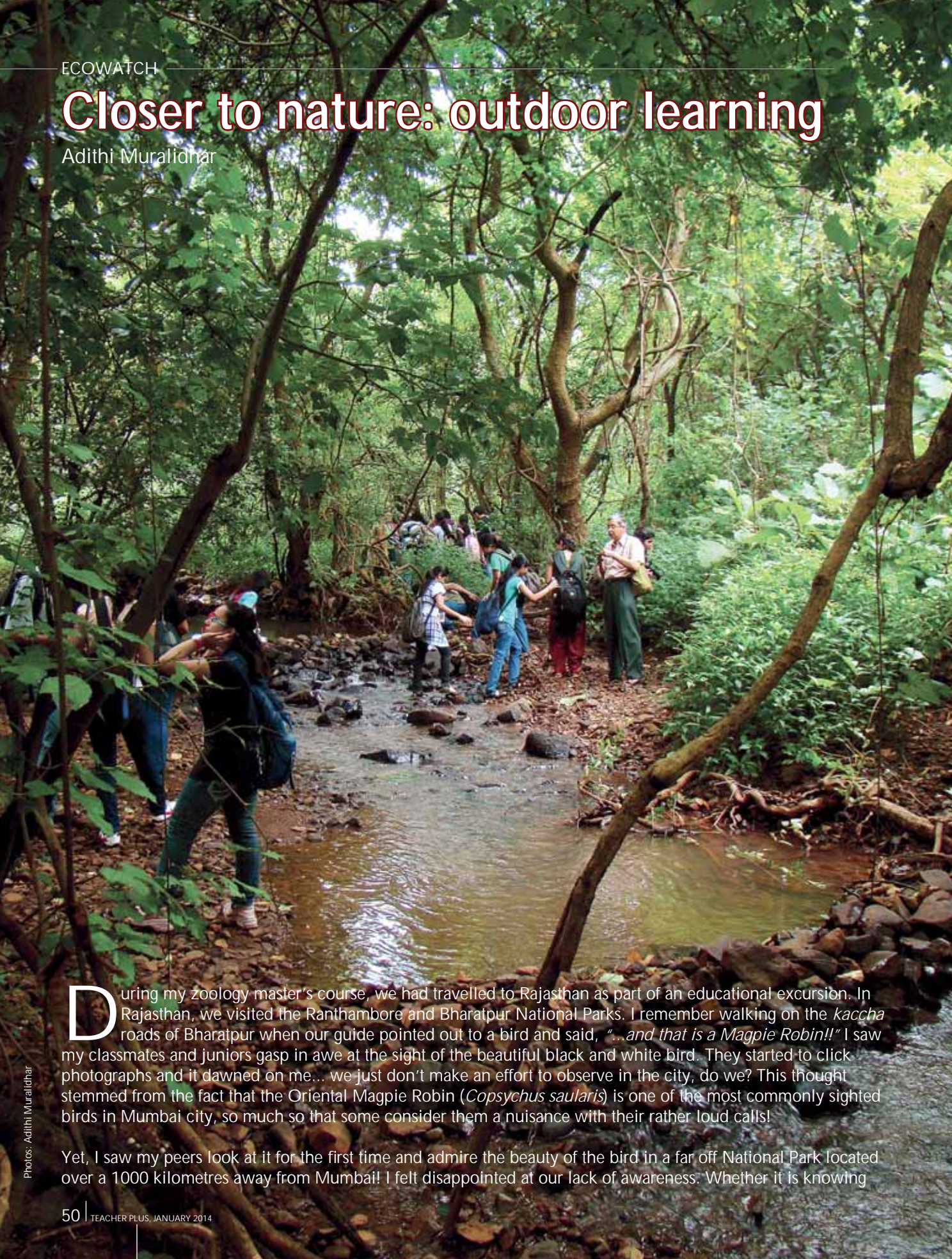


Closer to nature: outdoor learning

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During my zoology master's course, we had travelled to Rajasthan as part of an educational excursion. In Rajasthan, we visited the Ranthambore and Bharatpur National Parks. I remember walking on the *kaccha* roads of Bharatpur when our guide pointed out to a bird and said, "...and that is a Magpie Robin!!" I saw my classmates and juniors gasp in awe at the sight of the beautiful black and white bird. They started to click photographs and it dawned on me... we just don't make an effort to observe in the city, do we? This thought stemmed from the fact that the Oriental Magpie Robin (*Copsychus saularis*) is one of the most commonly sighted birds in Mumbai city, so much so that some consider them a nuisance with their rather loud calls!

