

CERD Green Chronicles



A FIELD EXPERIENCE STRAIGHT OUT OF JUNGLE

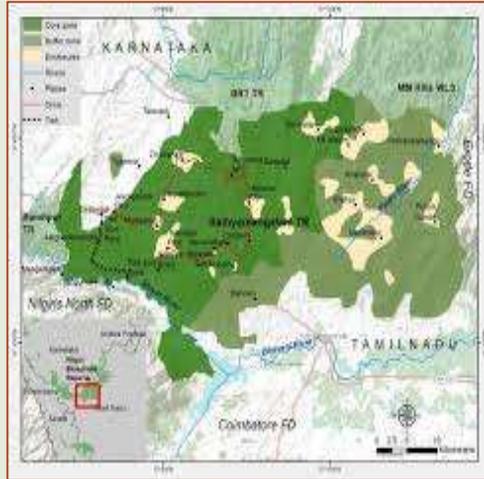
VIDIKA THIMMAIAH

Azim Premji University: PES Campus, Bengaluru – 560100 vedika.thimmaiah@gmail.com

1. ART IN ENVIRONMENT

Art and science has always been studied as two separate subjects, there have been very few attempts to understand the subjects together. Both art and science explore different ways to understand and describe the world around us. While science uses facts, figures and data art plays with aesthetics and the imagination. Using art in the world of science communication will help to bridge the gap between these subjects which have been studied in isolation.

During my internship at The Keystone Foundation, Bhavya an employee and I are explored different ways in which we can use art to communicate in the world of conservation. We created a map of the Sathyamangalam Tiger reserve, an entire poster explaining what Barefoot ecology is and used story telling and pop-up boards in conservation education models.



Ever since the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve was declared a tiger reserve in 2013, the areas that came under it took the shape of a rhinoceros. We used this to create an outline of the map outside the Keystone Field Ecology Center, Sathyamangalam. The map will not only define the areas where KFEC works but will also be a conversation starter for those who visit KFEC.

Keystone foundation uses the knowledge of the indigenous local communities to help monitor and understand the biodiversity of the area. They are known as "Barefoot Ecologists".(BFE) To help everybody understand who BFEs are and what they do. We drew a poster to illustrate the everyday life of a BFE. This included things that they monitored, animals, leaves, bee hives, fruiting of trees and water quality. The poster would give a visual representation of what BFEs do and why monitoring is crucial to conservation.

KF has been working on different ways to educate the children of local tribal communities in the STR region. For World Environment day, we created a storyboard with pop-up characters to explain the versatile use of plastic and the consequences of using it. Bhavya made the storytelling session an interactive one where the children would contribute to the story.



2. MY EXPERIEMNTS IN A FIELD KITCHEN

Field kitchens are very different from a regular kitchen. To begin with a field kitchen will always be less equipped than a regular one. The field kitchen at KFECS had few utensils, a handful of cutlery, a pressure cooker and most importantly a coffee filter.

During my internship I spent the most amount of time with Bhavya, an employee of Keystone Foundation. When I arrived at Sathyamangalam, I did not think I would cook all my three meals. I figured I would either eat at the local mess or just eat a lot of instant food. But thanks to Bhavya, I started to cook a lot more in the kitchen. My rations would come from local shops or Aadimalai (the producer company of KF).



Millet khichdi with potato fry and fig pickle from Aadimalai



Rice with potato and greens and chutney powder

The month that I spent in KFECS has taught me that cooking can be simple and not always elaborate, elaborate meals are hard to compose in a field kitchen. I also learnt that it isn't hard to make time to cook your own food, you also learn a lot more about local ingredients and the crops that are growing in the region. I enjoyed how we would use local foods like millets and eat hot yet comforting food.



Freshly harvested papaya, poha and tea for breakfast.

3. WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO BE AWAY FROM THE CITY AND STAY CLOSE TO A FOREST FOR A MONTH

When I learnt that I would be staying next to the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve for the duration of my internship, I was excited. For the past five years, I have lived in a city. Although the city has its own charm, the vast expanse of the forests, for me, will be a more captivating landscape than any city will ever be.

