

INAUGURATION OF SACON SILVER JUBILEE CELEBRATIONS



Inaugural Address by Shri. Mr. Prakash Javadekar, Hon'ble Minister of Environment, Forest & Climate Change, Government of India.



Presidential Address by Shri. Ashok Lavasa, Secretary to the Govt, MoEF & Climate Change

Shri. Prakash Javadekar, Hon'ble Minister of State (I/C), Union Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change, Government of India delivered the inaugural address. He began his speech on a nostalgic note as SACON Campus, along with its sylvan rural settings surrounded by rolling forested hills tended to remind him of his own village in northern Western Ghats in Maharashtra. He echoed our popular sentiments, "Even the chirping of birds and the smell of the woods are very similar, implying that nature has no geographical boundaries".

Dr. K. Sankar takes over as SACON Director

Dr. K. Sankar joined as Director, SACON on 7 March 2016. Before joining SACON, he worked at Wildlife Institute of India, Dehra Dun as Scientist – G/Senior Professor.

Dr. Kalyanasundaram Sankar did his M.Sc. in Wildlife Biology from Bharatidasan University, Tamil Nadu and obtained Ph.D., researching on herbivore ecology in Sariska Tiger Reserve, Rajasthan. With assistance from Dr. Salim Ali's Conservation Fund, he had worked on ungulate food habits for the M.Sc. dissertation project. His M.Phil., dissertation work was on 'Shore birds of Point Calimere Sanctuary, Tamil Nadu'. Before joining the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), he worked as Field Biologist at Bharatpur in B.N.H.S. Hydrobiology Project. After he joined WII as a faculty member in 1986, till 4th March 2016, he has worked on several large & small ungulates (chital, sambar, nilgai, gaur, yak, mouse deer), Asiatic elephants, endangered primates, sloth bear and large & small carnivores (tiger, leopard, wild dog, ratel, caracal). Dr. K. Sankar was actively involved in tiger re-introduction in Sariska Tiger Reserve, Rajasthan, gaur reintroduction in Bhandhavgarh Tiger Reserve, Madhya Pradesh and coordinated tiger census in southern Indian landscape. He is a Member IUCN SSC Deer Specialist Group and Asian Wild Cattle Specialist Group. As a Member of Environment Appraisal Committee (EAC-1) of Ministry of Environment & Forests, Government of India, provided technical guidance in Environmental Clearance of Industrial Projects for 3 years (July 2010 to July 2012). He has over 100 scientific publications, 03 books, 13 book chapters, 02 manuals and 15 popular articles published to his credit.



From the Director's Desk

SACON is an incredible organization already being nurtured by amazing people. I am deeply honoured to be a part of it now and there is no doubt on SACON getting 'BIGGER AND BETTER' in the years to follow!!

We are celebrating our Silver Jubilee after completing a glorious 25 years and from now on it is our responsibility to strive harder and make our Centre the best in its clan.

Our mandate is 'To help conserve India's biodiversity and its sustainable use' through Research, Education and People's Participation with birds at the centre stage'.

We plan to target Research by establishing a 'National Ornithological Data Bank Cell', Education through a two-year Masters course in 'Ornithology and Natural History' and People's Participation by offering 'capacity building programme' for forest officials on animal monitoring techniques, management of wetlands and human-wildlife conflict issues during the year 2016-17.

Our unified focus is the need of this hour. I am open to suggestions, however small or big, from each member of our Centre. My fullest cooperation will be there for you all.

Let us Make This Happen!!

Dr. K.Sankar
Director

He, then, elaborated on the critical roles that nature's ecosystem functions and services play in the wellbeing of human populations and in securing the livelihoods of local communities. He reiterated that nature and humans are interdependent and people prosper only when nature thrives.



View of the audience

To further drive home his point, he quoted Mahatma Gandhi: "Nature can take care of everybody's need, not everybody's greed". The Hon'ble Minister was also eloquent of the cultural and aesthetic values of nature besides its economic benefits, and was emphatic that man could never dissociate himself from nature and live in isolation despite the technological advances that have permeated our daily lives; so, it is imperative that we ensure the localized sustainability of nature through increase in tree cover around our habitations and revive the natural processes.

