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# ECOTRAIL

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# EDITORIAL

Change is the only constant, so also in camping and outdoor education things have evolved and the change is perceptible. I have been camping since the age of 11 years. Those were the scouts camps, then in the university I did a lot of NCC camps. Those camps were the most rigorous, physically challenging and mentally difficult but the learning outcomes were equally rewarding.

Finishing my post graduation, I joined the World Wild Life Fund as was known then, presently it is called the World Wide Fund for Nature, as their Education and Projects Officer for Western Region covering the territories of Maharashtra, Gujrat, Madhya Pradesh & Goa. We ran one of the foremost conservation education programme in the world through our Nature clubs of India movement (NCI). The NCI were present in schools and colleges of India and we organised camps for the students in some of the most spectacular wildlife sanctuaries and national parks of India, to name a few Dachigam in Jammu & Kashmir, Tadoba National Park, Melghat, Nagzira Wildlife Sanctuary in Maharashtra, Mollem in Goa, Mudumalai, Bandipur, Bhitarkanika and many others. One of the transformational thing we did was walk the forest in the morning and evening with teachers and children, a minimum of 15 km to 20 km exploring the wildlife in all its glory with not a soul in sight. We stayed in makeshift tents or forest dormitories.

Setting up the camps was interesting. A couple of days before the camp, we came and cleaned the toilets with materials brought from the towns 40 km away, the mattresses were put out to the sun and then the 10 campers with their teacher called the Nature Club Adviser would come in batches depending on the train they were arriving by, take a state transport bus and reach the camp site. It took nearly a day to fill the camp batch sometimes even two days. But the way we romanced the forest there is no doubt in my mind, all the children went back transformed with the beauty and tranquility of the forest, the serene atmosphere, the silence of the forest suddenly pierced by the alarm call of the sambhar or cheetal or the growl heralding the arrival of the tiger to the water hole just cannot be compared. All the participants teachers and children became ardent conservationists.

The morning trail would start by a cuppa of hot chai, glucose biscuits and a packet of grams soaked overnight in water and jaggery. They returned after the long trail for breakfast at 10 am. The beauty was no one complained. The only communication with the outside world was a wireless equipment of the forest department and my Jeep. We never had an emergency in over 10 years of camping. Local people, children and parents, in fact the entire ecosystem supported the movement. I can say with firm conviction that many of the present day lineage of proactive conservationists be it legal expert, wild life biologist, environmentalist, activist or journalist, have all been influenced as nature club members and have been coming for some of those camps. Those camps made a difference as the camps we run in our Trailblazers - The Outdoor School. Today camping has largely changed. From tents and dormitories, we have moved to hotels, AC rooms, attached toilets, buffet meals, AC bus and flights. Creature comforts are the order of the day but be that as it may be, we continue to discuss aggressively about climate change, deforestation and extinction. Children barely put their feet in the forest, but efforts are on.....

Ranjan Biswas  
Editor- Ecotrail | Managing Director | Trustee- Trailblazers Foundation



## SEPALOUS BARLERIA



Image & Information Courtesy : Kumar Vinod Gosavi

*Barleria sepalosa* C.B. Clarke commonly known as Sepalous Barleria (Koranti in vernacular language) is found growing on exposed hill slopes at about 1200 m at Torana fort in Northern Western Ghats along with other species viz. *Abutilon ranadei* Woodrow and *Stapf*, *Arthraxon lanceolatus* var. *meeboldii* (Stapf.) Welzen, *A. lanceolatus* var. *villosus* (C.E.C. Fisch.) Welzen, *Blepharis repens* Roth, *Dichanthium jainii* (Deshp. and Hemadri) Deshp., *Echinopus echinatus* Roxb., *Rhinacanthus nasutus* (L.) Kurz., *Strobilanthes callosus* Nees, *S. sessilis* Nees, *Swertia densifolia* (Griseb.) Knobl., *Trachyspermum roxburghianum* (DC.) H.

This species is currently known only from a single locality with an area of occupancy less than 1 km<sup>2</sup> area, and the population consists of not more than 100 plants. Hence the species qualifies to be assessed under Critically Endangered: CRB 1ab (i, ii) (IUCN, 2010) category.

*Barleria sepalosa* C.B. Clarke is closely related to the *Barleria lawii* T. Anderson but differ by its outer broad sepals with serrate margin, size and shape of bracts and flower. The plant appears bushy like Topali Carvi (*Strobilanthes sessilis*) and bears white fluorescent colored flowers.

Ex-situ conservation efforts have been done by botanists and researchers in Lead Botanical Garden, Department of Botany, Shivaji University, Kolhapur and Naorji Godrej Centre for Plant Research (NGCPR), Shirwal, Pune.

