



# SACON News

*Vol. 17 (2) April – June 2020*



# SACON News

April to June, 2020

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Feature Article on Otters



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#### Editorial Correction in SACON News Vol. 17(1), Jan -March, 2020

- Cover Photo Credit: Mr. Shiva Kumar instead of Mr. Amirtha Balan R
- Pg. 14: Green Nature Valley Resort to be read as Green Nature Valley
- Pg. 19: Correction in Email Address: khanxenab@gmail.com

**Front Cover**  
Little-ringed Plover  
©Deepak D.

**Back Cover**  
Painted Stork  
© Siddhesh Bhor





## From the Director's Desk



I hope all our readers are safe and healthy amidst the global pandemic COVID – 19. With the relaxation of lockdown norms and regulations during May 2020, SACON faculty and staff resumed regular work hours in the campus following the COVID-19 protocols laid down by the Centre and Tamil Nadu State Government.

As the pandemic has halted all major commercial, non-commercial and institutional activities, this April to June issue of SACON's Newsletter covers a few virtual activities including virtual celebrations of World Environmental Day (WED) 2020 hosted by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Govt. of India. On the occasion of WED 2020, our faculty Dr. P. R. Arun, Senior Principal Scientist gave a lead talk on a Webinar hosted by the Gulbarga University, Karnataka. During the reporting period, Dr. P. Balasubramanian, Senior Principal Scientist, superannuated from his service after devoting 27 years of dedicated service at SACON. This issue also features articles wherein our students have accounted their experiences with Otters and Gibbons, while carrying out research in their respective fields. Our new section Researcher's Corner - *Art & Conservation* also features a wonderful poem written by one of SACON's Researchers.

I hope you all have a good time reading and wish you all health and safety.

Dr. K. Sankar



# Institutional Events

## World Environment Day 2020 Celebrations



SACON joined the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Govt. of India in celebrating the World Environment Day (WED) on 5<sup>th</sup> June 2020 virtually through Video Conferencing (VC) on the theme of 'Nagar Van' (City Forest). The Hon'ble Union Minister (EF&CC) and Hon'ble Minister of State (EF&CC) delivered talks on the occasion.

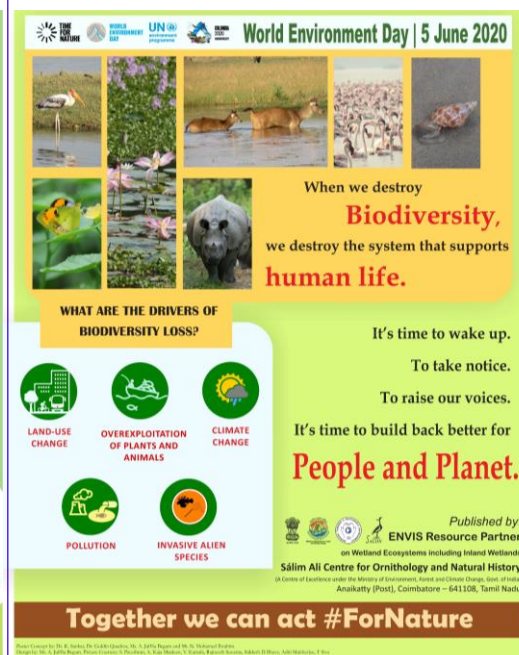
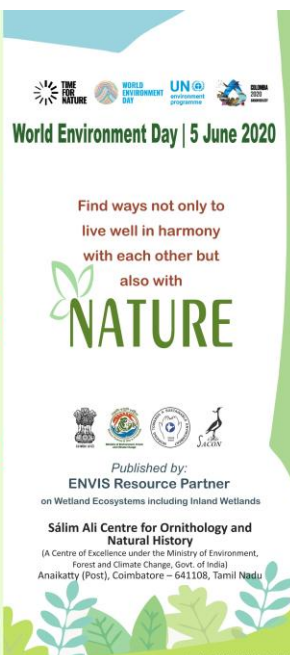