Shri. Javadekar, then, recounted the ecological, economic, cultural, and heritage values of the Western Ghats, and supported his arguments with statistics and scientific facts. He pointed out that our country, though home to 17% of the world's human population and an equal measure of the global cattle population, still harbours hundreds of thousands of flora and fauna with significant degrees of endemism. He added that India has a major responsibility to protect its nature, its ecosystems, and biodiversity and in fact is leading the world with comprehensive legislations that seek to protect both biodiversity and traditional rights of forest-dependent communities. He extolled the conservation value of the Western Ghats ecosystem and its significance as water catchment for peninsular Indian rivers thus ensuring freshwater security for the people living in the plains. He pointed out that there are over



Release of special Postal Cover

500 species of birds recorded from the Western Ghats and 15 of them are endemic to the hills. The Hon'ble Minister spoke on the ecosystem services that we receive from our birds including pollination, seed dispersal, and insect pest control. He was referring to Amur Falcon, a small raptor weighing only 168g that takes one of the longest annual migration from eastern Asia to southern Africa that includes 160 hours non-stop flight over the Arabian Sea; he explained the successful initiatives taken by the Ministry in

association with local organizations to stop the mass killing of these falcons in Nagaland where they converge for a week or so on their way to Africa. He also recollected, at this juncture, the stellar contributions of Dr Sálím Ali, the birdman of India and after whom SACON was named.



Felicitation by Ms. Manju P Pillai, Post Master General, Western Region, Tamil Nadu

Shri. Javadekar, then, spoke at length about the achievements of SACON since its inception especially SACON's conservation initiatives in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands with the UT Forest Department. He was particularly praiseful of SACON's efforts to develop a sustainable nest harvesting model for the Edible-nest Swiftlets, whose edible nests are a delicacy in parts of East Asia so that local tribal communities can harvest the nests after completion of nesting season and receive economic benefits without affecting the bird populations. He urged the scientists to evolve and apply such community participation models in our conservation issues so that win-win solutions are found.

The Hon'ble Minister also made a strong pitch for all the States to support the Compensatory Afforestation Management Planning Authority (CAMPA) Bill, 2015 that would enable us to utilize the CAMPA fund accumulated over the last decade for ecologically sound afforestation measures and biodiversity conservation initiatives.

While acclaiming the noteworthy work done by SACON in the area of biodiversity conservation with birds in the centre stage, Shri. Javadekar expressed his hope that SACON would soon be accorded 'autonomous institution' status under the direct control of the MoEF&CC. Citing the successful example of Indian Postal Department which reoriented itself by diversifying into different service sectors by utilizing its extensive resources such as 1,50,000 post

offices spread across the nook and corner of the country, he asked SACON to reinvent their strategies involving the public for the sustainable growth ensuring conservation of the nature.

Earlier Mr. Ashok Lavasa, IAS, Secretary to the Government, MOEF&CC commenced his presidential address welcoming the, Hon'ble Minister of State (I/C), Union Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change and other officials from the Ministry, dignitaries and representatives from different institutions and organizations, and media, who attended the function. He recalled the history of SACON with the origin of the idea to establish a centre of higher learning and research in the field of ornithology and natural history in the country in memory of Dr. Sálím Ali, considered to be the father of Indian Ornithology; he also gratefully remembered the financial and administrative support extended by the Government of India to SACON for purchase of land, construction of the buildings and other infrastructure and funding of core research projects.