# CELEBRATING 25 YEARS

*Trailblazers marks 25 adventurous years with plantation at Signal Shala*

Success is no accident, it is hard work, perseverance, learning, studying, sacrifice and most of all, love for what one does or learning to do. This said rightly, on the 20<sup>th</sup> March, Trailblazers celebrated successful 25 years and danced their way into the future with a fun filled day.

Trailblazers believes in sustainable environmental practices and felt no better way to commemorate the occasion than to plant saplings in India's first Signal School.

Signal Shala provides education to the underprivileged children living on signals in Thane, Maharashtra. The Trailblazers team spent the afternoon in the outdoors at the 'Signal Shala'. With an aim of beautifying the place for the students, the Trailblazers Team planted 25 flowering plants to mark these glorious 25 years. Each team member with a spade and shovel dug a pit, placed the plant into the pit, pushed the soil back into the pit, and lastly, watered it.

This was followed by the Trailblazers Team joining the Signal Shala students for Holi celebrations and getting smeared with different colors, enjoying the festival with great enthusiasm and fervor. After celebrations, the Trailblazers Team gifted books and sweets to Shri Batu Sawant for the Signal Shala students.

The vibrancy of colors is something that brings in a lot of positivity in our lives and Holi being the festival of colors was a great way to mark the beginning of 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration.



## THE TUDU LADY

*"Action speaks louder than words"*

Jamuna Tudu and women in her village of Purbi Singhum in Jharkhand have many brothers that they protect - the tree brothers. It is a great example of how our tradition and culture can be intertwined with the conservation of our natural resources. It is a simple way to combat plundering of trees from the greed of timber mafias. The Lady Tarzan has inspired others in her village and collectively they have been protecting these trees and forest of over approx 50 hectares day and night for the past 20 years. Armed with awareness on how forests can help environment, wildlife and people around, she has passed on this information to fellow villagers and created a mass movement to protect the natural resources around her village. She truly deserves Padma Shri - The Tudu Lady.



Jamuna Tudu

# SONAR QUILA - THE GOLDEN FORT, JAISALMER

A UNESCO World Heritage Site - A Sandstone Fort in the land of Sand

Its massive sandstone walls and high bastions atop a hill suddenly appeared as we crossed the unending sandy Thar Desert. The yellow glow of the sandstones used to build one of the largest forts in the world, gradually faded into honey gold as the sun set. Thus disappeared the 250 ft. tall, reinforced by crenelated sandstone wall of about 30 ft.. Built between 1633 and 1647, the 99 bastions camouflaged themselves to merge into the yellow desert.

The Jaisalmer fort has the architectural influences of Islamic and Rajput styles. It has a triple ringed defence and is one of the very few living forts in the world with almost one fourth of the total population of the city living inside. The city of Jaisalmer, that was mostly within the fort, once stood at the crossroads of the important trade routes including the ancient silk road. Said to have been built by the Rajput ruler Rawal Jaisal on the Trikuta hill, the fort, now a UNESCO world heritage site, has seen many battles. From the Muslim rulers like Sultan Ala-Uddin-Khilji to Mughal Emperor Humayun. During the British rule, the maritime trade expanded and the growth of the port of Bombay led to economic decline of Jaisalmer. After independence and the partition, the ancient trade route through this border city was totally closed. Jaisalmer is now an important, strategic military post and earns most of its revenues as a tourist destination.

As we walked through the meandering expanse of fort, we passed through the massive gateways – Ganesh Pol, Akshay Pol, Suraj Pol and Hawa Pol. We took time to admire the intricate carvings of a couple of the 7 Jain temples built inside the fort and the Raj Mahal Palace, that used to be the residence of the Maharawal of Jaisalmer and the Queen's residence. Both of which are now preserved as museum.

The fort has a very interesting ingenious drainage system, which takes the rainwater out of the fort. These ghut nalis', are effective in protecting the weak sedimentary rock foothill from damage caused by seepage. The threat is posed by both the inhabitants residing within the fort and the thousands of tourists that visit the fort every year. However, restoration work is underway by the World Monuments Fund and a UK based charity, Jaisalmer in Jeopardy.

Satyajit Ray, the famous Indian film director wrote and filmed the detective story which went on to become a classic, Sonar Kella – The Golden Fort. The locals of Jaisalmer call it Sonar Quila, and visitors from Bengal and various parts of the world come to enjoy the experience and to find Mukuler baadi, the house of Mukul, the child protagonist of the film. We did too and ended the tour at a local eatery just outside taking in the sight of the fort standing tall in front of us inspiring story-telling and behind us giving us a picture perfect backdrop!