I stayed at the Keystone field ecology center, which is located in a small village called Aarepalyam. There were quite a few things that changed while I stayed there. My lifestyle immediately became a lot simpler and adapted to my field visits. I had to constantly tell myself to be alert, I had to keep my eyes and ears open if I didn't want to miss out on the biodiversity of the forests.

The people of the tribal communities were the kindest to me, I was always offered a cup of tea at whatever time of the day. Rarely do you see this kind of hospitality in a city. Unlike cities, in a small village like Aarepalyam everyone knows everyone. The idea of privacy is alien, in a village it is all about the community. Something I often find missing in cities.

Although living in a village besides the forest has been something that is entirely different from a city. The village is becoming a lot like cities. The pace of development in Aarepalyam is extremely quick, the influence of the market and global trends can be found in the village and food habits are becoming homogenized.



4. WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY

June 5 is marked by the United Nations as World Environment Day. This year's theme was "beat plastic pollution." In the Sathyamangalam region the Forest Department curated a program for school children in a small village called Bejlatti. It began with an elaborate tree planting ceremony, the trees were planted by the DFO and the school children. The trees were provided by Keystone foundation which included native tree species like *Terminalia elliptica* (Mathji) and *Millettia pinnata* (Hongae). After the tree planting session, a speech was given by Bhavya and Madesh who are employees at Keystone foundation and the DFO, they spoke about the importance of the environment and how plastic is bad and the different alternatives that can be used instead of plastic. This was followed by tea and distribution of bags to the school children. I thought the program was a good initiative, it could have been made more educative by a video screening or games for the students to understand the importance of the day.

Bhavya and Vijen – employees of KF curated a program for World Environment Day in the Aarepalyam School. The program began with a game, identifying if the waste was degradable or non-degradable. We showed them the type of trash and they had to label it to the correct category. This was followed by an interactive story-telling session about the role of plastic. The program ended with a drawing competition. The students were enthusiastic throughout the program and promised to tell their parents to not use plastic bags.

5. OVERALL EXPERIENCE AT KFECS



When I first arrived at the Keystone Field Ecology Center, Sathyamangalam (KFECS) I was greeted by two small houses painted orange, one was the office and the other was accommodation for guests. The place had a huge garden with a distinct Singapore cherry (*Muntingia calabura*) tree. The tree was busy throughout the day it attracted bees and birds and lots of monkeys. KFECS also had other visitors. The children of the villages would regularly visit. They would drop by for a chat or help out with the nursery work. KFECS has a small nursery where Vijen an employee would grow native species of trees and plants

At KFECS I worked with a team of three members- Vijeyen, Mahdesh and Bhavya. Working with a small team has its advantages and disadvantages. Ideas flow faster and are easier to execute in a small team. However, differences are harder to resolve in a small team.

My internship was a lot about adapting, giving up luxuries, which I realized I don't need. Listening and observing while I was on field was influenced by my team members. There is so much to learn from other cultures and my entire experience was about learning from a culture that was entirely different from mine.



6. Aarepalyam

Aarepalyam is a small village which is part of the Erode district. It is also home to the Keystone Field Ecology Center Sathyamangalam .

The village is small but development is occurring at a fast pace. Newer shops, hotels and bigger houses are being built. The population of the village is small, it consists of three hotels,, two shops, a post office and a diary. The Irrula community predominantly live in the village.

I met the people of Aarepalyam through different ways, -Either through alert looks, a friendly hello, conversations while buying rations or exchanges over a cup of chai. During my stay in Aarepalyam I met lots of people. However, the person I met everyday was *Shivanna*. *Shivanna* was an elderly man who ran a small little hotel that would serve *dosa's* for breakfast, meals for lunch and *parota* for dinner with copious amounts of tea being produced throughout the day.

Shivanna's father had cooked for the British who stayed in the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve. I was told by *Shivanna* the British used to always travel with a cook everywhere they went. But when they settled in STR they decided to hire a cook who was local. *Shivanna's* father was employed as the official cook for the British. This is how *Shivanna* decided to become a cook. He is now married, his wife works with him in the hotel, his son he says has deviated from the family profession with a job in a city.

This hotel was the place where I would hear the most fascinating story of the people. If you do visit Aarepalyam I highly recommend *Shivanna's* hotel. On the menu, parotas and the tea are a must try.



