

Breakfast with butterflies, lunch with lilies

Joanna Rebelo Fernandes | THN

*The turtle lives 'twixt plaid docks
Which practically conceal its sex
I think it clever of the turtle
In such a fix to be so fertile*

—Ogden Nash

Nash was behind the news. He had no way of knowing that the turtle's reproductive wizardry notwithstanding, the animal has been allocated 'critical' status by the International Wildlife Watch, anxious about the species' possible extinction. WWF says only one in 1,000 eggs survives youth. It says the health of the marine turtle is a direct diagnosis of the health of the oceans. And we know the syllogistic fallout of that report.

But as turtles—ahead in the queue of several species—slowly go down the drain, animal conservation groups are drumming up innovations in counteraction. The purveyors of placards and pavement petitions have realised it's easier to convince people about wildlife by closing the distance between the two species. They're taking people to animals, instead of

Turtle festivals, bird races... animal conservation groups are coming up with innovative ways of closing the gap between people and nature

animal cutouts to people. They've made conservation thrilling.

Sahyadri Nisarga Mitra (SNM)—a non profit slaving to preserve wildlife native to the Konkan—found a way to save the Olive Ridley turtle without a sermon. They hosted a 'Turtle Festival'. For the last four years, at the end of nesting season in March, SNM has been inviting people to

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the village of Velas in Ratnagiri to see the year's crop of hatchlings take their maiden walk to sea. "Last year 500 people turned up," says Ehan Kaldare, director of SNM.

Tourists stop over at local home-stays for a nominal fee of Rs 225 a day. The festival doesn't just bring them nose to nose with the fledg-

lings, it gives them a chance to sample village life and take in the adjacent sights. "The festival was actually devised as a way to co-opt local villagers in the conservation of the Olive Ridley which, by the way is afforded the same protected status as the tiger," says Kaldare, who found the villagers more amenable to safeguarding turtle eggs and monitoring hatcheries if they stood to make some money from it. Ten per cent of the profits the villagers earn from the festival is stowed for the Turtle Conservation Fund.

"It's the first time conservation and livelihood have been successfully allied in turtle conservation in India," says Kaldare. Around 70 per cent of the tourists show up for the novelty of the exercise. It's a weekend getaway for them, and the turtles are an excuse. "But seeing



GIANT LEAP Kids For Tigers, a Sanctuary Tiger Programme has escorted over 10,000 children on educational nature walks in the past 24 months.

the animal in its natural habitat usually sensitises people to their problems," Kaldare believes. SNM says it would like to have festivals for other endangered species but manpower is a problem.

Not everywhere, though. Bittu Sahgal, editor, *Sanctuary*, points out that apart from the six major metros, smaller cities such as Nag-

pur, Amravati, Chikmagalur, Guwahati, Pune, and Ahmedabad all have NGOs who use holidays for 'shramdaan'-type activities. "Youngsters in particular are very enthusiastic," he says. "Kids For Tigers, the Sanctuary Tiger Programme that works in 600 schools across India, has escorted over 10,000 young children on educa-

tional nature walks in the past 24 months."

Sahgal holds that bird races, turtle watches and voluntary work to clean up forests are all legitimate ways in which NGOs can co-opt supporters in meaningful activities that go way beyond "just giving money". "It's a win-win situation where both organisers and participants benefit and, hopefully, the

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destination they visit," he says.

More and more more folk in the cities are eager to take a walk in the wild. The Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS's Conservation Education Centre (CEC) in Goregaon has had people clamouring for its workshops and training courses, enticingly titled Breakfast With Butterflies, Rendezvous With Reptiles, Lunch With Lilies and such other coinages. BNHS's

recent nature camps to Andaman, the Sunderbans, Valley of Flowers, Ladakh and Kenya have been running full, as have their nature trails to Karnataka, Borivli, Goregaon, Alibaug and Phansad.

Anil Sathe, Public Relations Officer, BNHS, believes that awareness segues into action when people start appreciating nature. "This happens when people actually go on nature trails or participate in activities related to conservation," he says. "Once they are convinced about a certain issue, they are also ready to contribute time and money." And not just on the big ticket species like the tiger. During BNHS camps they observed that some people who were initially fixated on spotting a tiger, gradually started noticing the rest of the jungle. Perhaps finally the urban animal has noticed the woods, the trees and the wildlife in between.

The Turtle Festival is on all Sunday March 28. For details visit www.snmpri.org

BNHS is organising a Flamingo Festival on Saturday, March 27, 2010, at the Savri jetty. For details visit www.bnhs.org