Yet, I saw my peers look at it for the first time and admire the beauty of the bird in a far off National Park located over a 1000 kilometres away from Mumbai! I felt disappointed at our lack of awareness. Whether it is knowing

your local biodiversity or being aware of the threats faced by the natural habitats in your area, most people seem to be unaware of the environment around them.

While this lack of knowledge of the local environment is evident in urban society, one cannot just blindly blame people's lack of awareness. The issue is not just a superficial one; it boils down to what relevant education we have received through our schooling years. Following the Supreme Court directive, Environment Education was made a compulsory component of school curriculum over a decade ago, and since then it has assumed an integral part of school education. But one cannot help but wonder how much "environment education" children are actually gaining through their school years, especially when all of it is taught within the four walls of the classroom. Today's children see life through a television or computer, and very few actually *go out* and experience nature. In such a scenario, how can a child be made to understand that saving the tiger is not just *limited* to taking part in a 'Save the Tiger' campaign or planting more trees? Sometimes, even adults seem to have a skewed notion about conservation education. On the one hand, we condemn the mining that takes place in a reserve forest in some remote area of the country, and on the other, we continue to live a luxurious lifestyle in the city. Do we realize that the ore that comes from those very mines we protested about is used to make a cell-phone that we *desired* and bought in the city? Very few understand the link between consumerism and saving the environment. To comprehend the fact that we live on a finite planet and we cannot sustain long with a linear model of consumption, one has to go way further than merely reading textbooks.

Textbooks, no doubt are vital to dissemination of information, but at times, one observes that the book doesn't cover topics on local biodiversity/ environment; instead they contain texts on famous national parks and sanctuaries. This is partly understandable as schools usually adopt standardized textbooks across the state depending on the board they are affiliated to and while they incorporate regional commonalities of the state into the textbook, they cannot have a customized version of the textbook for each locality! Thus, the onus of making students aware of the local environment shifts to the teacher, who can give relevant local examples to the children. Also, my experience in interacting with hundreds of youngsters over the last few years

has made me realize that many of them lacked the opportunity to learn outdoors.

Whether it is paying attention to the small creepy-crawlies in their garden or being a conscious consumer, young children need to be encouraged by their teachers and parents to explore the world around them. They need to be taught to observe and notice details around them and think critically about it. For instance; *why does our society garbage canister overflow every week, is it emptied regularly? Why are young boys pelting stones at stray dogs? Why has a sparrow built a nest in an electric box in our building? Why is there flooding on our roads during monsoons? Why is the sky smoggy at the horizon every morning? Why are 'save the environment' posters made of vinyl and other non-biodegradable materials? Why did people beat up and kill the snake that was found near the road the other day?* These are questions that children can ask and relate the same to the things they read in textbooks like land and water pollution, waste disposal systems, air pollution, smog, etc. David Ausubel, a famous psychologist who contributed significantly to educational psychology suggests that *meaningful learning can take place when students can correlate and connect what happens inside the school and outside the school* (Ausubel et al, 1978). But generally, there is a lack of opportunity during school years when it comes to outdoor learning, since taking the children out to experience nature has its own problems like dealing with logistics, responsibility, and security of the children by the school authorities. While those concerns are valid, one must also realize that if children don't see what they learn in their textbooks, they will never fully fathom the sorry state of our environment.

Over the last few decades, a growing body of research indicates that children exposed to nature at a young age have many physical, mental, behavioural and intellectual benefits (Children & Nature Network, 2012). Moreover, it is believed that children who spend more time amidst nature have more empathy for life-forms.