SACON Faculty attending the virtual celebrations on World Environment Day



Hon'ble Minister (EF&CC), Shri Prakash Javadekar's virtual address

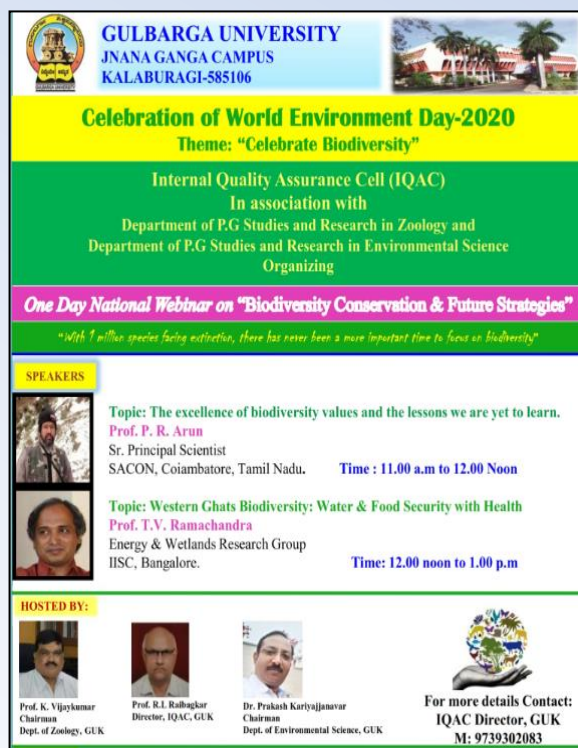
SACON released two posters in commemoration of World Environment Day on (1) 'Find ways not only to live well in harmony with each other but also with nature', and (2) 'Why Biodiversity needs to be conserved and the factors affecting Biodiversity'.





## Institutional Events

### Webinar Lead Talk by SACON Faculty on World Environment Day



**GULBARGA UNIVERSITY**  
JNANA GANGA CAMPUS  
KALABURAGI-585106

**Celebration of World Environment Day-2020**  
Theme: "Celebrate Biodiversity"

Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC)  
In association with  
Department of P.G Studies and Research in Zoology and  
Department of P.G Studies and Research in Environmental Science  
Organizing

**One Day National Webinar on "Biodiversity Conservation & Future Strategies"**  
"With 1 million species facing extinction, there has never been a more important time to focus on biodiversity"

**SPEAKERS**

**Topic: The excellence of biodiversity values and the lessons we are yet to learn.**  
**Prof. P. R. Arun**  
Sr. Principal Scientist  
SACON, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. **Time : 11.00 a.m to 12.00 Noon**

**Topic: Western Ghats Biodiversity: Water & Food Security with Health**  
**Prof. T.V. Ramachandra**  
Energy & Wetlands Research Group  
IISC, Bangalore. **Time: 12.00 noon to 1.00 p.m**

**HOSTED BY:**

**Prof. K. Vijaykumar**  
Chairman  
Dept. of Zoology, GUK

**Prof. R.I. Balaguer**  
Director, IQAC, GUK

**Dr. Prakash Kariyajanwar**  
Chairman  
Dept. of Environmental Science, GUK

**For more details Contact:**  
IQAC Director, GUK  
M: 9739302083

Dr. P.R. Arun, Senior Principal Scientist, EIA Division of SACON delivered a webinar lead talk as part of the World Environment day celebrations on 5<sup>th</sup> June 2020 through video conferencing from SACON. The webinar, on the theme "Celebrate Biodiversity" was organized on the occasion of World Environment day by the Internal Quality Assurance Cell (IQAC) of Gulbarga University, Jana Ganga Campus, Kalaburagi in association with departments of Zoology and Environmental Science. Dr. Arun spoke on "The excellence of biodiversity values and the lessons we are yet to learn from the nature". The talk highlighted the invaluable services by nature, the excellence of biological systems compared to our artificial systems, and the learnings from nature to further improve our systems thereby minimizing our carbon foot prints and environmental impacts. Another talk on "Western Ghats Biodiversity: Water & Food Security with Health" was delivered on the occasion by Prof. T.V. Ramachandra of Energy & Wetlands Research Group of Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru.