*Ms. Nivedita Mukherjee is a writer, educator and advisor for excellence and strategic initiatives in education. Her interests range from science and literature to creative arts and travelling. An aspiring raconteur, she writes of what she is passionate about ... teaching moments for parents and educators from her own experiences as a parent*

*and a fourth generation educator and stories from her travels. Various aspects of her life and thoughts lie within her articles categorised as : Ask Niv, Been There Seen That, Fabulous Forts, TanaBana stories and Children's book reviews.*

# THE WHITE CANVAS OF KUTCH

## A Unique Ecotone - Little Rann of Kutch

Trailblazers - the Outdoor School believes in taking the students in the outdoors and getting them closer to the ecosystem. Following this philosophy, Trailblazers conducted a camp for the students of an International School in Pune. The camp's objective was to give them an experience and understanding about the wetlands of Little Rann of Kutch. This was done by conducting science experiments that would help reinforce concepts they learnt in school. The students had a safari in the Wild Ass Sanctuary, the last and the only home for the endangered Wild Ass in the world.

The students had an opportunity to see migratory birds like Flamingos that annually visit the wetlands of Kutch. The most fascinating thing for them was to spot various birds and identify them at the Thol Bird Sanctuary. Enthused by the variety of birds, they decided to sketch some of the sights they witnessed. The sketching did not stop there, while exploring the intricate carvings at the well-known UNESCO World Heritage, Rani ki Vav and later the Modhera Sun temple, their sketch books were overflowing with masterpieces. Their inquisitiveness met no bounds when they got to know the entire process of salt manufacturing, right from visiting salt pans to a local salt factory where iodizing and packaging took place. They also interacted with the salt farmers known as the "Agariya Tribes" spread far over acres of desert.

The students also tried out fine bead work taught by the "Mir tribes" and they were also introduced to the local art forms like "Mata ki Pachedi" which involves a fictional story about their local deity being hand painted on cloth and then it is turned into various handicrafts. The intricate Tangariya art weaving left the students bewildered and they enjoyed shopping at these places. This coupled with leisure time to take part in plenty of fun activities and enjoy Gujarati cuisine, made the camp a success.



Soil testing - Little Rann of Kutch



Hands on experience - learning bead work from Mir Tribe



Rani ki Vav - UNESCO World Heritage site



# CAMP FOR THE CUBS



Keeping in mind the utmost importance we give to the outdoors and the way we wish to make it a part of our daily lives, Decathlon and Trailblazers have been associated to offer outdoor enthusiasts various treks, day outings, talks, workshops and camping experiences. Trailblazers recently organized an overnight camp for 6-9 year olds. Children had an opportunity to participate and get a camping experience in the safest environment possible. The best thing about camping with children is that

they are excited, curious and look forward to new experiences with their peers in the freedom of outdoors away from home and parents.

During the camp, children had fun interacting with each other while playing team games and doing team activities in small groups. The team games and activities involved peer to peer interaction giving them a platform to communicate, cooperate and organize amongst themselves.

The benefits of being in outdoors are many. It is observed that

physical activities like running, jumping, carrying objects etc. develops healthier children with improved motor skills. It prevents obesity and builds stronger bones and muscles compared to children glued to electronic devices. Outdoor play and team games not only improve the sensory skills like better vision and touch but also develops longer attention spans. In general, children who play in outdoors are happier and healthier with better immunity.



