus; the gaur

that occasionally visit the artificial water tanks; the Small Indian Civet that creeps and feasts on insects at midnight just outside the laboratory block; the Rusty-spotted Cat that walks silently over the campus; the Red Eyes that just can't stop flying around; the babblers that hop around the campus and the Southern Birdwing that soars over flowers of Tecoma.



Lost in these thoughts, we stumbled upon a sad death - a dead flat Yellow-billed Babbler (*Turdoides affinis*) (Figure 1). We got down and took some pictures. We looked at it as one of those several sad road kills that happen daily on the highways of India. We got back on the bike and started our journey towards the city. We went hardly a few hundred meters when we saw another road kill, but this time a beautiful Common Bronze-backed Tree Snake (*Dendrelaphis tristis*). We felt sad to see this arboreal creature lying dead in the middle of the road. From there within few hundred meters we saw a dead

flat Lizard (*Calotes* sp). Within a distance of three kilo meters we encountered three road-kills belonging to three different taxonomic orders; but the road had even more to reveal. We travelled a few meters and saw a flat baby Green Keelback (*Macropisthodon plumbicolor*). The beautiful juvenile snake, not even 15 cm long, was looking like a glossy, shining, metallic measuring scale. Looking at the baby snake we thought that it would not have even understood when it got crushed under a heavy wheel and died.

Our disturbing journey to the city continued. On the way back, we discussed the seen and unseen deaths scattered across the Anaikatty road. Seeing so many dead animals was shocking. Jumping to conclusions, unless a systematic study considering the land topology, vegetation structure and composition of the fauna is carried out, would have been like shooting in the dark. We decided to start counting and identifying the dead animals. We borrowed a colleague's bike and surveyed the belt between Aalamaramedu to Karl Kubel Institute. We surveyed the road for two weeks on and off. The results were surprising. We divided our study area in three parts – SACON inside road (belt 1, a kilometre long road with the least vehicular traffic, but with a similar vegetation composition with that of other sites), SACON main gate to Aalamaramedu (belt 2, 1.8 km of state highway with moderate vehicular traffic but human-modified landscape), and SACON main gate to Karl Kubel Institute (belt 3, 3.5 km of state highway with moderate vehicular traffic but largely undisturbed forest). In our few days' pilot survey, we found no road kills on SACON inside road. Average encounter rate for belt 2 and 3 were 0.5/km and 6/km. Most of the road kills were that of frogs. Majority of the individuals were crushed so badly that it was difficult to identify them. We also found some crushed Giant Forest Scorpions (*Heterometrus* sp.) (Figure 2). Site 3 – the most scenic belt turned out to be the road to hell for all those beautiful species. Apart from our observations, SACON students have seen road kills of Indian Gray Mongoose (Anoop Raj pers. obs.), Indian Rock Python (Jins V.J. pers. obs.) and Slender Loris (Santosh K. pers. obs.). After a week's pilot study, unfortunately, we had to stop this survey due to obvious financial and logistics reasons. We believe that with continuous monitoring we can definitely reason out how to reduce the number of casualties across this belt.

Wildlife road kill is not a new thing. In the past two decades, road kills have been increasingly reported and studied in parts of India and other tropical countries. While doing my field work in Northern Western Ghats during 2011-13, I encountered a number of road kills. The saddest deaths that I saw during that time were that of a Jungle Cat and a Small Indian Civet. It was horrible to see such beautiful species, which are otherwise very difficult to observe in the field, lying dead on a village road, crushed by a bulky tractor or a crazily honking truck. The problem of road kills may not be necessarily species-specific; it could also be landscape-specific. This is when I decided to crowd-source observations on road kills across India through a citizen science initiative. This idea was

supported by India Biodiversity Portal, resulting in a web platform called 'Roadkill Network' (http://indiabiodiversity.org/group/roadkill_network/show) to report road kills. The idea of this initiative is to use road kill data to detect possible barriers to the movement of animals across India. Since the inception of this project, we have received some very shocking photographs. Worth mentioning is several incidents of Leopard Cat road kills in Karnataka and West Bengal, and a Leopard and a Gaur from Rajasthan and West Bengal respectively. The saddest of all is the road kill of a pregnant Striped Hyena female with two cubs still hanging in her uterus. Like all other citizen-science projects, the road kill project too relies solely on inputs from users. Through this article, we would like to make an appeal to all the readers of SACON Newsletter to come forward and contribute your observations on road kills to the portal.



With the more and more industrial as well as residential projects coming up in the outskirts of expanding metro cities, the disturbance to the wildlife is increasing. The network of the roads is going to expand in the future, so is the vehicular traffic. The next big challenge is to reduce road kill casualties; perhaps by building tunnels or bridges for animal movement, so as to make our highways a better place for all that live beside them. An even bigger challenge would be to make feel our precious flora and fauna being a part of this same beautiful landscape!

*Mr. Pankaj Koparde (*corresponding author: pankajkoparde@gmail.com), Mr. Prafull Choudhary (prafpharma5@gmail.com) Roadkill Network: http://indiabiodiversity.org/group/roadkill_network/show

BIostatISTICS COURSE

A module on 'Biostatistics' was conducted for the research personnel and Ph.D. scholars between 8th and 14th June 2016 at SACON. In total, 23 research personnel/Ph.D. scholars, interns and faculty members attended the course. The major objective of the course was to expose the research personnel to the principles and assumptions of basic and advanced statistics used in the field of ecology and conservation biology. Dr. K. Thiyagesan, Former Principal of A.V.C. College, Mayiladuthurai, Tamil Nadu conducted the said course. First three days (8th-10th June, 2016) were devoted for learning various sampling methods and its design and uni-variate Statistics (parametric and non-parametric) using SPSS package. Last two days (13th-14th June, 2016) were spent on learning about advanced statistics such as ordination techniques, regression models and reliability analysis. On the concluding day, Dr. Thiyagesan distributed the course certificates to the participants.