### SACON bid farewell to Senior Scientist



Dr. Ram Pratap Singh, Senior Scientist, Department of Avian Physiology and Genetics, resigned from SACON on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2020 to join as an Associate Professor in the Department of Life Science at Central University South Bihar, Gaya, Bihar. Dr. Singh joined SACON in March 2012 and conducted research on DNA forensics and various physiological aspects of male and female reproduction in birds. Dr. Singh also played a significant role in the establishment of National Avian Forensic Laboratory at SACON. The SACON family wishes him well for all his future endeavours.

### SACON on Twitter



Sálim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON) is now on Twitter (SACON\_Sálim Ali Centre, @SACONCoimbatore). Dr. Aditi Mukherjee, Scientist (Extension Division) is the in-charge for the maintenance of the activity of the Twitter Account of SACON.

## Institutional Events

### Superannuation of SACON Senior Faculty

Dr. P. Balasubramanian, Senior Principal Scientist, Division of Landscape Ecology, superannuated on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2020 from the service of SACON, after putting in more than 27 years of devoted service. Dr. Balasubramanian, fondly known as Balu, joined SACON on 6<sup>th</sup> July 1992 when SACON was in its fledgling years. His years of experience and technical knowledge immensely helped in the institution's growth in the field of conservation. During his service at SACON, he executed over 30 research projects as Principal Investigator/Co-investigator, published over 100 research articles, 4 books, and also held additional responsibilities as Research Coordinator. Dr. Balu's competency, expertise, and unswerving determination for the conservation of India's biodiversity will be truly missed by SACON family.



On the occasion of Superannuation of Dr. P. Balasubramanian



## Tungabhadra Otter Conservation Reserve: Otters in an archaeological site

Ankit Moun, Riddhika Ramesh & Ramesh T.

**Fig. 1**

A view of  
Tungabhadra river  
crossing the rocky  
ravines of Hampi.



“Only when the last of the animal horns, tusks, skin and bones have been sold, will mankind realize that money can never buy back our wildlife” a famous quote by ‘Paul Oxtan’, a Wildlife writer explains the pessimistic condition of wildlife globally. When humans realized the need for conservation of natural habitats and wildlife, they started declaring land masses as Protected Areas. However, in the beginning only large and charismatic species were given attention; and small and less fascinating species were often neglected by governments and forest managers. Otters are one of the lesser known semi-aquatic mammals that were given less conservation attention until the illegal trade of their pelts, pet trade was busted by notable conservation organizations over the last decade. In India, a large extent of otter distribution is naturally protected by Tiger Reserves, Biosphere Reserves and Wildlife Sanctuaries, but otters being heavily reliant on water quality and quantity, also need innovative conservation strategies outside Protected Areas.

In 2016, Karnataka State Government notified the new ‘Tungabhadra Otter Conservation Reserve’ (hereafter TOCR), a first of its kind reserve prioritizing the conservation of Otters in this landscape. It’s a riverine stretch of 34 km extending from the city of Hospet to Kampli, with its banks fragmented by many village settlements, temples and farmlands of rice, banana, and sugarcane. TOCR is an archeologically active site, as the river flows through the Dharwar series of rocks, which is more than 2500 million years old Precambrian structure and is considered from the category of Archean era where the rocks are rich in manganese, tungsten, tin, gold, silver and iron. However, TOCR is under enormous pressure from tourism as the river surrounds the historical city Hampi, visited by many local and international tourists for its ancient and holy sites.