Children having fun with fellow campers



Children learning to pitch tent from Trailblazers expert



THEN AND NOW

THEN



NOW







THEN



NOW



# SANJAY GANDHI NATIONAL PARK

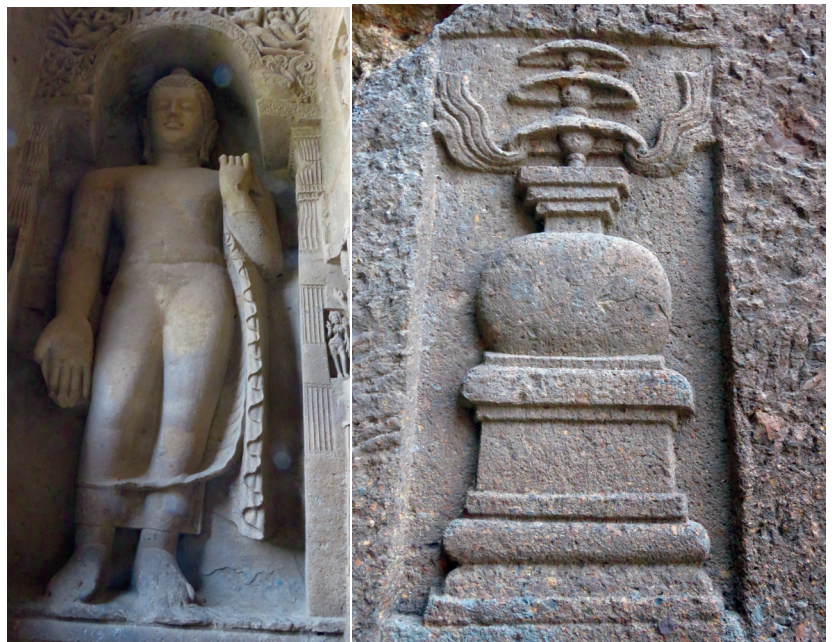
One of the most common visits in our school days would be the Sanjay Gandhi National park, the greenery, the exhibits at the interpretation centre, the explanation by our teachers that its one of the only forests within city limits and the home to many leopards. All this description gave an average school goer like me a feel of greatest adventure i.e. being in Jungle and to believe that we are being watched by carnivores and that straying away may mean being dinner to one of those fearsome creatures!

All that changed when I grew up and went with Ranjan Sir for a trail in the national park as a college student and was bowled over with the insights shared by him. The expanse of 104.5 sqkms with hardly any fencing was a divine gift to Mumbai acting as a sink for the all the pollution we created in the city. With picnickers visiting only the buffer area and we blessed Trailblazers were off the beaten path and taken to the Shilonda trail in the core area with infrequent glimpses of spotted deers, racket tailed drongos, jewel bugs and the serene stream flowing after the recent first showers of the monsoon. The calm and tranquillity got me to pledge that I will return to this place more often.

True to my promise I kept returning to this wonderful haven in every season with friends, relatives, colleagues and explored every nook and corner allowed for visitors, with special permissions or without. My job at Trailblazers offered an incredible access to the opportunities of visiting this paradise with a bunch of children-where we explored the national park and went around sensitising them on conservation of forest cover, importance of afforestation, interdependence and food web. Every opportunity opened new discoveries like how the forest department is struggling to keep visitors in the buffer area and also educating them to keep the surroundings clean. It was difficult for forest department to maintain the forest sanctity with structures like MSEB, private ashram and MAFCO. The morning joggers and the actual inhabitants of the forest who still stay in small shanties and colonies in the buffer zone get the first sights of the forest every day and also are touched with the tranquillity of the undisturbed dawn. The Kanheri caves visit transported us to the ancient time more than a millennia ago when Buddhism was spreading its roots in Indian Subcontinent, how travellers must have rested on their journey from the seaside port to the Deccan plateau in the *vihas* alongside the monks who preached and taught Buddhism to young disciples. With growing number of visits, I listed the butterflies sightings particularly the oakleaf butterfly that left me spell bound and the cocoon of Atlas moth being the largest in the moths left me in awe. The swelling stream in the monsoon and the splendid experiences of crystal clear waterfalls captivated me. *-Rashmi Sharma*



Sanjay Gandhi National Park - A view of the valleys, mountains and forest



Buddha Statue and bas-relief



Exploring near Kanheri Caves

## SARDINE RUN

The world's largest migration, and that too happening underwater! The Sardine Run is a mass migration of sardines along the coast of South Africa, happening every year in May through July. These billions of sardines attract their predators. Hence, we have a feeding frenzy of sharks, dolphins and even birds swooping in for the sardines. And to top it all, it coincides with the humpback whale migration. Scuba diving in this absolutely "wild" phenomenon is any outdoor enthusiast's dream!



## POLAR LIGHTS

A dazzling occurring light show in the night sky, the polar lights (also known as the Northern and Southern Lights) is a surreal experience for any. Scientifically called the Aurora Borealis and Aurora Australis respectively, this is an astronomical phenomena caused by the interaction of the sun's particles with the Earth's magnetic field. Visible during the winter months from countries like Norway, Canada, Sweden that are close to the polar circles, this is a must attend for any outdoor enthusiast!



## THE BLUE HOLE, BELIZE

The largest sea hole in the world, The Great Blue Hole is situated off the coast of the Central American country- Belize. It is a perfectly circular in shape and drops upto 350 feet deep. Originally a cave system that was submerged in the sea during the ice age, the Blue Hole makes for an exciting dive site. Divers are able to swim through these underwater caves and experience clear blue waters rich in nurse sharks, turtles, fish and corals. In 2012, the Discovery Channel rated the Blue Hole as the #1 most amazing place on Earth! Open to only certified divers, this is yet another reason to go get your PADI!



This is Mark  
Mark travelled everywhere  
Mark wanted to travel more  
Mark realized something  
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