7. CONSERVATION EDUCATION

In Keystone Foundation Ecological Center, Sathyamangalam (KFECS) , the organization is in process of launching a full- fledged program for conservation education. For this they have taken a few preliminary classes, the students are from different villages in the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve. Bhavya and Vijen are in charge of the CE program, they create different modules which they can use to teach across different schools. At the core, the modules are curated to help understand the different ecosystems in forests. This is done through different mediums of expression. The modules have different parts, a jigsaw puzzle, an interactive story telling session and games just for students to understand functions of an ecosystem. The modules included understanding water, wetland, grassland and forest ecosystems.

Our education system is creating a divide between the students and the forest. Schools teach children to aspire to get jobs in cities. Schools do not focus on teaching them about the world around them. The Conservation Education program is important because it focuses on teaching children about the environment that surrounds them. Keystone is helping to bridge the divide that our education system is causing.



8. CONSERVATION STEWARDS PROGRAM – CONSERVATION AGREEMENTS

The Conservation Stewards program adopted by Keystone was started by 'Conservation International'- This program aims to bridge the gap between conservation and livelihoods through certain economic benefits.

Keystone Foundation (KF) is working with tribal communities in the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve. For a livelihood, tribal communities farm, harvest honey and NTFP products from the forest. KF's intervention comprises of protocols that need to be followed, like- organic farming practices, sustainable harvesting of honey and NTFP products.

Following these protocols will be rewarded with benefits, the benefits include both individual and community rights. The negotiations for the benefit packages happened over the course of a few months. KF would ask individuals what they needed, which comprised of seeds and other basic amenities like fences and manure. KF after a feasibility check would negotiate with the tribal communities and tell them what they can offer.

What I liked about the negotiations that happened between the community and KF was that KF actually took into the views of all the individuals, they also made the effort to include women and make a note of their demands. Negotiations are tricky and can be difficult to be entirely inclusive. KF throughout its negotiations had been inclusive of everyone's opinions.



9. TECHNOLOGY AND ITS ROLE IN CONSERVATION

Digital technology is taking over the way we see and process things. Information is accessible to us at the snap of our finger tips. In conservation, technology is repeatedly being used for better comprehensive results. From GPS mapping to tablet surveys, Keystone foundation (KF) advocates using technology in conservation.

Barefoot Ecologists are chosen by KF to monitor the biodiversity around them. KF is providing them with GPS to be able to map the exact location of an animal sighting, a water source or even the location of a tree that's fruiting. They also provide them with tablets that allow them to take photographs and make a note of it on the tablet. This makes data processing a lot simpler.

During the course of my internship I was able to explore the role of technology employed by KF in conservation. I was given the opportunity to process the data collected by barefoot ecologists into infographics which will make communication simpler and more accessible for tribal communities and outsiders to understand the importance of the data that is collected by barefoot ecologists.

I was also part of the staff meeting where Microsoft Excel was taught to all staff members of Keystone, Aadimalai and Last Forest Enterprise. The workshop was conducted to initiate everybody to use Excel. This workshop was helpful because it looked at including all staff members to use one interface to organize and process information.

Technology is crucial and has changed the approach to conservation. It has made things accessible, organized and precise. I was able to witness this during my internship at KF.

10. INFOGRAPHICS

Info graphics as the word suggests are graphical representation of information. The aim of infographics is to have a visually pleasing piece that can process as much information as it can. I love infographics because they usually take processing of large amounts of data to fit it all into one page. Processing and deciding what goes into one page is a satisfying process.

Info-graphics are an important part of science communication. It makes the results accessible to the layman and curious about the scientific world. Info-graphics cannot convey as much information as a scientific paper would do, but they can be used as initiatives to understanding the world of science

For my internship at Keystone Foundation, I was given the opportunity to design info-graphics from the data processed by Barefoot Ecologists. Barefoot Ecologists are indigenous communities that monitor the biodiversity around them. The purpose of the infographics was twofold. The first, being able to show the community the results of the data. The second reason, to show forest officials and policy makers the data that indigenous communities can gather and are contributing to rigorous process of biodiversity monitoring, which is a crucial part of conservation.