## Popular Articles



**Fig. 2**  
A smooth-coated otter family in TOCR during their hunting bouts.



I (first author) was given the opportunity to study the habitat ecology of the Smooth-coated Otter in TOCR for my Master's dissertation in April 2019 by SACON and Bellary Territorial Forest Division of the Karnataka Forest Department. With all the enthusiasm I reached my destination and met the Deputy Conservator of Forest, for official site visits, and further discussions on the survey design and methodology. He provided immense logistical and technical support throughout my field surveys. I recall him saying that "Tungabhadra is not a typical river, where you have vast space to walk". And as he truly said, the terrain was very tough for trekking through the boulder-strewn landscape. Nevertheless, the experience was very distinct and mesmerizing than other rivers I had surveyed earlier. Bellary's waterways are beautifully carved by the vast rockiness along the banks (Fig. 1) amidst the farmlands, the iconic valley of 'Hampi' and the ruins of the Vijayanagara dynasty. Hampi is also an important archeological town and UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Smooth-coated otters of TOCR share the riverscape with the endangered Deccan Mahseer, Softshell turtle, and Mugger. Wildlife enthusiasts can also easily spot the vulnerable and endemic Yellow throated bulbul in fragmented rocky hillocks.

My field assistants, Ramesh and Hemgiri, local residents from this area, were once hunters, but are now working with the forest department as anti-poaching watchers. Their vast knowledge about the landscape is pivotal and without them my field surveys in TOCR would have been extremely challenging. As they accompanied me to the fields for almost two months, I garnered skills on tracking the signs of otters while searching for active grooming sites and holts to place camera traps.

I was closely monitoring two otter families, Kalghatta family (1 male, 2 females and 3 sub adults) and Huligi temple family (1 male, 3 females and 2 sub-adults). Both families were habituated to human presence and hence was easier to track. Although, otters were hardly seen through the day, they would emerge from the resting areas after noon break in the late evenings, as fishermen and pilgrims returned home. Within a short interval of time, they would gregariously predate fish and were observed to offer the catch to the sub-adults first. After a hunting bout of almost an hour, satiated, they returned back to the grassy thickets of *Arundo donex* (Fig. 2). Interestingly, there are nine ancient check dams (also called anicuts) in the reserve which are still functional, diverting the river water to agricultural areas and even to the wells used by the otters (Fig. 3). These anicuts retain the river water throughout the year, making it favourable for otters.



## Popular Articles



**Fig. 3**  
Adult and pup interactions of a Smooth-coated otter family at the entrance of a well-used holt.



Otters being semi-aquatic, require both land and water, but the absence of bank vegetation is as good as not having any refuge cover. A large patch of sugarcane field is functionally similar to the *Arundo donex* grass which the otters use as cover at resting sites. On multiple occasions, these families were observed emerging out of the sugarcane fields after a long spell of rest (Fig. 4).



**Fig. 4**  
The Kalghatta Otter family resting in sugarcane fields.



I had fixed camera traps inside one of the active holts that captured interesting interactions between adults and pups comprising 12 individuals. This family was highly nocturnal, and active mostly in the early mornings. The staff of Tungabhadra electricity board shared some CCTV footage, in which the family of otters was seen crossing the front of their office. Huligesh, a local resident and Anti-poaching watcher, informed me that this family often crossed the road to avoid the tunnel and to access open parts of the canals. Their fresh tracks were frequently seen in the front of the Anti-poaching camp on the canal.

Declaring TOCR as conservation reserve has its own pros and cons. Although TOCR supports a viable population of otters, it continues to face severe threats from the discharge of textile industries, runoff from industrial effluents, sewage from nearby urban areas, domestic pollution, mining activities, over-exploitation of groundwater, dynamite fishing and deforestation resulting in the death of fish and poor health of local people and wildlife species. These conditions could make otters more vulnerable to local extinction if the management authorities do not regulate the exploitation of Tungabhadra's rivers.