Dr. Babu S, sanbabs@gmail.com

SOMPETA WETLAND IN SRIKAKULAM DISTRICT, ANDHRA PRADESH-A POTENTIAL IBA SITE?

Sompeta wetland in Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh that borders Odisha is one of the last remaining wetlands of Coromandel Coast that holds a significant key to the aquatic biodiversity of the peninsular India. Spread over 1,600 ha in area with 20 km long shoreline that ranges from 0.5 to 2 km in width, Sompeta wetland is a complex ecosystem with a multitude of aquatic habitats including freshwater marshes and pools, irrigated paddy fields, stream mouths, mud flats, coastal brackish/saline lagoons, and tidal backwaters. This variety in physical features



Bengal Bushlark

gives rise to a spectacular diversity of aquatic flora and fauna. This wetland complex is also a lifeline to over 90,000 people, living in 33 villages around the wetland, who are directly dependent on the waters for their sustenance. The local communities have been waging a vigorous campaign to protect the wetland as parts of it were to be 'reclaimed' for industrial development (though these plans have since been suspended following mass protests from local people).

We surveyed the Sompeta wetland during 15-24 March, 2016 for a preliminary assessment of the floral and faunal diversity. During our short survey, we recorded 125 species of birds including 48 waterbirds and another 16 wetland-dependent avifauna. Interestingly, we documented presence of five species of globally Near-threatened birds, viz., Oriental Darter (*Anhinga melanogaster*), Eurasian Curlew (*Numenius arquata*),

Black-headed Ibis (*Threskiornis melanocephalus*), Curlew Sandpiper (*Calidris ferruginea*), and Alexandrine Parakeet (*Psittacula eupatria*) in and around the Sompeta wetland. Other interesting observations include range extension of Bengal Bushlark (*Mirafra assamica*), which is otherwise distributed along the Indo-Gangetic plains east to Bengal and Brahmaputra floodplains, occurrence of a good population of Long-toed Stint (*Calidris subminuta*) – an uncommon winter visitor to India,



Blue Grass Dartlet

and a large nesting colony of Black-breasted Weaver (*Ploceus benghalensis*) – a rare near-endemic species to India. Our survey also covered other taxa like plants, butterflies, dragonflies, fishes, herpetofauna, and mammals.

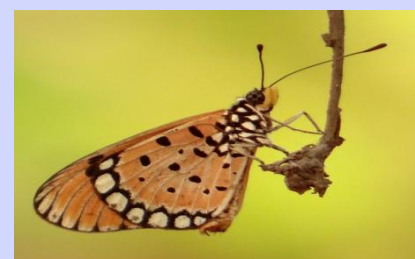
Thirty three species of butterflies were recorded though the survey period was an off season for conducting butterfly survey. The present data indicate that the number of species available in the environs of the wetland will substantially go up after the completion of survey during the post monsoon season.

Odonates are also surveyed and documented for the first time from the wetland complex and its immediate surroundings. Totally 23 species of Odonata were recorded during the survey including 17 dragonflies and 8 damselflies belongs to 4 families. Post monsoon survey may reveal the presence of many other species.

We plan to do more extensive surveys in the coming days to complete our documentation of the biodiversity of Sompeta wetland, and we will recommend the wetland to be designated as an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA) if warranted.



Long-toed Stint



Tawny Coster

DR. ANDRÉ DHONDT, CORNELL UNIVERSITY VISITS SACON



Dr. André Dhondt, Director of Bird Population Studies, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, Cornell University, USA visited SACON during 3-8 May, 2016. Holding the position of *Edwin H. Morgens Professor of Ornithology* at Cornell, Dr. Dhondt is a world-renowned avian biologist with varied research interests ranging from bird population studies, avian behaviour, evolutionary ecology, conservation biology, and disease ecology.

Dr. Dhondt visited different facilities at SACON including the Ecotoxicology Lab, ENVIS Centre, and Library followed by interactions with the faculty members and research scholars. Earlier, a detailed presentation on SACON and its key activities and achievements was made to Dr. Dhondt. He later participated in a couple of brainstorming sessions convened by the Director, SACON regarding the proposed post-graduate programme in Ornithology & Conservation Biology at SACON, and offered many suggestions and comments over the coursework, curriculum, and other academic matters. The Director, SACON also had a detailed discussions with him over possible collaboration between SACON and Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology in conducting the proposed M.Sc. programme and field research activities of SACON.

Dr. Dhondt delivered two talks at the Centre as part of SACON's ongoing Silver Jubilee Lecture series; the first talk was on '*Mycoplasma gallisepticum* in House Finch *Haemorrhous mexicanus*: the study of an emerging wildlife disease' and the second one was on 'Interspecific competition between Great and Blue Tits'. At the end of the session, Dr. Dhondt donated a copy of his much acclaimed book "*Interspecific Competition in Birds*" [2012, Oxford Avian Biology Series, Oxford University Press, UK, pp.282] to the SACON Library.

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