Mr. Lavasa talked in detail about the rich biodiversity wealth of our country especially along the the Western Ghats landscape and the need for sustainable development that places equal importance to both biodiversity conservation and enabling local communities to have better access to and benefit-sharing from utilization of natural resources. He also exhorted that SACON, through its contributions to biodiversity conservation particularly along the Western Ghats and the Andaman & Nicobar Islands are acclaimed widely, should reinvent itself to move forward in tune with the changing times and priorities. In her felicitation address, Ms. Manju P Pillai, Post Master General, Western Region, Tamil Nadu



Vote of Thanks by Dr.A.B. Harappanahalli, Advisor MoEF & CC

spoke on bird watching becoming a popular hobby in the country and the need to document the vast body of information being generated by birdwatchers. She also commended SACON for its services to the nation by undertaking research and conservation education in the field of Ornithology for the past 25 years. Mr. P.K. Das, IAS, Additional Secretary & Financial Advisor, MoEF&CC, in his felicitation address congratulated SACON on its Silver Jubilee celebration and assured all support to carry forward its mission and activities. .

Earlier, in his welcome speech, Dr. P.A. Azeez, Director, SACON summarized the achievements and milestones of SACON during the past 25 years. He also recalled the contributions of several stalwarts in the past like Mr. R. Rajamani, IAS (Retd.), Mr. K.P. Geethakrishnan, IAS (Retd.), Dr. E.G. Silas, and Dr. V.S. Vijayan in establishing SACON and laying the foundations of its research and conservation agenda.

Dr. A.B. Harappanahalli, Advisor, MoEF&CC proposed the vote of thanks.

Dedication of the Pirojsha Godrej Hostel for Students by the Hon'ble Minister

Over the years the number of research scholars has been increasing in SACON. In order to create adequate accommodation facilities, a new block of hostel with a capacity to accommodate 8 inmates, was constructed with the financial support of Pirojsha Godrej Foundation.

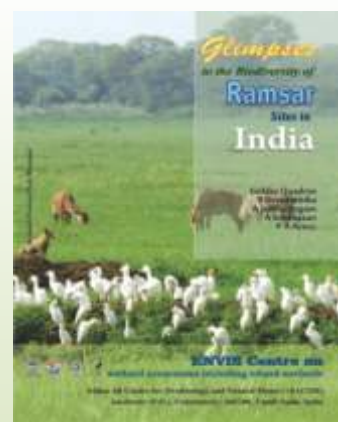
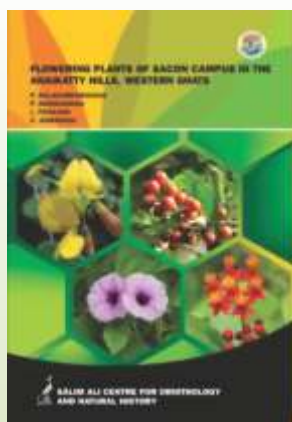


Release of Books



During the inaugural function the following books were released.

1. 'Flowering plants of SACON campus in the Anaikkatty hills, Western Ghats' authored by P. Balasubramanian, L. Prakash & C. Anbarasu
2. 'Glimpses to the Biodiversity of Ramsar sites in India' by Goldin Quadros, B. Hemambika, A. Julfia Begam, A. Srinivasan and P. A. Azeez



Annual General Meeting of SACON Society



Being the President of the SACON Society, Hon'ble Minister presided over the Annual General Meeting of the SACON Society immediately after the Silver Jubilee inaugural function.

Tree Plantation



**Honorable Minister planted a sapling
in front of the main building.**

Interaction with Faculty

Hon'ble Minister interacted with faculty in a formal meeting in the SACON board room. Each faculty explained the research works being carried out by them. Mr Prakash Javadekar showed keen interest regarding the activities of SACON. Appreciating SACON's achievements, he commented that SACON is giving unique contributions to the conservation of nature and natural resources.



SACON Campus then

Ghats, Southern India.

The ecofriendly buildings were designed by the renowned architect, the Late Laurie Baker. SACON has a built up area of more than 40,000 sq.



SACON Campus now

SACON is situated at Moongilpallam in the Anaikatty hills (11°05'30.9" N and 76°47'36.2" E), 30 km northwest of Coimbatore City, on the fringes of Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, Western

ft. The construction was undertaken by Centre of Science and Technology for Rural Development (COSTFORD), Thrissur. Every year several students of architecture come to SACON to do project work on these land mark buildings.

