

Bird on the wire

Finding space in our city for nature



KARTIK SHANKER

I first met Madhusudan Katti in Mundanthurai, southern Tamil Nadu, more than 10 years ago when he was collecting field data for his PhD on migratory warblers. Madhu, now at the California State University in Fresno, and his collaborators in the Central Arizona Phoenix Long-Term Ecological Research Project — at the University of Arizona, USA — work on bird diversity in urbanising landscapes. For over five years, they have documented the patterns of bird diversity in Phoenix and Tucson, Arizona, and studied processes and mechanisms underlying these patterns such as changes in populations of predators (urban cats), competitors (exotic pigeons, starlings, and house sparrows) and the structure of urban landscapes.

Focusing on three main habitats — the native Sonoran desert, agricultural fields, and urban areas — they found that urban areas support two or three times as many birds as the desert, although species diversity is lower in cities. Even native bird species that can figure out how to make a living on the food surplus generated by humans (either through bird feeders or food waste in garbage) can thrive in the city, providing urban planners and nature conservationists work together in designing better habitats for humans and native birds.

The biggest surprise though comes from the analysis of the socio-economic data. Madhusudan and his team found that bird diversity was positively correlated with median family income. In other words, birds prefer richer parts of town. The reasons for this are not hard to discern. Richer areas tend to have more independent houses as opposed to

flats, more land around each house, trees, more birdbaths. Further, richer homes may also be located closer to natural areas, either at the edge of the city or near the larger urban parks. Madhu, therefore, raises the critical question of environmental equity. If an increasing proportion of humanity inhabits inner city areas bereft of any natural environments, how will we get large-scale support for environmental conservation? How will the people who inhabit these neighbourhoods develop sensitivity to environmental issues when they have never seen a bird or a tree?



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This should make us question the way conservation is practised in India today. For example, much of the debate revolves around the relocation of people out of protected areas. In a country where a large number of people do live adjacent to or in natural environments, our best efforts are to move them away from it. When we should be nurturing their sensitivity to the environment, we seem bent on turning them against it. We might not be able to preserve the social milieu, which created their vast repositories of ecological knowledge, but we can certainly preserve the knowl-

edge itself. What's more, given our current relocation mechanisms, people who are moved out of protected areas seem almost destined to become part of inner-city slums. In other words, rather than increase environmental equity, our conservation paradigm actually decreases it.

Similar questions can be asked about our environmental education programmes. How often do NGOs take children living adjacent to protected areas for field trips to see tigers? Do they appreciate their forests, or is it something old-fashioned that the previous generation goes on about, while gen-next has its sights set on conquering the city? Of course, one must also question urban development planning. Few industrialists or city planners or politicians have attempted to marry environmental concerns and urban planning. Even Bangalore has long forsaken its claim to fame as the garden city, and is now the IT capital. Perhaps its time to rethink our strategy.

The answers are not simple, but there are some useful indicators. Inner city areas are not avoidable, and migration to cities is not going to stop. However, urban planning can and should take such factors into account, and ensure that access to natural environments is available regardless of economic class. Many Indian cities still do have some degree of natural habitats and these have served the cause of conservation well. The number of bird-watchers who have spent their youth at the Delhi ridge, at Guindy National Park or Theosophical Society in Chennai, or Lalbagh in Bangalore, and gone on to become biologists or conservationists, is testament to the importance of these habitats. The number of people of various ages who have been on a turtle walk in Chennai to see an olive ridley turtle in the last 30 years shows how urban landscapes can still be environmentally invaluable. ■

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