

HORNBILL

DISCOVER THE LIVING WORLD

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CONSERVING
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Realigning Priorities!

Just as we desperately need a vaccine for COVID-19, we also urgently need a vaccine to restrain human arrogance and greed! It is this arrogance that makes us believe that we control nature and the environment. We forget that we have little control over nature; in fact, we are always at her mercy. Be it the raging bush fires of Australia, or the wild fires in the USA, or recent forest fires in Uttarakhand, the increase in storm surges and their intensity (we have just witnessed the strongest storm ever recorded in the Bay of Bengal), the recent locust outbreak across Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra, or the unpredictably extended monsoon of 2019, and the latest enraging El Nino that is causing widespread coral bleaching in northern Indian Ocean including reefs of Lakshadweep, Gulf of Kachchh, and Gulf of Mannar, I can cite several more examples of Mother Nature's fury. Nothing is going right in 2020. Humans are the most dispensable entity in nature – can humans survive without nature? The tragedy is that the so-called literate are the least bothered about climate change or about nature, unless it starts pinching them in their comfort zone. On the other hand, those whom we call illiterate are actually more mindful than the 'literates'. They are the accommodative fighting voices for nature, but unfortunately they suffer most from environmental degradation. What an irony!

The last few months saw some extremely controversial projects getting various clearances, such as Dibang-Etalain and Dihang-Patkai. I believe some wilderness areas are beyond economic considerations – only their intrinsic values should be considered. If we do not fight to save such areas, then we as a race have nothing left to fight for. And the greatest irony is that we are trying to establish 'ecological values' on goods through the so-called 'environmental economics'! I have always had a cautious approach towards environmental economics. For me, it is like putting a price tag on an invaluable asset, as if it is a traded commodity. This is the very same economic logic that is used to facilitate clearance of developmental projects by paying a monetary premium. The NPV (net present value), as per prevailing guidelines, of one hectare of forest in Dibang-Etalain, is estimated to be Rs 10.43 lakhs, which in my view is rubbing salt to the wound!



Post COVID-19 (whenever that may be) provides us with an opportunity to look at investments differently. We must think about how we can decongest cities, improve rural organic agriculture, decontaminate soil, air, and water, think of ways to make best use of technologies, to reduce travel and save precious fuel, to reduce our ecological footprint, invest in systematic habitat restoration, improve health and education sectors, and curb wildlife trade. Investing towards a rural, small scale agrarian economy and moving away from an industrial economy is not a bad idea.



The recent study by Trisos *et al.* (2020)¹ suggests that if global warming is kept below 2 °C, less than 2% of assemblages globally are projected to undergo abrupt exposure events of more than 20% of their constituent species; however, the risk accelerates with the magnitude of warming, threatening 15% of assemblages at 4 °C, with similar levels of risk in protected and unprotected areas. The study highlights the impending risk of sudden and severe biodiversity losses from climate change and provides a framework for predicting both when and where these events may occur. It is a very insightful read and I suggest all our young researchers should wade through this excellent paper.

Our current model of development will only increase our conflict with the people and wildlife that are still surviving, occupying the last remaining patches of wilderness. It will also increase the exposure of humans to zoonotic diseases. COVID-19 is certainly not going to be the last zoonotic disease impacting us; this experience shows us that there are super-monsters in the making. We cannot continue to behave recklessly, contaminate the air, soil, water, and food resources, and compromise our immunity with our habits. Imagine what it would be like if the melting of the deep permafrost releases zoonotic diseases of the dinosaur era? How dreadful life may be then for the coming generations. For sure, it is time we put our collective wisdom together and realign our priorities to a changed reality and a changed world!!

Deepak Apte

¹TRISOS, C.H., C. MEROW & A.L. PIGOT (2020): The projected timing of abrupt ecological disruption from climate change. *Nature* 580: 496–501. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2189-9>

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APRIL-JUNE, 2020



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Nightlife in Mumbai's Forests

The forests seem empty if one does not know where or how to look. **Raju Kasambe** and his team captured some well-hidden forest life with camera traps to prove that the forest life of BNHS-CEC is healthy and flourishing.

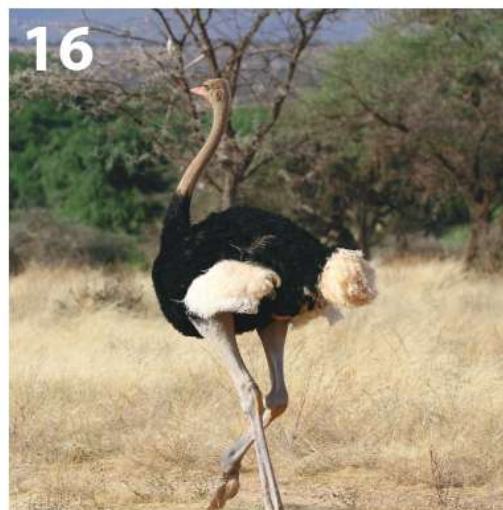


The Enigmatic and Elusive Jerdon's Courser

The rare and critically endangered Jerdon's Courser has eluded **Ranjit Manakadan** for long, but he hopes the wait for it will end some day soon.

Kenya Calling

The infinite bounty of nature in Kenya is both well-known and oft-visited. **Katie Bagli** too was spellbound by the country's diversity and abundance of wildlife during a BNHS field trip.



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