Campus Tour



Major milestones of SACON

- Registered as a society under the Societies Registration Act, 1860 – 1990
- Inaugurated – 5th June 1990
- 55 acres, acquired in 1995, occupied in 1998-99
- Foundation stone for the permanent campus was laid on 20 May 1995 by Shri. Kamal Nath, Hon'ble Minister for Environment & Forests, Government of India
- Campus was dedicated to the nation on 11th February 2000 by Shri. T. R. Balu, the Hon'ble Minister for Environment and Forests,, Government of India

From Jeans to Genes and Notebooks to Notebooks: the changing face of ecological research



Owlet Habitat

If one were to sketch a researcher in the field of ecology from 25 years ago and compare her/him to one today, I guess the only common bits would be the pair of jeans, binoculars and a water bottle. Twenty five years ago that was largely what a researcher would carry to field. And yes of course the notebook – but not what we refer to as notebook today. In the past this would be the simple pad of paper that one writes on with a pen. The notebook of today is a computer and no pen is required.

Apart from that, today's researchers would surely have a GPS unit with them – no one would venture into their field sites without one. This little instrument as important as the pair of binoculars for field research. If you know how to use it right you will not ever get lost. Moreover, you can record and track your important locations (where you saw the bird, collected a sample, landmarks etc.) all in the device itself and then download onto your notebook. And then of course there is the mobile phone. That is another little (sometimes not so little) instrument that all researchers today would have. This is the connection to the outer world in every possible way, be it for obtaining and passing on information, entertainment and even doubles up as a camera. Technology has changed the world and also the way research is done.

Laboratory work, which never really formed a major part of any Wildlife Researchers mission, has now become the centre point of many projects, especially my own. My career took a vast turn and technology opened up many new avenues in the way I could answer the same questions that I asked years ago. Studying rare species back then was in many ways suicidal for the career. One obtained very little data from hours of hard work even after squeezing out every bit of information, the output would be difficult to publish in any reputed journal. Fast forward to today and apart from the hard work that still remains, the rest is very different.

I, along with my collaborators (Robin Vijayan and Prachi Mehta) and student (Pankaj Koparde) have a project on owls, focused on one very rare owl (the Forest Owlet) found only in a few locations in Central India and nowhere else in the world! It is a little more than 20 cm in length and shares its habitat with two other similar looking and similar sized owlets (the Spotted Owlet and the Jungle Owlet) which are fairly common across India. The International Union for Conservation of Nature and natural resources (IUCN) reviews the conservation status of all biological species globally and inventories this in a compilation called the Red List. There are several grades of categories and species are listed under these depending on the degree of threats they face to their survival. The Forest Owlet is placed under “Critically Endangered”, which happens to be the highest degree of threat, just after the category “Extinct”.

There is a lot of drama surrounding this little owl. It was believed to be extinct but re-discovered after 113 years and there was great controversy over specimens from a museum being stolen and re-labelled with a new location! Most importantly its biological name, currently *Heteroglaux blewitti* (the first name being the genus and the other the species), was not agreed upon by all experts. For a long time there has been this debate on whether the generic name is appropriate. This species looks so much like the Spotted Owlet (*Athene brama*) that many believed it should be called *Athene blewitti*. One might ask “What’s in a name, if we know that this species is under severe threat?” Molecular phylogeny uses DNA sequence data of species to build a tree, akin to the family tree, to gauge relationships between species. This is important to understand evolutionary and biogeographical processes that could explain the current distribution of the species. In turn this could help understand the requirements and threats the species faces.



