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RUNNING NATURE CLUBS IN SCHOOLS

by Ashish Kothari

The resources on which human civilisation has survived for thousands of years are dying out, indeed being killed by a world hungry for immediate comfort and unmindful of the future. Unless something is done fast, the next generation will have no oil to run on, no forests to provide oxygen and stop floods, no clean water to drink, no clean air to breathe, and no peace and quiet among the growing din of 'civilization'. Fortunately, today there is a growing awareness and concern for the degradation of our environment. All over the world environmental movements on both a small-scale level and at large-scale governmental level have sprung up. In Western countries where ecological destruction has been the greatest in the past couple of centuries these movements have achieved national importance. Developing countries on the other hand, being still engrossed with problems of poverty and internal instability, are yet to take serious notice of the growing threat to their environment.

What is however more critical is that the youth of India, by and large, remain insensitive and unconcerned about their own future. Awareness needs to be created and their energy must be channelised before it is too late. In a few pockets of rural India, environmental movements like the Chipko Andolan have attempted to involve youth. But what about our urban areas? Our cities are fast becoming ghastly concrete jungles whose youths know the delights of video games but not those of nature. There is a need for urban youth to become not only environmentally conscious but also to become active in the fight to secure a better future. One such step towards this is the growing Nature Clubs Movement.

Nature Clubs - How to Start

The Nature Clubs of India (NCI) movement was launched on 1st July, 1976 by the World Wildlife Fund-India. Starting with about 75 clubs in the schools of Maharashtra and Gujarat, it has today spread to over 500 schools all over India. These clubs get a quarterly newsletter and information on nature projects from WWF. Regular film shows are also arranged by the WWF. Once or twice a year a field trip and camp is held for NCI members in one of India's still-existing natural areas.

The WWF requires a minimum of 15 students (whose age is at least 10 years) in order to register as a Nature Club. The registration fee is Rs. 10/- and each student has subsequently to pay Rs. 2/- per year. Registration forms and more information can be obtained by writing to The Education Officer, World Wildlife Fund India, Hornbill House, Opp. Lion Gate, 5 Bungal, Singh Road, Bombay-400 23.

No doubt there are certain advantages in joining the WWF as a Nature Club, but to ~~be~~ ~~rank~~ as a Nature Club Adviser, I have found that WWF's Nature Club Movement has failed to get off the ground in Delhi. Only 2-3 schools here have active clubs (of which one is not even registered). That they are active and aware is not essentially due to WWF's efforts but mainly to the enthusiasm and interest amongst the club members. This may be because WWF pays far more attention to the Western region of India, since its headquarters are in Bombay, or because there is a lack of motivated teachers and interested students in Delhi's clubs. I suspect a combination of both. In any case, what is important is not whether to register with WWF or not, but the presence of a motivated, committed teacher and a group of enthusiastic students. Put these together, use a bit of initiative, and you have a Nature Club. At times even a teacher may not be needed; an environment-conscious ex-student or senior student would be enough to coordinate the group. St. Columba's School has a group of such students who run a fairly active group. Frank Anthony Public School students have attempted activating a group of students with very little help from teachers. Naturally a teacher is often necessary in the case of young students, as also to gain the approval of parents and school authorities when planning a trip in or out of Delhi.

What to Do :

This is the part where most clubs get stuck—they have "nothing to do". This complaint is hardly justified. With a bit of imagination, one can think up a thousand and one projects that club members could undertake. Before starting the students on some work, it is important that they be aware of why they are doing it. Otherwise, conservation will simply become another activity which has to be carried out because the teacher says so. Members must know that it is their own future which is imperilled; they must realise that they are the only ones who can do something about it; they must be environment conscious. Such an awareness can be created by various methods, both in the classroom and out in the field. Slide shows and films are the best indoor means of communicating environmental issues. It must be noted that mere lectures, unless delivered by experts (both in environment and in speaking!) can be extremely boring and will be thoroughly disliked by club members. The Delhi branch of WWF has a few films and slide shows with taped commentaries, on issues like wildlife, ecosystems and the pollution threat to the Taj Mahal. These can be lent on request to a recognised (not necessarily registered) club. Kalpavriksh, Delhi's environmental action group (more about that later), also has a few slide-series on wildlife and Delhi's environmental problems which can be used. Other informative and interesting approaches are arranging quizzes and debates on relevant topics.

Once a sufficient degree of awareness and interest has been created, the club can start working on a variety of projects. It is a good idea to divide the students into small groups, each of which can take up a specific project. Ideas, information and experiences can then be exchanged between them. One project which gets students particularly involved is tree-planting. Digging pits, planting saplings or seeds and car fully nurturing them till they can grow on their own can go a long way in inculcating a student's love for nature. Simultaneously the useful roles of a tree (producing oxygen, binding

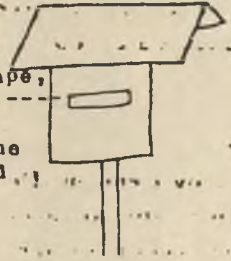
soil, attracting rain, providing shade, reducing pollution etc.,) must be explained to the students. Contact a nursery or Kalpavriksh on details, of tree-planting - the season to do this is just around the corner. Another project involving trees and bushes, is to label the ones in the school - the labels should preferably be in at least two languages and should be tied on rather than nailed to the tree.