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Photo Credits: Ankit Moun

## Popular Articles

### Of Garo Land and it's *Hooroos*

Subhiksha Lakshmi Maxima

A panorama of a typical forested landscape taken at Sasatgre, West Garo Hills



It was with mixed feelings when I landed in Garo Land for my MSc Dissertation project. A new place, a different culture, a new language, a new habitat and moreover, the uncertainty of the post-CAA times was easier to deal with, thanks to the Meghalaya Project's Junior Research Biologists who were kind enough to help us – me and my classmate and friend Sangeeth, to settle down and initiate field work. The major focus of my work was to assess the butterfly species diversity of jhum fallows of various age classes and the different habitat factors that influence it in this landscape. The core of my data collection was excruciatingly shortened thanks or rather, no thanks to COVID 19 as I managed to spend only less than two months in the field. The time that I did spend, etched some of the best moments in my memory. Whether it was experiencing the delectable flavours of the Garo cuisine (fraught with baking soda), the musically orchestrated howling of the Hoolock Gibbons every dawn, the visuals of people leaving for work in the *cha* (tea), *komla* (orange) *bagans* (gardens) or in the *ghum* fields, a wedding where the entire village comes together for cooking and each household contribute a basketful of rice and all that they can for the celebration, the *ghum* fields where my Field Assistant would harvest some tapioca and chilies for a survey-time snack or the magical transformation of the blue skies to an ochre - a result of the smoke from burning of large patches of felled land for cultivation, an integral part of slash and burn agriculture practiced by the people here.

A panorama of the burnt forest fallow after slash, a typical jhum agriculture scene taken on the first day of cultivation.





## Popular Articles



A "Nok Achik"  
(Nok- house, Achik -  
Garo) being built  
overlooking the  
forested landscape.



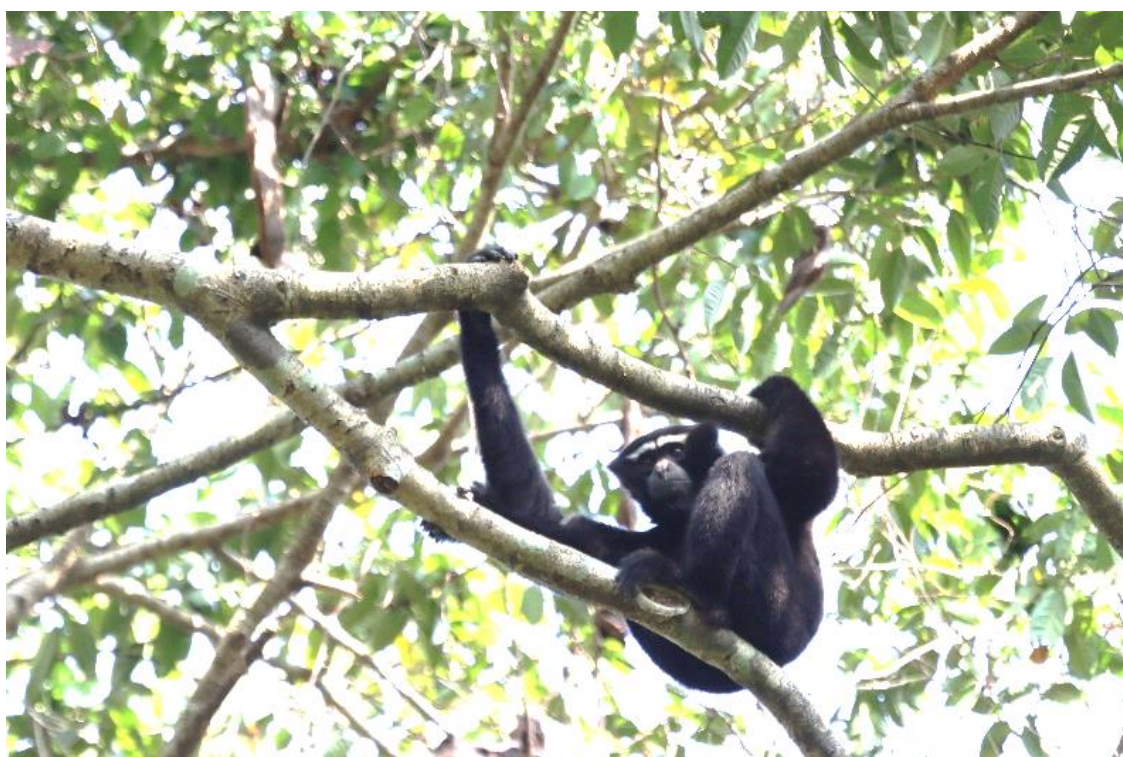
One of my personal favourites was when I got to spend a solid twenty minutes in the company of a very curious Hoolock Gibbon or *Hooroo* as they are known in Garo. Working is considered a sin on Sundays, an offshoot of the Garo's religious beliefs and I used to find it a herculean task persuading my Field Assistant to accompany me for data collection who would look at me incredulously as if I'd suggested manslaughter. Needless to say, I succeeded only twice. However, during my fieldwork at Selbalgre, the *Hooroo* country, the Secretary of the village who was also a charming host, agreed to show me around as long as no "meplip" (butterfly) – catching was involved. As all my sightings of the *Hooroo* were during my sampling time where I did not have the luxury to either follow or observe them, I asked him to just accompany me in the hunt for the *Hooroo* and he gladly obliged.