Forest Owlet

With the rapid progress in technology it is now possible to address several time scales of the history of a species, from evolutionary time to current, simultaneously. This provides information on taxonomy, the degree of relatedness with other species, connectedness between fragmented populations (even if the habitat is fragmented populations can be connected genetically), genetic diversity within a population and possible hybridisation with other species. All this is possible with a drop of blood or the tip of a feather. Recent methods using Ultra Conserved Elements (UCE) which are small bits of DNA that have a very similar (conserved) sequence construction across very distantly related species can provide this bulk of information. When comparing across species, the DNA sequences closer to the conserved markers (UCE) would be similar and with distance mutations would increase. The ones closer to the UCE (and hence more similar) would provide information of the deep past (evolutionary). Hence similar species would have similar sequence structures and the more distantly related species would have greater differences. As distance increases from the UCE, differences would increase. This would be important when looking at differences within a species but across different populations that are fragmented (e.g. Forest Owlet from Khandwa in Madhya Pradesh vs from Tansa in Maharashtra). This would tell us if these populations are genetically (and hence physically) connected. Still further from the UCE would inform on within population differences, e.g. we may assume that the population in Khandwa is a single one but a break in the habitat (such as deforested bits) could disrupt genetic continuity. This population level information would also inform us on the genetic variation present in the population (larger the variation better are the prospects for the species).

Unfortunately, despite the potential volume of information that can be obtained from technology, the problems in conservation remain the same as 25 years ago. Habitats of many species are fast degrading. The case of the Forest Owlet is alarming. It lives in the deciduous forests of Central India which are under severe threat from logging and development. Since biodiversity conservation is strongly linked to social and political ideology it is now left to human minds and hearts to put all this information to good use. It is up to us to ensure that the bird survives the next 25 years (and much more) and figures in an article for the Golden Jubilee celebrations of SACON!

Dr. Shomita Mukherjee
shomitam@gmail.com

Sálím Ali Trophy Nature Competition Awards 2015 -16



**Address by Dr. K. Ravichandran, IFS,
Conservator of Forests, A&N Islands**



Address by Dr. K. Sankar, Director, SACON

Sálím Ali Trophy Nature Competitions 2015-16 prize distribution ceremony was held at Champion Hall, Central Academy of State Forest Services, Forest College Campus, R. S. Puram, Coimbatore on Sunday, 20th March 2016 at 10:00 AM. Dr. K. Sankar, Director, SACON presided over the function and Dr. P. Pramod, Principal Scientist, presented the background information and report of the Sálím Ali Trophy Nature Competitions. Dr. K. Ravichandran, IFS, Conservator of Forests, A&N Islands, the Chief Guest, gave away the prizes and trophies to the winners. In total, 120 students from 17 schools received the prizes. Kongu Vellalar Mat. Hr. Sec School, Karumathampatti won the overall Champions Trophy and honoured with the Sálím Ali Trophy for the Sálím Ali Trophy Nature Competitions 2015-16. Bharathi Mat. Hr. Sec. School, Thadagam Road, Coimbatore received the first runner-up title, whereas G.D. Mat. Hr. Sec School, Coimbatore received the second runner-up title.



**Kongu Vellalar Mat. Hr. Sec School, Karumathampatti
Winners of Overall Champions Trophy**



**Bharathi Mat. Hr. Sec. School, Thadagam Road,
Coimbatore- First Runner Up**



**G.D. Mat. Hr. Sec School, Coimbatore
Second Runner Up**

सल्लम अली पक्षिविज्ञान एवं प्रकृति विज्ञान केन्द्र,

Sálím Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History

अनैकट्टी, कोयम्बटूर & 641108

Anaikatty (Post), Coimbatore – 641 108

Tamil Nadu, INDIA

Tele : +91 – 422-2203100, 109

Fax : +91 – 422 – 2657088

Email : salimali@sacon.in, salimalicentre@gmail.com

Website : www.sacon.in

Editor: Dr. Mathew K Sebastian

Editorial Board: Dr. Rajah Jayapal, Dr Pramod P &
R. Jayakumar

Design: A. Srinivasan

Views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the
Editors or the Sálím Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History

January- March 2016

Published by the Director, Sálím Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History,
Anaikatty, Coimbatore– 641 108, Tamil Nadu, India.