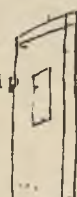
Projects involving reduction of wastage and curbing the pollution of air and water can also be attempted. A compost pit is an excellent example - it effectively uses garbage which would otherwise be burnt or thrown into our lives and it provides organic manure which can be used in the school laws. Digging such a pit (it should be at least 8 x 8 ft and 4.5 ft deep) will give the members some strenuous exercise and bring them "closer to the soil".

Another project of interest is the detection of air pollution. Details are shown in the figure.

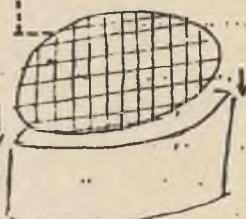
(From Bharat Scouts and Guides. July 1979. Vol: 22. No 7)

AIR POLLUTION: SIMPLE DETECTION


1. 

another strip on wind-free side, facing wind flow: 

Try in the direction of Indraprastha Power Station

2. Absorbent paper, 1 cm squares drawn on it, cut to fit base of tin. 

Place tin outdoors. After a week, count particles in each square. Find average. Compare different areas.

3. Detecting magnetic particles. Horseshoe magnet enclosed in transparent plastic bag. 

Drag this over ground in different areas - roads, stations, near industry, forest. Compare results.

Other projects in the field which could be taken up include paper and tin recycling, making of small-scale alternate energy models (e.g. solar cookers which would demonstrate pollution-less renewable, free energy) and models of water treatment plants.

Younger students should be asked to build up scrap books or files on specified animals or plants with diagrams, photographs and written material from wherever they can be collected. Please do not ask students to collect plants or insects - it is only another cruel way of injuring nature and would run contrary to what Nature Clubs are all about. A regular bulletin-board could be assigned to the club so that its members could display their talents and give the rest of the school the message of conservation.

One of the most rewarding and informative programmes a club can take up is to arrange field trips in and out of Delhi. I have seen from students' reactions that this is by far the most exciting part of Nature Club activities. The length and duration of such trips will obviously depend on finances, age and willingness of members; but one or two trips a year are a must. Even in city areas, one doesn't have to go far to find nature. Delhi is fortunate in that it still has some beautiful green areas left. The southern ridge forest opposite Maurya Hotel or the northern ridge near the university are two of Delhi's wild life areas where the incredible beauty, complexity and serenity of nature can easily be experienced. Trips to such areas will show the seasonal variations in vegetation and bird life. And talking of wild life, Delhi in winter is a sight to see, with over 400 species of birds collecting there. A walk down the Jamuna will be rewarded by the sight of literally thousands of ducks in the water. The Delhi Zoo at any time, shows the enormous variety of animal life present in the world. It is important that during these trips members do not see only the pleasant sights, but also note disturbing factors like pollution or tree-cutting which contribute to making Delhi a more unpleasant place to live in. A visit to the National Museum of Natural History is also a rewarding experience. Trips out of Delhi could be planned to nearby wildlife sanctuaries. These have to be carefully planned out; WWF could help supply information about them.

Over all this it is important that the club has the sympathy, if not active support, of the school administration. Official indifference or hostility can make all efforts futile. Recently the saplings planted by the members of a school club were uprooted, and the students are too scared to ask what happened!

Kalpavriksh - Delhi's Environmental Action Group

Feeling the urgent need for a youth-centered environmental movement in Delhi, students from various schools and colleges got together to form Kalpavriksh, basically an action-oriented group. Kalpavriksh has in the past successfully protested against the destruction of the Ridge and other forests in Delhi, and also raised its voice against indiscriminate wildlife shooting and the dangerous smoke pollution caused by Indraprastha Power Station. Its members run the few active Nature Clubs in Delhi, and try to increase their number by giving slide shows and talks on various environmental issues. It has organised frequent excursions in Delhi and even a few trips out of Delhi. The most ambitious trip so far has been a 15-day trek through Tehri Garhwal where the Chipko Andolan is active. Recently it held a meeting of environmental activists from various parts of India, organised a bird-count and opened a dialogue with the Lt. Governor and Government horticulturists on the issue of saving and enlarging Delhi's green areas.

Kalpavriksh believes that individuals can do a great deal to help avoid the 'eco-catastrophe' that faces us. The Nature Club movement, if it picks up and spreads, could play a vital role in channelising India's youth into a strong, effective, long-term environmental movement.

(Ashish Kothari, a 1st year student of Sociology in Delhi University, has been an active member of the Nature Club of Serdar Patel Vidyalaya. He now functions as the Advisor to the same Club. We will be happy to introduce him to any other schools in Delhi interested in starting a Nature Club. Ashish is also active in Kalpavriksh and is one of the editors of their bi-monthly Newsletter, Nature.)

The August issue of PATHWAYS will carry an article on 'TREES' - which we hope can form the basis of a project in your school, next term.

—Gayatri Moorthy.