The Village Secretary of Selbalgre  
gathering some "Ritchi" for a snack  
during the *Hooroo* Hunt



## Popular Articles

The Gibbons here are known to spend more time near the fringes of the Community Reserve close to human habitation where food is easily available. After four hours of a frustrating cat-and-mouse search both outside and inside the Reserve, we were trudging back ruefully, clothed in defeat when a Black-capped Langur troop distracted us. Thanking my stars, I bolted towards the troop losing the Secretary and managed a hazy video. Although there was a newfound sense of hope, I was contemplating turning back when through my viewfinder, I saw a patch of black moving towards me mid-canopy. Wondering what on earth, one could imagine how elated I was when I saw those silver-grey eyebrows. Agile and graceful with his movements, the male Hoolock Gibbon moved swiftly and settled on a branch in the top canopy without making a single sound. Not blessed with the same sense of nimbleness, I moved a tad bit ungracefully, rustling up leaves, and sat down right beneath the *Hooroo* on the forest floor.



A male Hoolock Gibbon graced the author with his presence

And there we were, just the two of us, staring at each other with absolute awe (I speak only for myself when I say this) and I had begun recording in my camera all the while making sure I was looking at the Gibbon *not* through my viewfinder. An experienced gymnast I found him to be, he would also resort to staring at me upside down and after deciding I was not a threat, relaxed and started munching on some tender buds after a few minutes of which I lost him. Exhilarated, I skipped back to the Secretary who was ironically watching the mud-puddling Sailors, Jesters, and Judies for me and we pored over the footage, for who would be as lucky as I had been?



## Popular Articles

### Researcher's Corner - Art & Conservation

#### *Wee twees in the air*

*And love happened twice  
I was ready for the price,  
With the Sun on zenith  
One bird in my checklist  
Roaming the Indian rivers  
Along with some believers  
Vibrant and calm water  
With all silver fishes ; otters  
All those peaceful eves  
Keep that way God, please!*

*Breathtaking twist and turns  
And all the sand burns  
Walking life to life  
Watching the fish do Jive  
Series of lessons learned  
Book of experience earned  
With the "wee twees" in the air  
Wingbeat not so firm  
I found my second love for Black-bellied tern.*

**- Gourav Sonawane**





### Editorial Board

Dr. Aditi Mukherjee, Dr. T. Ramesh & Mr. R. Jayakumar

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

सालिम अली पक्षिविज्ञान एवं प्रकृतिविज्ञान केन्द्र

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To

**April - June 2020**

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