Such an approach also creates a feeling of oneness and enhances the child's sense of responsibility. One study even reported of how certain aspects like the child's connection to nature, previous experience with nature and the perceived family value towards nature influence their interest in displaying *environmentally friendly behaviour* (Cheng and Monroe, 2010). This is of utmost importance, as a

favourable attitude towards nature and environment will encourage more young minds to work towards protecting it.

The sooner adults adopt sustainable lifestyles; the sooner children will get better opportunities to learn about 'green practices'. Parents and teachers form *very* strong role models for young children. Thus they can encourage outdoor activities (outside of school) for them, take them out for small nature trails, show them the biodiversity in the city, and help instil in them love and respect for nature.

Adults and mentors can also encourage kids to take up small projects in their neighbourhood like:

- Document the biodiversity (both flora and fauna) in their locality
- Volunteer with NGOs to set up a compost-pit in their housing society
- Monitor nesting birds (from a distance) and make sure people do not disturb or hurt them
- Create small frog pools in the garden, in other words, creating micro-habitats for frogs

- Identify the threats to biodiversity in their area
- Plant indigenous tree-saplings in the local compound and take turns nurturing the sapling
- Get kids to form nature clubs, and help in spreading awareness about environmental issues
- Organize clean-up drives in their locality
- Label all the trees in the locality
- Observe bird-behaviour or insect-behaviour and maintain notes
- Document the flowering and fruiting seasons of the trees in the locality
- Get children to participate in Citizen Science Projects
- Start a vegetable garden in a small plot in their residential complex, and practice organic farming

Here are some tips for teachers and parents who wish to communicate simple green practices to children:

- ♦ Reduce – Instead of changing your cell-phone each year, prolong its usage. In fact, this can be applied to all devices and gadgets.



- ♦ Reuse – Use both sides of a page; if you have a bunch of sheets unused on one-side, make a book out of it and reuse the other side of the page. Do not throw away notebooks that have blank pages left; you can use that to make a rough-book.
- ♦ Recycle – Donate your old clothes, toys and games (instead of throwing them away) to people who are in need of them. Donate books to the local library. Give your old textbooks to the next batch of students who are one year junior to you in school.
- ♦ Avoid littering and/or spitting – Most kids when offered a toffee or chocolate instantly throw the wrapper on the ground. They do this unintentionally and kids need to be taught that they need to consciously make an effort *not to* litter; be it a toffee wrapper, pencil shavings, straws, chips packets, ice-cream sticks, fruit peels, or empty water bottles.
- ♦ Discourage excessive use of plastic bags and/or tissue papers. Lately there has been a fad to use tissue papers in restaurants/homes/picnics. While it may be feasible to use tissue papers when on an outing, it can be avoided in restaurants or our homes. Instead, they can use the traditional cotton handkerchiefs which are reusable.
- ♦ Avoid wasting water, for instance, when we keep the tap water running while brushing our teeth, keeping a bucket under a running tap and forgetting about it, using a shower as opposed to a bucket of water for bathing, keeping the water running in the shower while applying soap, throwing away old water down the sink when we fill our water-bottles with fresh water (instead you can throw the water in the soil/for plants), etc.
- ♦ Avoid wasting electricity, like when you keep a fan switched on in the room when you go to another room; avoid getting used to using air-conditioning every day (instead tie a wet towel on your window, you will have pleasant cool air entering the room), keeping devices like laptop and mobile phone charging all night.
- ♦ Avoid wastage of food – Adults should make sure that children only take on their plate what they can eat. It is very important that children don't take for granted the value of basic necessities like food.

All of the practices mentioned here *may sound very simple* and insignificant, but all such “apparently

facile” routines incorporated into children’s daily lives can make them more sensitive towards the environment. I am not stating that all the kids who practice these *will continue* to have such attitudes later in life. But because they were encouraged to adopt such practices when they were young, they are more likely to think twice before making decisions in life and the implications of their decisions, which may or may not influence the bigger picture of protecting the environment. They may become better citizens by taking a more balanced approach to tackle issues relating to consumerism. Their contribution to living a sustainable lifestyle will begin from a younger age and more importantly, such an approach will help inculcate and sustain a value system in which all children grow up to appreciate the importance of the environment and preserving it.



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